

reinhold MESSNER

THE ORIGINAL EXTREME ALPINIST IS STILL CHASING THE IMPOSSIBLE

Ask the world's greatest mountaineer what his latest mission is and he rejects the word outright. "I have no mission. I am not founding a religion—we have enough of that. I am expressing myself as a storyteller," Reinhold Messner explains by phone from his home in the Italian province of South Tyrol. It is in this German-speaking alpine region that Messner was born seventy-one years ago, and where he has spent the last two decades cementing his legacy with no fewer than six mountain-themed museums, including one designed by Zaha Hadid that resembles the secret lair of a James Bond villain.

It's an unconventional project, albeit a less eccentric one than the in-depth investigation of the yeti that Messner embarked on in the '90s. But then, almost everything the man has set out to do—his groundbreaking Mount Everest ascents first and foremost—was dismissed as thoroughly bonkers before he did it. The naysayers continue to fuel him. "Now I'm an old man, no doubt," he admits. "But I'm still trying to do things where normal people would say, 'Forget about it.' I'm never looking at the practical—I'm just interested in making my dreams real."

Once upon a time, those dreams were exclusively about conquering mountains. In 1978, Messner and Peter Habeler became the first climbers to summit Everest without bottled oxygen. Two years later, Messner did it again, alone. He then became the first person to bag all fourteen of the world's eight-thousand-meter peaks. His CV is so ridiculous that people tend to forget he also crossed Antarctica on skis in his mid-forties.

It's not just *what* Messner did that sets him apart, but how he did it: briskly and confidently, and without the piles of gear that pretty much everyone else at the time considered essential for survival. Messner pulled off the solo Everest climb in a mind-blowing four days, carrying an under-sized backpack and using a route that had never been done before.

More than his other feats, that solitary trip up Everest cemented Messner's reputation as a superhuman. And he did it with just three toes, having lost the rest in an early-career calamity on Pakistan's notorious Nanga Parbat. Along with his trademark lion's mane, his frequent public disputes and tendency to self-aggrandize only added to his Zeus-like air of touchy omnipotence. The man probably *could* head up a religion if he wanted to.

With all six museums now up and running, Messner's future plans have shifted to filmmaking—dramas, rather than documentaries, about "what

happens when men and mountains meet." The recent Hollywood blockbuster *Everest* missed the reality of such encounters by a mile, Messner grumbles: "Plastic mountains, plastic people." He's confident that the survival story he's currently developing, based on an actual incident from the '70s on Mount Kenya, will be much better.

That apparel sponsors are all over the mountaineering world these days doesn't bother him. Messner was an early beneficiary of the trend, after all, even co-designing an Adidas trekking shoe for his 1978 Everest bid. "This is the cleanest way to finance expeditions," he says. He considers himself lucky that he didn't have to rely on alpine clubs and local governments, as so many of his predecessors did.

He believes the ubiquitous GoPro and other lightweight cameras are a "very good new possibility" for extreme alpinists. He claims to accept the dominance of "sportive" mountaineers bent on breaking speed records, even if they lack the imagination and grandeur he's always pushed. What gets to Messner more than anything, it seems, is the failure to distinguish properly between true adventure and all the rest. "What's happening on Everest, with the sherpas preparing everything, is tourism," he says.

But according to Messner, there are still plenty of "good adventurers" out there. Conrad Anker, star of *Meru* and the first to conquer that Himalayan peak's infamous Shark's Fin route, is one of them. Messner also mentions Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson, who completed the first free climb of El Capitan's Dawn Wall in Yosemite National Park. The media covered that nineteen-day ascent as it happened, whereas a century ago it took months for news of the death of British polar explorer Robert Falcon Scott to reach the world. Messner points out that the diaries Scott kept on his doomed Antarctic expedition remained a popular read for decades.

"Today, information you send to a newspaper from the summit of Everest is forgotten two days later," he says. Not that the man has ever been a slouch about self-promotion. But he's always championed a romantic ideal of solitude that is thoroughly incompatible with constant live-streaming.

