

043 - Offshore Stories: Tales Of Typhoons And Science In Submarines

2nd February 2024

Thom: So, slightly different episode this time. We are both in the throws of prepping to go to sea; very very busy, lots of buying of shackles. It's always lots of buying of shackles. You always need more shackles than you think you do. So we thought for this one, we would do a little Q&A from the listeners about offshore life, going on these expeditions and what it's like. So we got some questions from listeners and I thought we could just rapid-fire these and if any interesting bigger stories come up we'll just go with it.

Alan: Go for it.

Thom: Question number one: well, this is a potentially dangerous one. We're going in hot. Do you ever start getting annoyed with everyone when it's drawing to the end of the trip? Or do you always keep spirits high and tensions low?

Alan: I don't think I've ever been annoyed with everyone but I certainly get annoyed with some people, so it depends who it is and the circumstance. But yes, there are times on the longer trips where you do want to strangle people by the end of it but you just have to bury that.

Thom: And the ability to get on with people at sea can be a factor in you being included in the trip. Like, a big element of it is: how well do you get along with others? 'Cause there's some people who are absolute geniuses and brilliant at their work, but they just don't get on well with others and you can't have that poisoning the vibe on the ship.

Alan: There's an element of cabin fever there too I think. I think anything over a month, you can see... not necessarily with me or anyone else... but you can see it amongst everyone, that after about a month people start to get on each other's nerves a little bit. And what's cool, is when you get off the ship and go to the pub or something like that, it all goes away, it goes away instantly. You can be like "I really kind of like, just can't stand this guy anymore" but then as soon as you're off the ship and it's like last night let's go for a beer and it just evaporated, it's kind of weird, it's just total cabin fever.

Thom: Mmhhmm I get that.

Thom: Do you ever have a moment where you're just "wow this is my job, I get to do this". And is it tied to a certain moment? Is there one that jumps out for you?

Alan: Uh yeah, sometimes yeah. Yeah there are sometimes... I can't think of one specifically... but you know when we find something we wasn't expecting, or you're sitting in a submarine looking at something. Every now and again it does pop into the back of your mind that: this is not normal. Right? You know, I'm looking at something that human beings have never seen before. And you know, something... a structure that was formed millions of years ago and it's been sitting underwater that entire time

and then suddenly one day on a Sunday morning we've s showed up and went: "oohh look at that". So, there are little moments where you think "That is pretty cool". What about you?

Thom: No, definitely. There's been a few, but I try and keep stock of that. I try not to let it get too normal because we are really lucky to do what we do and see the things we do. It was a story I told recently, on that other show, it was the ethereal. I just think that was such a cool story 'cause it was just the three of us up at 3:00 a.m. absolutely exhausted from the day. And then, just to get someone wheel back their chair and just go: "Check out this fish". Yeah, that was a really good one.

Thom: Oh and then the flip side, have you ever had days or specific trips that have made you close to never going out again? I think we've all had those.

Alan: Probably not so much recently. I think there was a period of time around 2005-2006 or something like that, that I was doing a lot of trips on lots of different vessels, doing lots of different things. You know? And I remember once going from a trawler in the North Sea, coming back to the house for like 24 hours. Jumping on a plane, going to Malta, joining a German's ship, spending a month going around the Mediterranean. Doing really crazy hours. And then flying home, waiting two days and then flying to South Africa and ending this crazy trip down to Southern Ocean, that lasted like six or seven weeks. And I think that was before I had family and stuff like that, but I think there were times where [I was] probably pushing it a bit too hard. And you just, you go: "What am I doing?"

Thom: And that's an amazing opportunity, but that burns you out.

Alan: Yeah even when you're younger, stuff like that there comes a point where I just want to just slow down a bit. It's not so much the cruise itself, it's just the travelling. And it's sort of getting your mind from a bunch of Germans doing CDT profiles, then you're a bunch of British doing loads of trawls. And then you jump into different nationalities, different gear, different science objectives, you know? Loads of different time zones and you're just exhausted.

