



Explorer Lucy  
Shepherd  
Picture:  
DENISE BRADLEY

Danielle Lett chats to the 29-year-old, who has explored terrains ranging from the Arctic to the Amazon - and shows no signs of stopping anytime soon

# LUCY SHEPHERD: *Suffolk's very own Bear Grylls*

Cast your mind back to childhood, where most of us will have fond memories of playing outside, making our own adventures and letting our imaginations run wild.

From playing in hedgerows and pretending we're in the jungle, to exploring the beach on a family day out and conjuring up fantasy scenarios, it was always a joy to play pretend as an adventurer.

But what about if you actually grew up and became an explorer?

Many of us have dreams of seeing every corner of the planet - but Lucy Shepherd has actually turned those dreams into a reality, as she's a full-time explorer and has seen places most can only imagine.

The East Anglian native is only 29 - but for the past 10 years has dedicated her life to travelling across the globe, exploring a variety of uncharted terrain.

But how did she end turning a never-ending sense of adventure into a career?

Growing up in Henham, Lucy made the most of her days outdoors, whiling away the time roaming around the fields freely from dawn until dusk.

"It's one thing I held onto in later years more so than other kids because I was an only child," she explains.

"That meant a field could become a faraway land, or a small forest could be a jungle. Growing up in the countryside definitely contributed to where I am now."

But never did she imagine it would be where she ended up as an adult. "My parents weren't explorers or in the military, and I eventually navigated my path later on in this world," she adds.

Years later, Lucy took the leap and signed up for a two-week expedition in Scotland which saw her dip her toe into the world of exploration and adventure - and she's never looked back.

"That was the first time I was introduced to the word 'expedition'," she says.

"I was quite naive and didn't know it still existed - I thought it was something they did hundreds of years ago. I didn't know that someone like me could go on expeditions."

Like a duck to water, Lucy threw herself in at the deep end and realised being outdoors was something she thrived at.

"The trip consisted of a lot of kayaking and hiking. We had an instructor, but at one point we were left to our own devices for a few days as we worked out how to survive. I was naturally good at being outside, and gritting my teeth and getting on with it.

"I think that was what opened my eyes to another world that was out there. That fortnight changed me, and from then on, I wanted to see how I could do a real expedition. Scotland taught me there was a world out there waiting to be explored, and it solidified the fact I love the

adventure side of things."

Shortly after that, at the age of 18, Lucy packed her bags once again and made her way to the Arctic Circle for a 10-week expedition across Svalbard - completely cut-off from civilisation.

"I saw an advert in the paper that was looking for 18 to 25-year-olds to take part in this scientific Arctic expedition," she says.

As part of the Royal Geographic Society, hopefuls had to go through a vigorous application process which included a series of interview and intense training.

"To my surprise, I got in and was set loose in the Arctic with nine others."

A Norwegian archipelago, Svalbard is comprised of mountains, fjords, and around 60% of it is covered with glaciers.

During her adventure, Lucy fully immersed herself in the stunning landscape that the island had to offer, and seeing such a side to the world is something that has always remained with her, further fuelling her wanderlust.

"It can be wild, but it's pristine and has this sense of fragility at the moment as it's melting at such a rapid rate due to climate change. I went over a decade ago and it's changed so much, it's almost too dangerous to go where I went, as the ice is melting so quickly.

"The Arctic is still where my heart lies though, thanks to that trip. Everyone else on it thought 'wow, what an amazing, once-in-a-lifetime experience', but I thought to myself 'if this was once-in-a-lifetime, I've got to keep finding ways of doing this'."

And ever since, Lucy has globetrotted around the world multiple times a year, experiencing landscapes and settings most of us have only seen on film and in photos.

Pins in her map include the high mountains of Tajikistan and Bolivia, Mount Denali in Alaska, Iceland, Greenland, the Patagonia region of South America, and Argentina to name just a few. But how does she decide where she heads to?

"There's not much thought, I just go with my heart," she says.

"I hear a name, and go from there - but it usually has to be somewhere very remote. I enjoy all of the problem-solving that comes with it too, when it comes to working out how to make it happen. A lot of the time, there's not a lot of information on somewhere, and that could be because no one's ever gone there, or very few people have, and that's a huge part of the attraction."

And it was her latest adventure - a 253-mile expedition across a previously uncharted section of the Amazon rainforest - that proved to be her biggest feat yet.

