



Photo/Illustration: Ed Peters/SCMP

THE OLD MAN AND THE ODYSSEY

Twenty-five years ago, Magnus Bartlett set out to write the ultimate guidebook to China. The pre-eminent travel publisher tells Ed Peters it should be finished soon

HAD MAGNUS BARTLETT played his cards wrong, he'd have made a stack of money from pornography or renovating houses. As it is, 30 years after landing in Hong Kong, he's become the pre-eminent – though hardly pecunious – cerebral travel publisher.

Bartlett launched the *Over Hong Kong* series of calendars and coffee-table books, and remains the driving force behind Airphoto's *Odyssey Guides*, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year.

Focusing on such remote destinations as the Kyrgyz Republic and producing illustrated maps of the likes of the Yangtze river, *Odyssey* has been won praise from travel gurus such as Simon Winchester, John Julius Norwich and Peter Hopkirk.

A historic photo from the 1985 Frankfurt Book Fair shows Bartlett joking and sipping champagne with fellow publishers Tony Wheeler – Mr *Lonely Planet* – and Hans Hofer of *Insight Guides*, both of whom have gone on to become millionaires.

"I suppose I've always been the junior member of that triumvirate," says Bartlett, an engaging, eccentric 60-year-old who at times looks rather like Yoda from *Star Wars*.

"We try to address a reader and traveller who is more interested in depth. *Insight*, which has one page of photos for every page of text, has done fabulously well over the years and made a great deal of money.

"*Lonely Planet* veers more to the practical, but by nature I find that sort of stuff less interesting than the more esoteric, historic and cultural information we try to put into our guides. What's the point of finding somewhere to sleep or to eat if, at the same time, you don't appreciate the point of the place?"

"I've always felt that *Lonely Planet* – of whom, of course, sales-wise I am wildly jealous – is about how many places you've been to, not about staying for two months in one place and having a fantastic time. What *Odyssey* is trying to do is tell people about a place before they visit it, so that when they get there they appreciate it more."

Bartlett started in the late 1970s focusing on China, which at the time was just

starting to open up to tourism. The first guides to Beijing and Shanghai were written without the author visiting either city, but they marked *Odyssey's* foothold on the mainland.

"I wanted to put together a sort of Domesday Book – one guide for every province – to the PRC, which was *terra incognita* in those days. Nobody knew what had happened during the Cultural Revolution," says Bartlett.

"I had a sense that this was a country on such a scale that to try to cover it in a single title would be impertinence, but later on in the 1980s we did bring out an all-China guide, it sold by the truckload."

Bartlett's slightly unusual commercial imperatives may account for the company's modest growth over the past quarter century, but he expresses no regrets and says he is passionate about all the company's titles – including a particular favourite, on the music of Tennessee, which "did disastrously at the box office".

"Publishing *per se* is not a passion, but I'm passionate about life, and publishing takes up a lot of my time. Titles are a passion, and Tennessee was definitely a passion."

"One magazine – *Travel And Leisure* – described one of our books as the 'bible of Bhutan guides', and to me, selfishly, that's more rewarding than the sales figures. "Someone once famously remarked 'any moron can make money', and I think, up to a point, in a rather arrogant sort of way I felt long ago that if one was focused purely on making money one could do it quite easily. I redeveloped some run-down properties in London and made a huge return so I easily could have stuck to that."

"When I first started in publishing I went to see a pornographic magazine producer in New York who wanted us to do all his colour separations, but I simply wasn't interested. Of course, I'd no objections to seeing beautiful naked women but I didn't want to spend a lot of time quality controlling the tint of their nipples, or whatever."

Before arriving in Hong Kong, Bartlett taught photography at the Royal College of Art and enjoyed a successful career as a freelance photographer. He accompanied the explorer and writer Bruce Chat-

win on assignment to Tiger Leaping Gorge in Yunnan for *The New York Times*, and practised portrait photography, as well.

"It was a wonderful excuse to quiz people, as I believe that everyone has a story to tell," says Bartlett. "I believe strongly in what's known as networking, for want of a better word. I think it's vitally important and it reflects my self-confessed extrovert quality. I really love people."

