

A man with short, light-colored hair is shown from the waist up, wearing a full scuba diving suit. He has a scuba regulator in his mouth and is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark, making the man and his gear stand out. The text is overlaid on the lower half of the image.

# *a* LIFE *less* ORDINARY

*Andy Torbet got his first taste of outdoor adventure when he joined his local diving club in Aberdeen. Now he leads a life full of action and excitement in the wilds.*

By Chae Strathie





**H**AVE you ever tried an extreme sport? If so ask yourself, was it REALLY extreme?

Did you run down the stairs two at a time? Try a jazzy new shade of lipstick? Scoff sliced beetroot from a jar while wearing a clean white shirt?

Daring stuff indeed, but not quite in the same league as Aberdeenshire-raised daredevil Andy Torbet.

The seasoned explorer and TV presenter has been a regular face on the likes of The One Show and Coast in recent years, and his approach to 'getting out and about' is a bit more, shall we say, intense than most people will stretch to.

Before I meet him I check his website . . . and realise with a sinking feeling that he's the kind of guy who makes your average bloke (that's me, by the way) question their masculinity.

It's not that he strides around wrestling bears and headbutting boulders – it will turn out that he's actually a very calm and relaxed presence. But his back story really is something to behold.

Here's the list. He's an extreme diver. An underwater explorer. A skydiver. A mountaineer. A bomb disposal expert. A former army officer. A TV presenter. An author. A public speaker. Oh, and he has a degree in zoology, is a member of MENZA and is studying for a Masters in archaeology in his spare time.

You can probably see why I suddenly feel a tad on the inferior side. The closest I've come to underwater exploring is searching for the bar of soap in a bubble-filled bath.

To meet up with Andy I make a beeline for the Isle of Bute, where he's on holiday with

his family, taking a break from his many adventurous projects.

I find him in fine form, sipping a cuppa in a not very extreme (but very lovely) cafe in Rothesay.

Andy begins by explaining he was born in Irvine in 1976, but moved north to Turriff soon after.

"My dad was a forester so I spent my early years in the country, playing, walking and camping," he says.

He dreamed of being a diver, and that dream became a reality when his family moved again, this time to Aberdeen in 1988 when he was 12.

"I joined the local dive club," he says. "But back then you couldn't properly dive until you were 14, so I had to just snorkel above the older members when they went out to sea.

*"I had to resort to a pair of long johns and a woman's wetsuit jacket... with the bulges in all the wrong places!"*

"My funds didn't stretch to the full gear in those days, so I had to resort to a pair of long johns and a woman's wetsuit jacket . . . with the bulges in all the wrong places!

"It was freezing. If I started diving now with the same experience I had back then I'd quit after a day. I was much harder as a kid than I am now."

Another ambition as he grew up was to be a soldier. So after getting his zoology degree he joined the Royal Marines.

Everything was on track for a career with an elite fighting force. And then disaster struck during training when he fell and broke his back.

It was a devastating blow and a lesser character might have thrown in the towel.

But not Andy.

"I thought 'I'm going to prove I can get fit'. So I did. I didn't join the army for the easy life."

Andy went on to serve in the bomb disposal team with 49 Squadron, Royal Engineers – a Commando, Paras and Special Forces support squadron. Overall he was in the army for 10 years and did tours of the Balkans, Iraq and the Falklands.

"I loved Iraq," says Andy. "I was running bomb disposal teams."

But surely that's one of the most tension-filled and scary jobs there is?

"Tension?" Andy shakes his head. "I found it incredibly peaceful. The second I stepped into that no-go zone, it all became very 'zen'."

The thing about Andy is that despite his taste for adventure he's not an adrenalin

junky. He's calm, measured and prepared. He doesn't have a death wish.

"People say 'You're a lunatic' or 'You're fearless' – but none of that is true," he says. "Cave diving is incredibly safe, sky diving too, if done right. I'm a control freak"

That said there have been some hairy moments. Like the time he dived the submerged passages of Uamh nan-Claig ionn, The Cave of Skulls, one of Scotland's deepest caves. To be honest, the name 'Cave of Skulls' would probably set a few small alarm bells tinkling in my risk-averse brain. But that's the kind of title Andy sees as a recommendation rather than a warning.

He'd already attempted to dive further

than any other caver in the system back in the winter months, but a particularly tight space and dwindling time had meant he had to turn back.

Andy's not a giving up sort of guy, so the following June, he was back.

After a series of underground scrambles, abseils and squeezes he found himself at the narrow passage that had foxed him last time.

Andy recalls what happened next.

"I dug silt away to make more room and tried to push through, but I just kept getting stuck and having to back out, dig more and try again. I was twisting my head from side to side, trying to breathe in the freezing cold water, when I saw the space widen out ahead.

"Just inches from that point I took a deep breath, plunged my face into the water and pushed hard with my legs. Nothing. I was stuck! I was starting to wonder what I was going to do when an idea struck me. Because I'd breathed in and was holding my breath my chest had expanded and was getting stuck. So I breathed out, forcing all of my air away.

"If I'd still been stuck at that point it would have been a bad situation . . . but I felt my chest contract and managed to slip through!" Just hearing Andy relate this tale brings me out in a cold sweat and gives me a nasty case of the collywobles, but it's exactly the kind of daring attitude that TV people love.

So it's no surprise when the producers of BBC's Coast spotted some films he'd put in the internet.

His first piece for them was about 'sea shepherds' on Lewis taking their flock to a little island.

"It basically went really badly," laughs Andy. "I got on really well with the locals, but they were a little more wary with the crew from London, so I ended up as a sort of go-between.

"The weather was appalling. The team got lost, and I said 'follow me' and got my compass out. We had three cameras and the some of the crew weren't that fit, so by the end of it I was carrying all three cameras up and down this island.

"I ended up doing four of the six episodes of that series. I now say I wouldn't be on TV if the weather had been good and the locals had been on side!"

Thankfully for Andy, the Scottish climate delivered in its usual way and kickstarted his life of outdoor adventure.



*"I took a deep breath, plunged my face into the water and pushed hard with my legs. Nothing. I was stuck fast!"*

Now, after 18 series for grown up TV, including The One Show, Andy has just finished his own series for Children's BBC. It's called Beyond Bionic and sees Andy, with the help of science and technology, take on some of the superheroes of the animal kingdom.

The show saw Andy swim 50m under a frozen lake in Alaska on a single breath, stand in the middle of a 700 degree C fireball, try and sprint faster than 44mph, climb a 12 storey glass building and go over 250mph whilst skydiving with rockets strapped to his legs.

Hmmm . . . it's a close call, but in the daredevil stakes I think Andy beats me. Just.