The Trails of Exploration

A journey to the forgotten side of our Planet

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When I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. I would look for hours at South America, or Africa, or Australia, and lose myself in all the glories of exploration. At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth, and when I saw one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say, “When I grow up I will go there.”

JOSEPH CONRAD, “HEART OF DARKNESS”

In the 19th century the charts of the World were completely redrawn by a generation of scientists and geographers who left the safety of their homes to venture into the mysterious heart of the Planet in order to unveil the hidden secrets beyond the green screen of the forests and the vastness of the oceans. At that time the horizon was not only a geographical line, it was the entrance to a wild and secluded world where adventure and science mingled to disclose the secrets of the geography and natural history of the Earth. All of a sudden, previously empty areas of the maps were filled with rivers, lakes and huge mountains; old legends fell apart and the whole Globe was revealed for what it was: our home. The protagonists of that magical age of travel and discovery gave the World new borders and remote and legendary territories became part of our History... Until, in some cases, History itself forgot about them and as a consequence entire newly discovered regions sank back into the darkness.

And now? What happened to those never-ending forests, those far-off islands, those mosaics of distant cultures described by the first European travellers? What is left of that world? What changed? How much? Why? And most importantly what are the lessons we can learn for the future?

A modern researcher is going to find out. He will start an adventurous journey through still wild and hardly known regions that were first described by Europeans around two centuries ago. By his side there will be the most valuable gifts these explorers left to us: the diaries and will help us, together with the local communities. Follow Heinrich Barth, the first true scholar to have explored Africa, in his anthropological expeditions through the Sahara desert and discover that the purpose of today’s caravans has almost entirely transformed from traditional trading trips into risky and life changing journeys of illegal immigrants as they struggle to flee their place of origin.

This will be our adventure. But we will not be alone because the spirit of the first pioneers of geographical exploration will be there through the pages of their diaries and will help us, together with our modern exploration, to better understand our Planet as it is now.