Networking is, without a doubt, one of Bartlett's strengths. He was able to call on Chang Tsong-zung, doyenne of contemporary Chinese arts experts, to come on the Chatwin expedition; he chatted easily with Bill Bryson, Eric Newby and Michael Palin at a recent reception in London; and, when the Rolling Stones came to town for the Harbour Fest, Bartlett sent Mick Jagger a photo he'd taken of the band at a recording session in 1963.

"I did write to Mick asking him to pony up some cash for our upcoming Afghanistan title, making reference to the fact that I effected his introduction to the group's first agent, Andrew Loog Oldham, but they fell out so maybe he didn't feel like putting his hand in his pocket."

"When I told David Tang about it, he chuckled and gave me Bianca Jagger's fax and – rather indiscreetly – mobile phone in London, and said I might fare better with her."

With the aerial photography business in the capable hands of his son, Kasvan, Bartlett will be commemorating the silver jubilee by returning to where he started. "I'm going back to what I embarked on in my 40s, and completing the China guidebook series. Much to my discredit, we didn't always hang in there when the going got rough, so I really want to complete that cycle before the Olympics in 2008."

"I'm 60 now, and though my father is 86, the Grim Reaper may step in this evening, so I don't take life for granted."

"My wife and I live in a rusty – as opposed to rustic – cottage on Lamma looking over the ocean, and the view to Cheung Chau and Lantau is absolutely gorgeous."

"I feel like a multi-millionaire. Hong Kong has been really good to me, life is sweet and I look forward to being 70. I really would like to die with my boots on."

The ultimate diet: there's nothing to it

You've tried no salt, no fat, no carbs ... get set for the latest health fad: no food. Peta Bee samples the mean cuisine

CHECK IN AT the New Life Health Centre in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, and, before you're shown to your room, staff will perform a hair and urine analysis to check your toxic overload, and prescribe a daily diet for the duration of your stay of, well, nothing.

Fasting is one of the latest food (or should that be non-food?) fads, and the ultimate way to experience it is at one of a growing number of dedicated non-food "hotels".

Most residents – or patients, as staff prefer to call them – at New Life stay for a minimum of five days and pay upwards of HK\$6,000 for a basic room and liquid diet, touted as a treatment for everything from obesity to arthritis. A lucky few with minor complaints such as headaches are permitted herbal tea or other substances in minuscule quantities. For the rest, plain water must suffice until solids are slowly re-introduced as the fast comes to an end.

Eating nothing may not seem the soundest route to wellbeing, but emerging scientific research suggests otherwise. Dr Mark Mattson and his colleagues at America's National Institute of Ageing are conducting a study to find out if regular day-long fasts have a positive effect on health, after research with mice showed that fasting appeared to increase their lifespan.

Reporting his initial findings in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Mattson says mice fed only every other day appeared to benefit the most. Their longevity was greater not only than that of mice allowed to eat when they wanted, but also those given 40 per cent fewer calories overall. Not only did the fasting mice in Mattson's study live longer, they also recorded better scores in measures relating to diabetes.

At the end of the experiment, all mice were injected with a toxin that damages cells in the hippocampus, the part of the brain where cell damage causes Alzheimer's disease. Fasting mice were shown to be more resistant to the toxins. "We think that going without food imposes a mild stress on cells, and that those cells respond by increasing their ability to cope with more severe stress," says Mattson.

So, starve yourself for a short time and, rather than crumbling in the face of self-inflicted torture, your body will respond by enhancing its defences. Perhaps.

Traditionally, fasting has religious roots – the month-long period of Ramadan in Islam, for example – the point being to concentrate on faith rather than the less prosaic details of everyday life, such as eating and drinking. Many who have fasted, however, claim they experience health benefits and improved vitality, which may partly explain why pilgrimages involving fasting are attracting followers other than the devoutly religious.

Hong Kong journalist Liana Cafolla says she felt healthy and more relaxed after a 48-hour

fast she once tried while contemplating joining the Mormon church. "I felt hungry only after the first five or six hours but not after that. At the end, I felt relaxed, like I'd had a massage, and my head was really clear."