Thom: And lots to worry about for each one. Will the gear be there?

Alan: Yeah

Thom: And just long long days, like a 16 hour day isn't unusual. And there's only so many weeks you can keep that up for before you just buckle. I think I was similar back in the days working in uh in survey where that it was a lot of time offshore. And I can remember one where we'd all absolutely busted a gut, because there was a storm rolling in, if we got the survey done that night we could all be home for Christmas. If the storm rolled in, we couldn't work, we'd have to stay out on site and no one would get Christmas. And so we absolutely busted a gut. Everyone sort of pulled above and beyond to try and get done. And I came into port late at night, on the 23rd and we'd done it we'd made it. And as I'm walking down the gangway... my bosses stood at the end of it, and before I'd even got within earshot of him I was like: I'm not going home for Christmas. Like, something's fallen through and I'm going to be sent immediately onto another boat and I just knew it, walking down before he even had to say anything. And I've seen a meme going around at the moment of people in the military or the Navy being served a really nice meal and how everyone is like: "oh no, because that's

the meal you get before you're deployed or before you get bad news or you're going to be out there for longer," And that's how it felt just walking down the gangway, and I was just like oh no I'm not going home.

Thom: Are the rooms/bunks assigned or is it first in best dressed? They are very much assigned, usually.

Alan: It's assigned, you don't get a choice. It's assigned based on the number of people versus if they're shared. If they're shared then it's male-female ratios. There's other things to consider like: it's quite nice sometimes if you're doing a back-to-back with someone (so someone's doing a 12-hour shift) and if you're bunking up in the same cabin as someone who's doing the same job as you, it means the agreement is for 12 hours a day the cabin is yours and for the other 12 hours a day the cabin someone else's. They're better ones. And so, it's normally the ship that decides how they allocate stuff like that. So you don't really get a say. You can... if you've been on the same ship a lot, you can probably wrangle a slightly better deal and you can always bribe people as well. Bribing is an option.

Thom: Yeah never forget bribing

Alan: Always on a ship yep.

Thom: Your cabin allocation is usually tied to your role during an emergency and so that might be based on your level of training. So they're not going to have you on the fire team if you haven't done your firefighting and things like that. So sometimes that can influence which cabin you're put into.

Thom: Oooh scariest moment at sea?

Alan: Oh, I've had a few. I think probably... I don't know, it's a toss-up between being in an absolute horrendous storm in Antarctica and thinking that Heather was going to get cut in two. And I couldn't do anything about it because they chained me to the A-frame. That was pretty mental, that was on Christmas Day 2015. That's pretty scary. There was another one where my old colleague Toyo and I went out on a Japanese vessel called Hako Maru and we went straight into a typhoon, straight off the bat. And that was just like, I mean that's a big ship. It's a good like, I don't know, 60-70-80m. Something like that. And it was getting absolutely pummeled. And they're just like: "Here we go!" I'm just like... Yeah, it's normally big weather, I think big weather is where it becomes scary because you realize how vulnerable you are. Even on a big ship, the ocean is bigger than you. It's definitely, definitely bigger than you. So it's probably weather-related stuff.

Thom: Yeah I can remember a few [times] where it was just leaning too far and it was pausing at the extremes of the lean. So it was like going right over and then rather than rolling back again, it would just hang there for a moment. And I can remember lying in my bunk holding on, just sort of trying to measure the angle in my head and thinking: "This is it. This is the one that's going to flip us." Scary.

Thom: Any hacks for being at sea? E.g. the room closest to the mess means that you get a midnight snack.

Alan: Well, you don't normally get to choose but I know that I've been on ships where there's bad cabins to have. Like on the old Discovery, there used to be one near the bar. And we used to call it the 'Thunderbog' cabin because there was a communal toilet next to it (and on a ship you have vacuum flushing) and this particular toilet was very loud and and vibrated a lot. And so, if you got to that cabin, you'd be trying to go asleep and there'd be other guys in the bar and they'd all be taking the turns to go to the toilet every 10 minutes. And thunder bog would go off, right behind your head, just through the wall.

