

In the wake of Kon-Tiki

When NICK THORPE sailed from Chile to Easter Island on a reed boat, things didn't go entirely to plan. Storms, navigational hitches and a rogue freighter kept the crew on their toes – not to mention catching dinner...



"WHERE the hell are all the fish?" muttered Stephane testily, dangling his unconvincing rubber squid lure over the stern. "I don't understand it. Not a single bite." It was a sparkling morning on the Eastern Pacific, our sails were bulging with a following breeze, and beneath our bundled reed hull the liquid blue abyss was beautiful and empty. We should have been proud of our progress – already one week and 300 miles from our starting point on the northern coast of Chile with barely a maritime qualification between the eight of us. But the lack of fish was a problem. Fish, after all, were supposed to be part of the whole guys-on-raft-expedition deal. I knew this for certain because I was sitting on the cabin roof reading *The Kon-Tiki Expedition*.

"There was not a day on which we had not six or seven dolphins following us in circles round and under the raft," wrote the explorer Thor Heyerdahl, who died last month, in the best-selling account of his 1947 balsa-raft voyage. "As a rule, it was enough to warn the cook 20 minutes in advance if we wanted fresh fish for dinner." The six tanned, bearded Scandinavians, travelling westward like us from South America towards Polynesia, seemed to have been mobbed by sealife from the moment they pushed off from Peru. Flying fish landed obligingly on board at night

to be used as bait, and one night a 3ft-long snake fish leapt through the door of the cabin into a crew member's sleeping bag, enabling Heyerdahl to discover its existence for the first time since prehistory. More than half a century later, we had failed to pull in so much as a shrimp. It was downright unfair.

Had I known more about Thor Heyerdahl at the outset, I could have predicted that the explorer would prove a hard act to follow. But a mere three months earlier the *Kon-Tiki* man had meant little more to me than a sun-blasted face in some sepia archive newsreel, his preposterous raft drifting through mountainous seas like a wave-lashed garden shed.

Then I met Phil Buck on a bus in Bolivia. When I set eyes on his 16-metre reed-boat *Viracocha* (another name for the sun god Kon-Tiki) on the shores of Lake Titicaca, in late 1999, I remembered the Norwegian. Buck, a 36-year-old US adventurer, had read *Kon-Tiki* as an 11-year-old boy and had been planning to emulate Heyerdahl ever since. Now he aimed to sail 2,500 miles from northern Chile to Easter Island, in defence of one of Heyerdahl's founding theories. I found it ludicrous and irresistible. When one of the other crew members dropped out, I signed up.



Now, three months later and hundreds of miles from land, I was beginning to feel distinctly unheroic. We were, to put it kindly, an underqualified bunch, drawn from Chile, Bolivia, USA, UK and France by little more than a shared longing for open seas. Our only experienced navigator had quit two weeks before we set sail. None of this seemed to bother Phil, a mountaineer. "Of course nobody knows how to sail a reed boat!" he scoffed, whenever I nervously raised the subject. "That's the whole point. It's an experiment!" Phil's aim, like Heyerdahl's, was to show that pre-Incan craft were sophisticated enough to have reached Easter Island from the east before the Polynesians did so from the west (a now largely discredited theory which, nonetheless, has never been entirely stubbed out). Heyerdahl's *Kon-Tiki* was a balsa-log raft with a crude, square drift-sail, which passed

hundreds of miles to the north of the island and washed up on a reef. Phil had opted for a boat of buoyant reeds (similar to those Heyerdahl used in later Atlantic trips) coupled with a more complex lateen sail rig that would enable us to steer closer to the wind. Thus, we would enact the connection the Norwegian had talked about all his life but never actually made.

Oddly, Heyerdahl himself had so far been less than complimentary about our efforts. According to a short news story which appeared only days before our launch, he claimed he had been told that the *Viracocha* included "inauthentic" materials and was therefore "unscientific". Phil, who had admittedly been forced to use a little plastic cord on the boat's inner bundles due to a string shortage in Bolivia, was flattened by this verdict. It was difficult to imagine anything more devastating than a snub from the man who had inspired the expedition in the first place.

Perhaps fittingly, it was our "inauthentic" gadgets which let us down most spectacularly. First to go was the Trimble satellite navigation system, definitively not pre-Incan in design, which refused even a log-in password from the outset, thus robbing us of reliable access to weather forecasts. Next to malfunction was the power-generating pedal-bike strapped to the roof, which required increasingly lung-bursting bouts of pedalling for the tiniest battery charge. And just when we were furthest from land – 1,000 miles in any direction – the BBC World Service helpfully announced that our satellite phone company, Iridium, had gone into liquidation. We faced the prospect of a voyage with only a hand-held GPS and a VHS radio with a 100-mile radius.