But despite the unexpectedly pleasant experience, during which she took only water, she still felt regular eating was a better option. "Put it this way, I didn't join the church," she says.

While excessive fasting is not the kind of approach leading nutritionists recommend, not all are strictly opposed to the odd short fast. Sarah Stanner, a scientist at the British Nutrition Foundation, says fasting shouldn't be used as an excuse to gorge at other times, but says that if a 24-hour fast makes you feel better, then go ahead.

"Fasting for longer than 24 hours is not advisable, but

"At the end, I felt relaxed, like I'd had a massage, and my head was really clear."

Liana Cafolla
Past faster



avoiding food for a day won't really present any problems for most people," she says. "You need to make sure you stay well hydrated by drinking plenty of water and other fluids."

Despite Mattson's findings, the debate continues about whether fasting can be good for you. By far the most popular reason for fasting is not to lose weight, but to improve health and cure nagging ailments. Several studies have suggested a variety of benefits, from improved insulin resistance (which can help prevent adult-onset diabetes) to an improved ability to deal with stress.

However, leading diet experts such as Dr George Blackburn, director of nutrition at Harvard Medical School, doubt that fasting is useful. "Purging yourself by fasting has no scientific or medical backing," he says. *The Independent*

"What's the point of finding somewhere to sleep or eat if, at the same time, you don't appreciate the point of the place"

Magnus Bartlett Publisher



Magnus Bartlett (right) with travel guides Hans Hofer (left) of *Insight Guides* and *Lonely Planet* founders Maureen and Tony Wheeler at the 1985 Frankfurt Book Fair

Photos: AP/AFP/EPA

PEOPLE

Jolie a cash cow

Tomb Raider star Angelina Jolie is funding a programme to donate cows to poverty-stricken Cambodian farmers.

Three hundred families will get one cow each to help them earn money, hopefully dissuading them from logging and hunting wildlife for a living, said Mounh Sarath, of the Cambodian Vision in Development project.

Jolie (right) is giving US\$1.5 million to the organisation for its environmental protection efforts in the country. AP



Marriage miscarriage – Britz calls it quits

Pop princess Britney Spears is looking to have her surprise marriage annulled – just two days after tying the knot with a childhood friend.

Spears married Jason Alexander (both right) on Saturday morning, after a night out in Las Vegas.

But a spokeswoman for her record label, Jive Records, said the couple had second thoughts almost immediately. She said the joke had gone too far, and that the marriage between the two 22-year-olds would be annulled yesterday.

The singer famously once claimed she would remain a



virgin until she got married, making her a role model for the pro-chastity movement in the US, BBC Online reported.

One of the biggest-selling female stars in music history, Spears has been trying to redefine her image from that of innocent teen idol to raunchy sex icon.

Charlie, Paris and Pooh

When Prince Charles took the unprecedented step last year of identifying himself as the central character in a series of "untrue" rumours, he probably hoped it would bring an end to the episode.

The prince may be disheartened to learn that his denial of newspaper allegations of a sexual act between a member of the Royal Family and a servant only fed the curiosity of the British public, *Britain's Independent* reported.

Last year, Prince Charles (right) was the most searched for subject on the Google search engine in Britain. Millions of Britons searched for "Prince Charles" on the site, after he issued his statement in November. Searches for the prince outstripped those for celebrities such as David



Beckham, who was sixth, and rugby star Jonny Wilkinson, who came fourth. Pop star Michael Jackson, who is facing child molestation charges in the US, came seventh, and hotel heiress Paris Hilton, whose home-made pornographic film was posted on the internet in November, was ninth. Winnie the Pooh, who has been the subject of a legal battle over merchandising rights, was in third place.

Parker pens debut novel

British filmmaker Alan Parker has found his foray into novel writing a walk in the park after 28 years of Hollywood.

Parker, 59, who directed Madonna in *Evita*, said he marvelled at the manners of the editors who worked on the manuscript of his first novel, *The Sucker's Kiss*.

"They are infinitely more gracious ... If the [film] producers have notes, they are usually in capital letters with a great number of exclamation marks, whereas in publishing, they say, 'Oh, if A went to B instead of C, wouldn't that be better? But if you don't think so, then that's fine'."