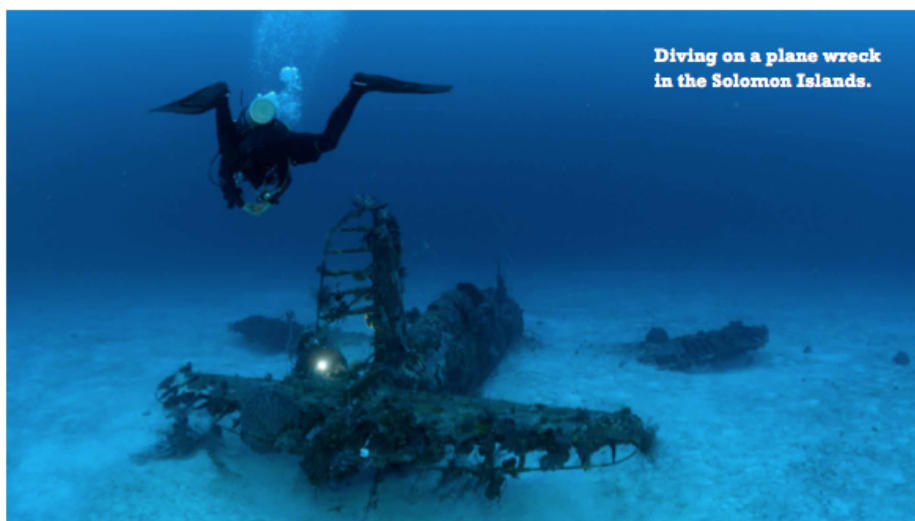


+ Profile

ON THE WILD SIDE



Ellis Emmett at home in Cheviot, still a farm boy at heart.



Diving on a plane wreck in the Solomon Islands.

To Ellis Emmett, the world is an adventure playground, above and below the water. He talks to Joanna Wane about becoming Aotearoa's answer to Jacques Cousteau.

Ellis Emmett was never the kind of boy who played doctors and nurses like other kids; he starred in his own reality show right from the start. At the age of 10, he gashed his hand with an axe and stitched up the wound himself.

Mere child's play, of course, compared to great adventurer Sir Ranulph Fiennes, who clamped his frostbitten fingers in a vice at home and sawed off the tips with a fretsaw blade, rather than bother with surgery.

A younger, mullet-haired version of Fiennes – minus the peerage and posh Eton accent – Emmett doesn't get what all the fuss is about, either. "I wasn't trying to be tough," he says. "It just seemed like the most

practical thing to do."

Did he at least sterilise the wound first with a good slug of whisky? "I didn't break into the liquor cabinet, if that's what you're asking," he laughs. "The hiding I'd have got for that would have been worse than the stitches! My old man was pretty strict."

Who knows what he was doing with an axe in the first place? One of his best friends had already been permanently banned from associating with him after being concussed falling out of a tree playing a game Emmett made up called Stunts.

"I was just a country boy!" he protests. "We play rough."

You can tell by the name of his company, Go Wild Productions, that nothing much has changed. As one of the hosts on the Travel Channel's new underwater adventure series, *Descending*, you might find him diving on a World War II shipwreck in Sudan, exploring an ancient forest below the surface of Lake Waikaremoana, or getting jiggy with a one-tonne manta ray in the Indonesian islands of Raja Ampat.

But for a man who's ventured into some of the most exotic parts of the world, the 41-year-old is still a country boy at heart. He and his Finnish wife, Sanna, and daughter Michelle live in Cheviot – a stone's throw from where he grew up on his parents' hobby farm. "I don't mind going into town [Christchurch] but it's an hour away

and after a couple of days I'm over it and come back home to look at my mountains again," he says.

Building their home, with its sweeping views across to the Kaikoura Ranges, has been the couple's labour of love for more than a decade. Still a work in progress, "The Tree House" is designed around two 120-year-old eucalyptus trees with massive nine-metre trunks rising up through the centre of the lounge.

An enormous stone fireplace, constructed from several tonnes of schist, was inspired by the Angkor temples that made such an impression on Emmett in Cambodia – majestic feats of engineering which took generations to build. To a North Canterbury boy, that kind of big-picture thinking puts the fleeting nature of human existence into perspective. "Imagine being part of creating something that even your great-great-grandchildren won't live to see completed.

"We clutter up our lives with so much bullshit; things we believe are important but which really aren't important at all. Becoming immersed in those temples, especially being able to stay overnight, was such a powerful experience for me. Although it was ruined a bit by the police who held us up at gunpoint halfway through the night..."

IT WAS WHILE travelling in Cambodia that Emmett met Scott Wilson, his co-host on *Descending*, and cinematographer Andre Dupuis back in 2001. The Canadian pair were filming an adventure-based backpackers' show and bumped into Emmett in Siem Reap, where he'd washed up after several months travelling through Southeast Asia.

Recognising a natural storyteller, they got him talking on film. Next day, he arranged to guide the crew by motorbike to the ruins of Bang Melia, an ancient temple deep in the jungle. But on the way there, a high-speed crash knocked the producer unconscious, cracking a hole in his skull.

Still wearing the same jandals and sweat-stained T-shirt he'd been travelling in for months, Emmett cradled the injured man's oozing head while a local doctor patched up the wound. By the time the producer was stable enough to be airlifted to Bangkok, he'd offered Emmett a job hosting the next season. Three months later, they started filming in Chile.

The show, *Don't Forget Your Passport*, was the usual mish-mash of intrepid travel – swimming in the Amazon with piranhas;



Emmett has spent the past 10 years designing and building his home, *The Tree House*, which has two massive tree trunks rising up through the centre of the lounge.