Even as our modern defences collapsed, however, we put increasing trust in the *Viracocha* herself, whose stability and constant speed (about walking pace) were more reliable. Even more encouraging was the belated appearance of fish, 10 days into the voyage. An enormous retinue of tuna and dorado joined us as we reached the far side of the

broad, nutrient-rich Humboldt coastal current, following us for the rest of the journey even as we picked them off using the bait of flying fish or small squid which squirted themselves aboard each night.

We grew used to the barefoot simplicity of our new life. One night, our eccentric Chilean crewmate Carlos was roused by a strange premonition of danger, and within seconds spotted the lights of a Korean freighter bearing down on us from behind, which took evasive action only when we radioed her. She crossed our bows within about 300 feet. Late on April Fool's Day, a torrential rainstorm broke and left us blowing before the gale with a broken yardarm within miles of dangerous rocks. Then the wind died altogether and we drifted on a millpond for three days, noticeably lower in the water (by about 18 inches) than when we had set out. There were near-mutinies over hoarded food, and personalities clashed like dinner gongs.

But in general we found that the more trouble we encountered, the more we began to work as a team, to the extent where the loss of our ninth crew-member, Pablo – one of two live, flightless ducks given to us as mascots by the captain's mother-in-law – provoked a day of mourning.

So when, after 45 days at sea and 2,500 miles, we finally sighted land and pulled into the harbour of Easter Island to shouts and bemused applause from the local population, we were probably almost competent sailors. There remained a niggling doubt, however, a final journey to make. Without it, our efforts still felt a little hollow ...

THE first thing that struck me about Dr Thor Heyerdahl was his age. It wasn't that he wore his 86 years heavily – in fact, he looked about 75. But I had spent the eight months since the voyage reading books from which he grinned like a young, Nordic Kirk Douglas, and nobody expects great explorers to get old. "I am sorry about the criticism your expedition received," he said, greeting Phil and I at his archaeological museum in Tenerife. "Let us go and have lunch by the ocean and see if we can resolve things."

Heyerdahl himself was no stranger to criticism, his theories often ridiculed by the scientific community for his tendency to straddle disciplines and make broad connections between disparate civilisations. Perhaps that day he recognised potential allies. "So the plastic string had no effect on buoyancy or direction," he mused, nodding like a high court judge as he scrutinised a photo of the boat and listened to Phil's defence. "The only real effect was that it gave people something to criticise ..."

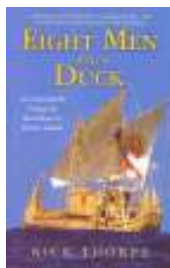
He and Phil chatted with increasing warmth and animation about the best time for cutting reeds, the importance of certain knots on lateral ropes. Finally, the breakthrough came. "I think the scientific result of this reed ship voyage is very important and very positive," concluded Heyerdahl, unbidden, after lunch. "It's the first primitive vessel that has shown that it is possible to navigate directly from South America to Easter Island."

Phil beamed broadly at this benediction from his mentor, whose penetrating blue eyes now had a little laughter at the corners. I realised I liked the old man immensely. If he had any knowledge of the brain cancer that was soon to claim his life, he showed no sign of it that day. Our shortcomings as sailors didn't seem to bother him at all. "What the critics need to understand about these voyages is that it's not the crew that is fantastic, but the reed boat they're sitting on," he was saying. "When I set off on *Kon-Tiki*, I had no form of training in maritime affairs. Yet I came back and I was applauded by admiralties for my seamanship! It was the most ridiculous experience in my life!"

I recalled these words when I read of Heyerdahl's death last month, and imagined how amused he'd have been at all the renewed tributes of "master craftsman" or "maritime hero". Half a century ago, the *Kon-Tiki* had set out, much as we had, winging it without even a qualified navigator aboard. Yet wasn't that the whole point of such experiments? The adventure was in the mountainous learning curve, not the ready-made knowledge. I felt a wave of gratitude to Thor Heyerdahl for his legacy of passionate inquiry and DIY odysseys.

"No, my friends," he had told us with a chuckle, as we got up from lunch. "Maritime experience is not as important as a good sense of humour."

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**Nick Thorpe's *Eight Men and a Duck: An Improbable Voyage by Reed Boat to Easter Island* is published by Abacus, £7.99.
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