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In September last year, Lucy, with the help of four local indigenous tribesmen, set out across the Kanuku Mountains in Guyana in what ended up being a 50-day expedition.

Having previously conquered a smaller section of this perilous terrain, she was intent to head back - and when tragedy struck, she was even more intent on seeing it through.

"In 2020, I trekked through that same area but did so in 11 days, and I had the help of a friend, Ian Craddock, who was ex-Special Forces. He had a lot respect for the country and its people, and helped me make it all happen.

"We started planning this big expedition, but he suddenly passed away. It was incredibly sad, and the expedition now seemed impossible to pull off, but we felt there was much more incentive to go on and prove we could do it, and do it for him. So my friend Anders Andersen, who acted as operations manager, and I set about planning it, and there was a huge amount of work to do."

Lucy began contacting all of the necessary government bodies, as well as the tribal chiefs of the nearby villages, in order to get permission to conduct the trek.

"The only maps of the area are 50 years old, so they're not exactly reliable, but they're the best I could get so I started planning a logistics route with those. My operations manager organised supplies for me, which were kept in barrels at separate points along the river. He told me the coordinates and we'd pick up the food from them. That was three weeks into the expedition, and three weeks after that."

With her route meticulously planned, and her team of Amazonians ready to join her, she was finally able to make the epic journey.

But all of the planning in the world couldn't prepare even the most intrepid explorer for some of the dangers she encountered along the way.

"We faced challenges daily. So many things could've gone wrong, and probably should've, but we managed to get through it," she says.

"You're constantly wet and always soaked through - whether that's because you're soaked with sweat, or wading through water. You get used to it, but it does inevitably rot your skin, especially your feet. And small cuts you get become infected. One of the guides got trench foot, and I got skin infections."

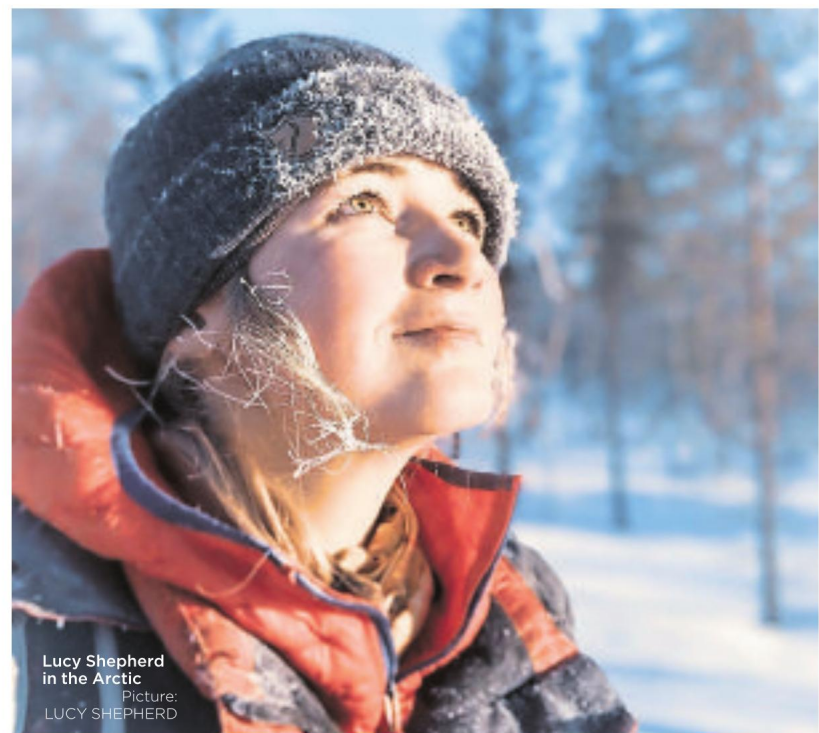
And don't forget the unpredictable wildlife that inhabits the Amazon.

"I'm not exaggerating when I say there were venomous snakes everywhere. One bite from them would mean game over."

Some of the world's most venomous snakes can be found lurking deep in the Amazon, and it is thought to be home to around 17 deadly species including pit vipers such as the

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Lucy Shepherd  
in the Arctic  
Picture:  
LUCY SHEPHERD



**LEFT:**  
Explorer Lucy  
Shepherd

Picture:  
DENISE BRADLEY

**BELOW:**  
Lucy with her team  
who made it over  
250 miles deep into  
the Amazon over the  
course of 50 days

Picture:  
LUCY SHEPHERD



bushmaster, and 10 types of coral snakes.