Thom: We had a few called the 'anti-gravity cabin' which is the ones right in the hull. So I can remember one time where in one of these storms, I was being like pushed right down into the mattress so I could hear the Springs groaning. And then, you would like float a little bit out of my mattress as the bow came down again. So it's hard to sleep in that situation, plus we'd got bow thrusters, so it was deafening. It was horribly loud. So that was a bad cabin, yeah. Aim for low and in the middle of the ship if you don't like movement because that tends to be the pivot point. That's a pro tip. Nothing else on cabins really.

Alan: Yeah. You get what you're given. Deal with it.

Thom: Oh this is a weird one. Trickiest/most annoying critter to work with, look for or study.

Alan: For me, it's definitely the big decapod. The big penaeids, the big red shrimp we see at hadal depths. They're just so skittish. We've tried to catch them in a whole manner of different ways, but...

Thom: ...just everything about their morphology is to not get caught, so if anything touches those antennae, they're just off.

Alan: We've got hours and hours and hours of footage of these things all over the place. And after 600 deployments I think we've caught one of each species. And they were about 2,000m apart so utterly useless in terms of making any assumptions or data points. So, the big red shrimp are the most beautiful graceful things in the abyssal plains, but God they're difficult to catch.

Thom: It came up today actually in a conversation. A weird one, but glass sponges.

Alan: Oh yeah. Nasty.

Thom: Because the spicules are like fibreglass and they get into your skin. No matter how many layers of gloves you wear, somehow they still get into your skin and over a few weeks it's like eczema. You're just covered in a rash. It's really not nice at all. And as we've discussed, they smell.

Alan: It's almost as if humans haven't really evolved to handle glass sponges from the deep sea. It's like they didn't really evolve together at any point.

Thom: It's seems like we don't like microscopic glass splinters and they go right into our hands.

Alan: Yeah it's like trying to pick up 10,000 hypodermic needles and going wow this is really awkward.

Thom: Yeah one of those yellow needle bins they have in hospitals. It's just like rooting around in one of those for the toffee at the bottom.

Thom: What was it like the first time you went on a ship or down in a submarine? I think the sub's an interesting one.

Alan: Yeah the first time I went the ship it was RS Discovery. I just really enjoyed it. I just really enjoyed the whole thing, it was just a really great experience, I loved it. I thought: I'll do this. First time in a submarine... are we talking first successful dive or the first aborted dive?

Thom: Oh that's true, there was a near-miss first, wasn't there?

Alan: Yeah first time in the sub didn't go that well. Uh, first successful dive was just brilliant. It was just such a good day out and coming back, and I told the story on the very first podcast but it was just... it was just one of those days. It was just great, it really was. It just it went like clockwork, kind of, you know. And there was a big party at the end and the weather was like an absolute glass off and there was a big sunset at the end and they made me a T-shirt and it was oh it was just, really cool. Yeah.

Thom: Oh this is a good one: what's the biggest animal you've seen? Both on the ship and in the subs?

Alan: On the ship was a blue whale we saw last year, coming back...

Thom: That's the biggest one!

Alan: Yeah!

Thom: That's the biggest one Alan! You can't top that!

Alan: I know, I bagged it.

Thom: I've got nowhere to go with that.

Alan: It's the Challenger Deep of big animals, right? That's what they say?

Thom: That's what it says in the book!

Alan: We were on a privately owned yacht and we had just come back from doing the Diamantina Fracture Zone. Coming into port, we were told to watch out for pygmy blue whales and all this kind of stuff 'cause it's a sanctuary, a protected area and so on. And we're up there doing our due diligence to make sure we didn't ram any whales... and this was not a pygmy blue whale.

Thom: Quite the opposite, my friends.