"Climbing is all about freedom, the freedom to go beyond all the rules and take a chance," Messner has written. Whether it's a high-altitude exploit or a slightly more earthbound one, the unlikely act itself takes precedence over whatever its ripple effect may be later. "I never went out to make an experience people should remember," he says. "I went out to do something which normal people thought would be impossible."

written by DARRELL HARTMAN photograph by KISHORE CHAND

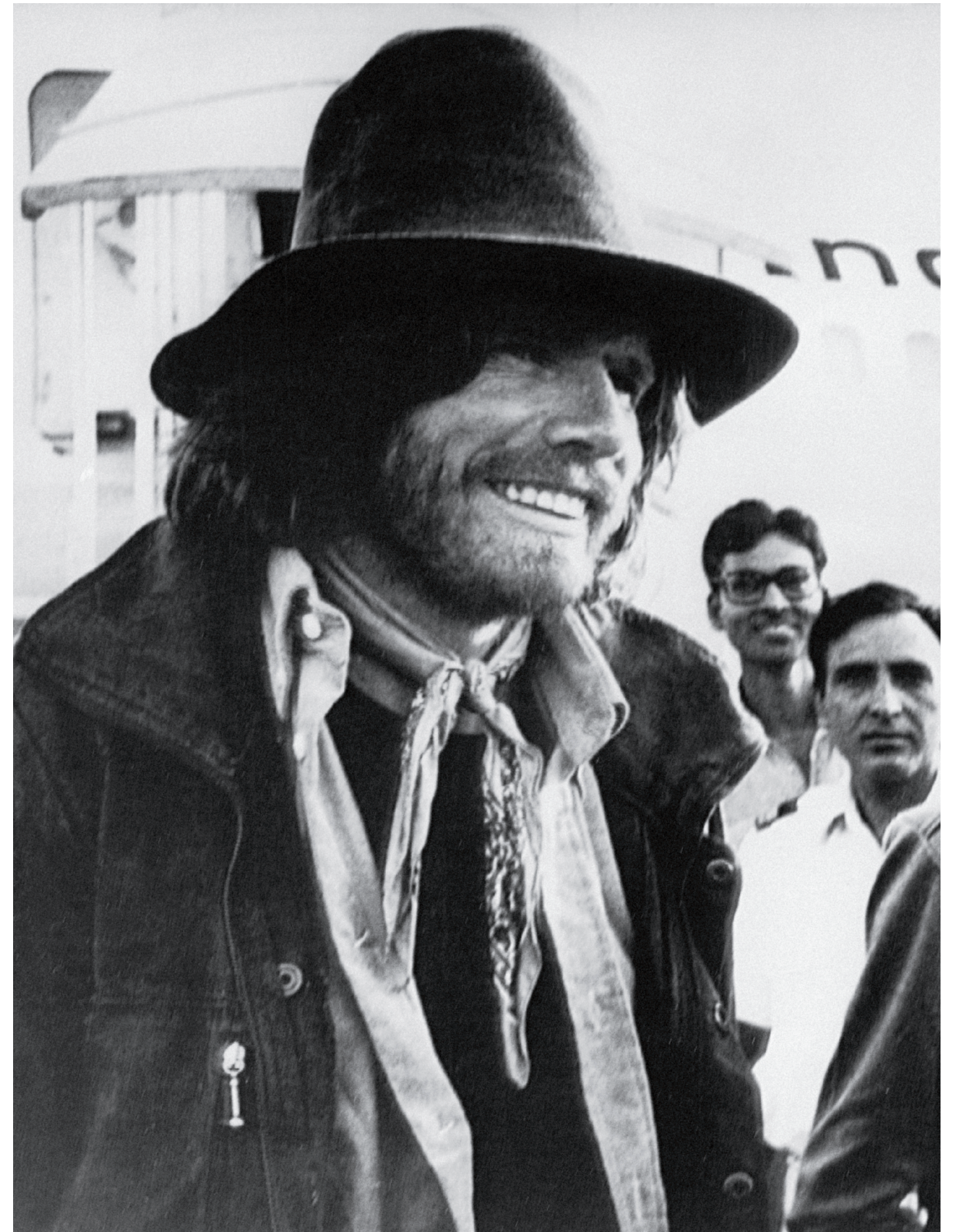


Photo courtesy of AP

Messner greets the media at the New Delhi airport on his way back to Europe after climbing Mount Everest without oxygen, May 1978.