“That was a huge terror, especially when they’d come out at around 3pm every day.

“And crossing rivers was pretty sketchy at some points due to the caiman,” she adds.

A reptile native to South and Central America, caiman are similar to alligators, with the black caiman the largest predator in the Amazon River basin.

Lucy and her team had to keep an eye out for jaguar and wild boar during their expedition.

“There’s also the risk of trees falling. In all honesty, luck plays a huge part in all of it. You can try and mitigate the risks, but sometimes there’s an invisible snake hidden under some leaves, or a branch could fall on you.”

Physical challenges aside, Lucy happened to be the only woman in her group – which might seem daunting to many, but she soon took charge and earned the respect of her team in no time.

“There’s of course the cultural difference, and you have to establish your role quite quickly, but like with anything, if you’re a good enough leader, then it will work out. There’s also no privacy when you’re out there – but you soon come to realise you don’t want that, because if you’re alone, you’re more at risk of a jaguar attack.”

But thankfully, she and the rest of her team, completed the trek in one piece after nearly two months deep in the rainforest.

“I found it unbelievable, I think I was the most shocked we pulled it off,” she says.

“It was a huge relief because every single day during that trek, I had the weight of not just the bag on my shoulder, but also the responsibility of my life and the four others I was guiding. You have to be alert and ready for danger at any point. It’s nothing like the mountains or the Arctic, where you can switch off for a bit.

“But I worked hard to make it all happen – it was a huge privilege to be able to complete the journey, and to be given the opportunity to visit as no one else had been given permission to go there.”

A few months have now passed since that perilous journey, and already Lucy is itching to get back out there – and has a few other projects in the works for 2022 and beyond.

“As a result of my Amazon expedition, I was contacted by a couple of governments who have some uncharted and unexplored land, and they have asked if I would like to give permission to explore those.

“I’m also in the process of writing a book about my most recent trek. Even before I began, I knew there’d be a story to tell, and I never felt ready to write a book until now, but so much happened in the lead-up to the expedition, and during it, so I think it’s screaming for a story to be written.”

In addition, Lucy is organising a series of springtime guided treks

through the Arctic with people who are complete novices, to help give beginners a taste of life as an explorer.

A keen environmentalist through and through, Lucy’s efforts certainly haven’t gone unnoticed, as at the age of 23, she became a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, and is also the youngest council member of the Scientific Exploration Society.

This is thanks to her contributions to the scientific and geographical fields during her time as an explorer, which have included taking water samples to see if there’s microplastics in some of the remote reaches of the world, conducting inspiring talks, and helping the Scientific Exploration Society with their grants, to encourage more young people into the field.

While these achievements might be enough for some, Lucy shows no signs of stopping – and is making it her mission to open people’s eyes to the dangers of climate change, and how we need to act before it’s too late.

“You can’t ignore what’s going on right now. It’s probably quite easy to look the other way, from our urban cities surrounded by concrete, but when you’re connected to nature you realise how we all have it in us to be connected to the earth in a primal way. My expeditions prove to me time and time again how urgent it is that action is taken, and how frustrating it is that governments and companies aren’t acting as fast as they should.

“Seeing how fast the glaciers in the Arctic are melting and the deforestation that’s taking place in the Amazon, it really hits home. I’ll often go back to places I’ve been to before, and see the changes before my very eyes, or talk to people who’ve lived there, and through tear-filled eyes, they’ll explain how much their home has changed, and how no one is listening to them.”

If Lucy and her adventures have inspired you to get out there and see the world, it’s not too late. No matter your age, you too can explore and see more of this beautiful planet.

“There are a number of ways you can start, depending how old you are. If you’re young, the Duke of Edinburgh Award is a fantastic place to start as it teaches you basic skills such as teamwork and navigation – and they’re vital for taking that next step if you want to go somewhere a bit more exotic or difficult.

“And if you’re an adult, why not go out and explore Suffolk? I think we get so stuck on sticking to the footpath, so why not step off it for once? Or if you fancy going further afield, you can head to Scotland where you can roam and wildcamp pretty much anywhere. That will spark your imagination, and from there you can go anywhere.”

Later this year, Lucy and Anders are teaming up for expedition courses and expeditions in the jungles of Guyana for anyone who wants to give exploration a go.

To find out more about Lucy and the work she does, visit [lucy-shepherd.com](http://lucy-shepherd.com)