Quite the opposite. This was absolutely enormous! I've seen them before but always at a distance, right? You don't really get a sense of scale, but this one was pretty close and it was just like, wow. That was just absolutely enormous, like it's so big it doesn't make sense. You know what I mean? It's just like, that didn't grow. Like, someone's made that.

Thom: That's a prop, that's not real.

Alan: Yeah, that that was really quite something special. Uh, in the sub, it's probably just a big cusk eel. You don't have real big stuff down deep.

Thom: There's an optimum size, everything sort of gets to that 'one-and-a-half-meters'.

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: Actually, that reminds me of a couple of stories, since we're doing a stories. Once I was offshore with an engineer who... it was his first time. He had transferred and it was his first time going offshore, or like an early early time going offshore. And as we're heading out of port, some common Dolphins were bow riding... and he had

quite a tough background and he didn't quite know how to process that. The only way he could sort of sum it up was to... he just genuinely asked me: are those real? He just couldn't believe it. I don't know what the alternative was? I don't know how I would have faked that. But he just was so overwhelmed by the moment, he couldn't believe it was real.

Alan: You could have just told him they were robotic and it's part of the the sample design.

Thom: Yeah or it's like when you get a plastic owl to scare off pigeons. So we just have plastic dolphins on our bow.

Alan: Yeah, to scare off the flying fish, so they don't chip the paint.

Thom: Talking about things they do and don't like. Common dolphins really like this one piece of equipment we used to use called a boomer, which basically was yellow and dolphin-shaped. And these are the dolphins with a flash of yellow down the side in the hourglass shape, and apparently that was very very sexy to them. So they'd all be flirting with this piece of towed gear, so that was fun.

But yeah, for the biggest animal... Nowhere near yours but one of the sort of magical ones were pilot whales, which are really just big dolphins. But they're quite curious and we were holding station to lower a CTD, I think it was. And they do this thing called Spy Hopping. And a few different animals do this, where they sort of bob straight up out of the water to get a look at you (or to orientate themselves 'cause they can have a little 360 twirl and come around). And I just made eye contact with this pod, and they were really quite big, at least in my memory they're really quite big. And they're just standing out the water like the monolith from 2001. Just these huge black animals rising out of the sea and making eye contact with us. And a sort of like: what the hell are you doing here? This is our area! But they seem just sort of curious. But yeah, they hung around for a while... that was a cool one.

Thom: What's it like getting to connect with all these specialized scientists and interviewing them? I'd say that's probably why we started the show because we talked to a lot of people on these trips and we just like: you are really cool and nobody even knows what it is you study. Or the general public don't. And they have a right to be as interested as we are!

Alan: Yeah, I agree. I think there's a lot of the ways in which deep-sea science is presented. We rant about this all the time; the way it's presented in the media and stuff like that. There's a certain narrative which is becoming really boring, but when you actually work with a lot of these people you're like: it shouldn't be boring. There's no way this should be... or not necessarily boring, but just really predictable. And there's way more interesting stuff going on and there's all these people who don't necessarily get a voice to do it. And I think that's the reason why we really started it. Is to get all these interesting people that come our way and just chat about it, rather than making some sort of big bold statement about what ultimately always becomes: knowing more about the moon than ocean conservation.

Thom: Are there any specific news feeds to keep up on... to hear more news about the deep sea? This is the tricky thing, 'cause this is why we started this show because

there aren't many. I think the DOSI newsletter is really good, we've mentioned that a few times. So that's a great angle for deep-sea news. There are a few of the dive-streaming (live streaming) streams. There is a Discord called Dive Stream Oceanographic, I think it is. We've mentioned these previously, we'll try and put the links in the show notes. They're all really good for experiencing sort of deep-sea science as it's happening. Yeah, it's difficult 'cause we started this because we worried that people who had a genuine interest couldn't find the good and factual stuff in amongst all the aliens and monsters and nonsense. And we try and tweet. We're not very good at it but both me and Alan try and tweet when we can.

Alan: Oh I've given up.

Thom: Oh have you? You're off it?