“We found problems without looking for them. Not only degradation of fish stock and the effects of ocean warming, but problems I’d never heard of before.”

mountain-biking in Bolivia down the world’s most dangerous road. For Emmett, the best thing to come out of it was Sanna, who he met on a ship off the coast of Chile.

Wilson and Dupuis flew over to New Zealand for the wedding and ended up staying on for the honeymoon, filming a pilot for their new travel programme, *Departures*. That show ran for 42 episodes and by then, the wonders of the world had started to feel a little stale. With so much of the planet already explored and regurgitated on-screen, there was only one place left to go: underwater.

Emmett, who’d done a few guest spots on *Departures*, was brought back on board as co-host for *Descending*, a 13-part series that took a year and a half to film. “Nearly three-quarters of our planet is water,” he says, “yet we know more about space than what lies beneath the waves.”

The first two episodes, which were shot in New Zealand, include a dive in the Poor Knights marine reserve in Northland and an eerie wander through the ghostly remains of the Mikhail Lermontov, a luxury Russian liner shipwrecked in the Marlborough Sounds. It’s the kind of international exposure our tourism industry couldn’t buy. The Travel Channel (where the show screens on Sky 025 on Wednesday nights) transmits to 130 countries.

Dupuis, who wields the sophisticated digital camera gear, was a complete novice in the water, but Emmett had been diving – mostly for crayfish – since his teens. Jacques Cousteau, the great French underwater explorer, was one of his childhood heroes.

What none of them expected, however, was just how pervasive mankind’s footprint has already been. Submerged in a submarine at depths of 1000 feet, where no human had been before, they saw beer bottles and VHS tapes that had been chucked overboard from boats on the surface.

“Wherever we travelled around the world, we came back to the same recurring theme,” says Emmett. “Every single time locals and fishermen would tell us it used to be different, it used to be better, there used to be more life on the reef, whales used to come here...

“We found problems without looking for them. Not only degradation of fish stock and the effects of ocean warming, but problems I’d never heard of before.”

In Vanuatu, the crew asked some villagers to take them for a dive on the best local reef. Emmett swam around shocked; fighting back tears because he’d never seen so much dead coral. “We don’t ram our eco standpoint down people’s throats, but it’s definitely woven through the fabric.”

Inevitably, there were some hairy moments on location. In Indonesia, Wilson’s light plane crashed into the water and flipped, pinning him in his seatbelt. He and the pilot both made it out safely. Dupuis got trapped in a shipwreck; he also suffered from nitrogen narcosis (like being drunk underwater) and would sometimes surface from a spectacular dive only to find he hadn’t remembered to press the record button.

“Scott’s right into history and shipwrecks,” says Emmett. “I’m more about the creatures

and experience-based learning. I love to have interactions and probably touch things I shouldn't."

In South Africa, he watched a school of sharks being whipped into a feeding frenzy as a bait ball was lowered into the ocean and handfuls of sardines were thrown overboard. "Every time they tossed in some fish, the water boiled with sharks.

"I was genuinely scared to plop over the side of the boat. How would they know I wasn't just another sardine? But growing up on a farm, you learn to read [animal] body language. The minute I saw the sharks underwater, in their own environment, I felt safe and just calmed."

The experience swept aside his initial reservations about humans interacting with sharks in a way that might alter their natural behaviour. "I came home a real advocate for sharks," he says. "We're one of the apex predators on land and they're one of the apex predators in the water, and they deserve respect."

IT'S AN INTANGIBLE quality, courage. Emmett used to be scared of heights, until he forced himself up enough high mountains to beat back the fear he considered a weakness. He still doesn't think of himself as brave.

Before taking on each challenge, he weighs the risks, backing his experience and physical skill. The last question he asks himself is this: What's the worst that can happen?

"Often it's a broken arm or leg. That'll heal. So you just go for it. It's pretty calculated," he says. "We all have a line of comfort, right? And when we reach that line, it's yep, no, that's far enough. I have that line as well. It's just that my line happens to be a little further along than the average person."

This summer, he's launching a kind of Outward Bound wilderness experience for high-achieving, stressed-out corporates, centred on a nine-day rafting trip on the Clarence River. When you strip away the noise of life, he says, some remarkable things happen.

He and Dupuis have teamed up again for their next adventure, *Over the Horizon* – a five-year plan to "sail the world and rediscover places in between that most people never get to or even know exist". They've already filmed a pilot, in New Zealand and Tonga, and are about to start pitching it to networks.

Ask Emmett about his scariest moment and he'll tell you he's had too many to count. But if one experience has defined his life, it was a climbing trip with a close friend in Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park in 1999.

Atrocious conditions forced the pair to



Top: The *Descending* team plot their next dive. From left: Ellis Emmett, co-presenter Scott Wilson and cinematographer Andre Dupuis.

Above: Nearly three-quarters of our planet is water, says Emmett. "Yet we know more about space than what lies beneath the waves."

turn back 100 metres from the summit of Mt D'Archiac in the Two Thumb Range.

Already a day overdue, they barely made it back to camp. Packing up their gear to head down the mountain early the next morning, they heard a man calling for help. His climbing partner, John, had slipped and fallen down the north face. At first light, they went searching for him, but the man's body was never found. "Climbing for the summit that day, I was almost physically ill I was so afraid. Making it down, surviving and being safe, and then facing John's death,

it changed the way I looked at life," Emmett says. "It's not often you're faced with your own mortality. I was living life reasonably large anyway, but I decided I had to make every moment count, because you just never know when it's going to be your last day.

"Someone else might have come to a different conclusion and never done anything risky again in their entire life. But to me, that doesn't make sense. I never feel more alive than when I'm faced by some insurmountable challenge that damned well terrifies the hell out of me. It's just how I tick." +