Alan: Yeah I just couldn't be bothered. I don't know, I'm losing my mojo. I was an internet sensation for about a day.

Thom: Did you ever lose a platform/technical device during an operation?

Alan: I reckon we just fly past that.

Thom: Just whiz right past it?

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: All I will say along those lines is: everything you put in the sea is temporary. The sea always wins. You're lucky every time you get it back.

Alan: Deep-sea equipment doesn't generally live to be an old man.

Thom: They all die young and handsome.

Alan: Yeah, a blaze of glory, all of them.

Thom: What is your favourite leisure activity while being at sea? You don't get a lot of free time.

Alan: I don't think I do any leisure activity at sea other than a couple of beers at the end of the day, but even then we probably talk about work, so probably nothing.

Thom: Some good chatting. Um, something that will take me out of it, if the vessel's starting to feel a bit small. Bit of cabin fever. A bit of sci-fi or something or just like another world I can disappear off into. So quite often that's an audio book, because I find reading exhausting. So I usually load up on audio books and yeah have something I'm listening to that makes me feel like I can go somewhere else if uh I'm feeling a bit claustrophobic.

Thom: Oh... did you ever have second thoughts about entering a deep sea sub?

Alan: No.

Thom: I know you're...yeah, you're quite adamant on this one.

Alan: No, never. If you're if you're second-guessing or are worried, you shouldn't be getting in it. That's the rules. Nobody gets in it if you don't want to get in it.

Thom: Yeah, no one's forcing anyone.

Alan: I can understand people get nervous. And I still... I wouldn't class it necessarily as being nervous. It's probably more sort of slightly anxious. And it's more to do with the ceremony of it all. It's not the safety of it, in any way shape or form. But when you get all tooled up in your gear and everything else, and you're sat under the air

conditioning waiting to get the nod to come out and walk across the deck and get in the sub. It's a kind of like, it's like a waiting game. You've got 10 minutes to sort of pace and it's that... as I say, it's not even nervous or even anxiety or whatever it is. It's just kind of like this... you're sort of psyching yourself up a little bit and you're walking around circles and then you hear someone over the radio saying 'Okay, ready for passengers'. And then you walk out and you go in, and then you're just doing what you need to do. So I don't think you really have time to think about it.

Thom: It would be 'I can't pee for the next 12 hours' that's what would be making me anxious. I'm fine unless somebody tells me I can't go.

Alan: It doesn't bother me.

Thom: There's a secret knack to that though, isn't there? What was it? A cup of tea and a hot shower?

Alan: Well, all guys say: you go for a wee in the hottest shower you can handle and then that'll give you a good 12 hours.

Thom: Wow, yeah okay. Worth knowing.

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: Do you have a favourite area of the world to be in on a boat and why?

Alan: I don't know. It's kind of all the same.

Thom: Surely Antarctica? I know you were quite moved by that one. It's one of the few places where there's stuff at the top.

Alan: Uhhh yes and no. It's nice when you get the opportunity to come in close to the shore and you can see things like, you know icebergs and penguins and all that kind of stuff. But certainly out in the open Southern Ocean, it's horrendous. It's an awful place.

Thom: It's a desert, I've described it as. It's just terrifying. It's like, if I left this little life-pod, I would not survive very long at all. So it's humbling.

Alan: Yeah. What's weird is that each ocean has a different colour right? When you're in Antarctica the water looks black. It looks very very dark gray. If you're in the Pacific, it has a really specific colour of light blue. And in my mind, the Indian Ocean is a bit greener. And the Atlantic is even greener, if you like.

Thom: It's amazing you could rattle that off. That is an amazing observation.

Alan: Yeah I genuinely think it is. Yeah I think you can tell the difference. And one of the most, I think the most beautiful colour, is when you get in the sub in the Pacific and you're on the surface and you just start to descend. And there's a moment around a few tens of meters, maybe 50-100 m something like that... you go very quickly so you lose the light within the first few minutes... but there's a very specific colour of blue which is very Pacific Ocean and it's amazing. And the the water clarity is amazing too. If you did it in the Atlantic, the visibility is not very good. Uh so that alone would probably be put in the Pacific as a favorite place.

Thom: Get Dulux onto that. 'That one. That blue.' Both walls of my house; that one.

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: Do you have a favourite ship? We've had some deep bonds.

Alan: Had some deep bonds, but it's like Kaharoa was a favourite, but now six months ago I went back to see it I'm like: 'I don't know how we ever worked on this thing'.

Thom: It's smaller than I remember.

Alan: You know, the ship I'm on just now, I've got a lot of obviously a lot of history with it now. We've been working on it almost constantly for five years.

Thom: But it must dwarf any other ship you've been on really. Even the ones we felt we spent a lot of time on. Like, you've lived on this one for, like you say, five years.

Alan: But that makes it a different relationship to some of the other boats where you go on it and you just have a great old time. Like the Sonne is a great vessel to be on. I personally really like the old Sonne. The new one's nice and it's bigger but the old Sonne had some real character to it, and it was a proper workhorse. And the atmosphere was just good, you know? And it says a lot about the atmosphere. And as I said before, there's some ships you get on, and as soon as you set foot like on it you're like: 'Nah, I don't like this.' I won't name names but there's some quite famous ships I just don't like the vibe. It's got bad mojo.

Thom: And I don't know if everyone else is picking up on that too, but like everyone feels that way as well, so it's not going to be a very good trip.

Alan: Yeah, there's some that are just... I don't know what it is. It's not even the people or anything, it's just something about... I don't know, I can't really put a finger on it. But the old Sonne I've got a lot of time for.

Thom: Do you get homesick or is there no time?

Alan: I think you mentally compartmentalize it. So I know a lot of people struggle with stuff like that. And a lot of people spend every spare moment phoning back friends and family and stuff like that. But I'm really bad for that. I tend to just switch off. Uhhh and knowing that I have to check in at home I'll make time to go and do it. But then I find you just don't have much to say. It's like: 'Oh, how's it going? Well, I've done the same thing today I've done the last 23 days.'

Thom: As we get more connected it's getting kind of difficult, because you really have to be present in that world. You're so busy, there's so much going on.

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: And you've got so little time and energy left over. You know, it's lovely to hear those voices, but also it makes me homesick.

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: Yeah 'cause it reminds me of everything else, and you can just be in the zone. And, the more people there were to miss, you know once I had a family of my own, it was a lot harder to go to sea. But I used to I used to be fine with six weeks, you know? It was just, I'm going on an adventure, and I'll be back when I'm back.

Alan: But it's a hard thing to explain to someone who's not done it.

Thom: And it sounds selfish, it doesn't sound nice, 'cause there's absolutely people I miss. But I can't find the time for updates and to juggle my home life from remote.

Alan: If you can't switch it off, you'll just become miserable. This is the thing, so over the years, I used to switch it on and off when you have to. You know, if something happens at home and you have to sort of be in the zone for that, then you can. I don't know, maybe I'm just very robotic and very binary. But just kind of like: right, get into family mode and do whatever you need to do. Make the calls you have to make. And then back on the ship, I don't sit and dwell on things or mope around and wish I was

somewhere else. You're there now, just do the job and when you get off you'll deal with whatever you have to deal with. I don't know it's a super power switching off.

Thom: There's probably a lot of people in the military that get that. I think that's a similar mentality.

Thom: What's it like to try and do lab work on a rolling ship?

Alan: Really irritating.

Thom: I can't do microscopes. Like you're guaranteed to get seasick if you try and use a microscope.

Alan: Actually, it's not lab work that annoys me. Lab work is just balancing, it just like spinning plates, right? You just got to make sure everything's tied down, everything's got little holders and all that kind of stuff. The thing that bugs me is typing when it's really going for it. I remember we did a job off Titanic. We're sitting above Titanic, we went out there for like 8 days and never got a single dive in, because the weather was so bad. And it was just rolling all the time and for some reason, I forget what it is, I had to write something for something and I promised myself I'll do it when I was away. And it's just every word you type there's a typo because you're being pulled off the keys. Pulled off the keys and you're pulled on the keys. And you spend the whole time just going "T"... "h"... "ee" ..."delete"... "space". You know? It's just... you might as well just start typing with one finger because it's just so irritating. And that's when I get to the point where I want to take the laptop, take it outside and literally throw it into the sea. I think typing in rough-sea to be the most irritating thing.

Thom: I can't hold my thread together either. I find my writing's really bad. It's not just using the keyboard, it's just stringing sentences together with that sort of external stimulation of constantly holding balance.

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: Yeah my writing's terrible when I'm at sea.

Thom: Oh it's weird... do you ever get a song stuck in your head specifically at sea?

Alan: Yeah.

Thom: I've discussed this and I think it's the rhythm of the vessel. I think the rocking of the vessel is the same tempo as certain pieces of music and they just get stuck in my head.

Alan: We experimented on that once, where we deliberately picked a song and started playing it quite a lot in a lab to see if it would then catch like a virus. And ultimately you'd end up a couple of days later, you'd find somebody whistling it. Did that once on the James Cook.

Thom: Oh did it work?

Alan: It did. It was Octopus's Garden.

Thom: Okay that's a good one.

Thom: How do you mentally prepare for a stint at sea?

Alan: I think it depends where you are in your career and what your background is. Going back, I would probably struggle more when I came back than going 'cause when you're young free and single and you're like 'Yeah let's just go on a big adventure' and

you just go and deal with it. And then you come back and you realize you have nothing. You know, you come out there at the arrivals gate and then there's all these wives and girlfriends, and you just walk straight through the door and into a taxi and go to the pub and find your mates. And you realise... why am I even doing this? Whereas now it's different because now you're going home to something. But then the harder bit is leaving in the first place 'cause you don't necessarily want to leave them but you're looking forward to coming back. And so I think that that's something that shifted when you go from being a young, free, single knucklehead, to someone who's actually got kids.

Thom: Yeah that's really valid. I find the buildup more stressful just 'cause there's always that stress of getting everything ready, getting the mob ready. Things are inevitably late. Suppliers inevitably let you down. We have never successfully internationally shipped our equipment. Is that is that record still holding?

Alan: I think so yeah.

Thom: It's never worked out

Alan: No.

Thom: So it's always stressful and at the moment, if I wake up at 3:00 a.m. that's it, I'm up. Because I'm just running scenarios, I'm packing things, I'm running internal stress tests on pieces of gear I'm putting together. So yeah, I'm finding this part quite stressful. And so I don't want to then be snippy with my family. And then when I'm away and missing them, my last memories of the last week and a half spent with them is me being tired and grumpy and stressed about other things and not really spending any time with them. So that's yeah, that's something I'm trying to balance right now.

Thom: Oh, if you could give one piece of packing advice to someone going on their first expedition, what would it be?

Alan: No.

Thom: Excellent.

Alan: The grand finale question. No, I don't know. I've seen people come on... I still regularly see people come on ships with huge bags and lots of stuff. I just don't get it

Thom: You pack amazingly light. Your packing is fantastic.

Alan: There's a washing machine on the ship, right? You don't need to bring a month's worth of clothes. Just bring a week's worth and wash it. It's pretty easy to work out.

Thom: My pro tip is: when you're going to do the very careful packing of your bag, lay everything out on the floor take a photo of it and then pack your bag. So, when you inevitably do that: 'Oh did I pack that thing?', you can just zoom in on the photo and you don't have to unpack that bag six or seven times because you keep forgetting things.

Alan: There you go, never thought that.

Thom: That is my pro tip, better than an inventory. You can just zoom in on it and see that it's there. If it's in the picture, it's in the bag.

Alan: My alternative strategy is: just don't take anything with you.

Thom: Just four black polos and some shorts.

Alan: Yeah.

