

NICE BUT NUMB

Howard Marks's global campaign to legalise weed comes to South Africa next month. But will his argument be dulled by his voracious habit, asks **Oliver Roberts**

THE irony of Howard Marks' efforts to have marijuana legalised would make a stoner giggle uncontrollably. For me, it isn't so funny — a telephonic interview that I'd been looking forward to for a week turned into an uninspiring 15 minutes with a man who was so high when I spoke to him that he was too lazy to give me proper answers.

Here is someone who was once described as the most sophisticated drug baron of all time, had 43 aliases during his peak in the '80s, spent seven years at Terre Haute penitentiary in Indiana, worked with the British Secret Service and had connections with the IRA, MI6, CIA and the Mafia, yet the 20 minutes I was given to speak to the Welshman proved naively optimistic. I imagined stories of danger and excitement — deals going down in sweaty rooms in Thailand; capture and escape; hazy sexual encounters — but there were none. What I got was a dopey old hippie who wasn't all that bothered to recall any of it.

Here's an example:

Me: So how did your time in prison change you?

Marks: It just made me a better person, not that I recommend it. I think, I'm sure.

Me: And what about your work for the Secret Service? That must have been pretty exciting...

Marks: It basically involved setting up safe houses and letter drops — that sort of thing.

Me: What about the usage of marijuana through the years — how has that changed?

Marks: It's gone from being a general diet of Pakistani hash to home grown.

Read his autobiography, *Mr Nice*, which was published in 1996, and it's all there — the first of his dealings at Oxford University where he studied nuclear physics and philosophy; the 30-ton stash he once sold; hauling suitcases filled with millions of dollars through airports. It's clear from the book, which is well written, that Marks is a man of considerable intelligence and charisma, which is why my interview with him was so perplexing. Consider the opening paragraphs of the book that tell the story of how Marks attained the alias 'Donald Nice':

"After a couple of awkward meetings with a go-between, I was introduced to a gentle guy named Donald. I couldn't tell if he was a drinker, a stoner or a straight. His kitchen gave no clues. He looked normal, except that his eyes danced like those of a villain. 'We can talk privately out here,' he said and took me to a garden shed."

Donald Nice turns out to be a convicted murderer who sells his passport to Marks for £1 000. If only Marks' true self were as informative and descriptive over the phone.

The problem with a figure like Marks is that he's been turned into a hero and a celebrity for doing selfish and illegal things. A dubious section of the world's population also sees him as a kind of über cool, straw

Stetson-wearing martyr for the cause of getting dope legalised.

I do not doubt that Marks has been rehabilitated in some way — that comes across clearly at the end of his book when he makes the decision to use his experiences to educate people and do something positive with his intellect. However, that rehabilitation is filtered through Marks's irresponsible insouciance and lack of remorse for the indirect damage his drug dealing had on people he never knew, and the direct effects it had on his family. But I suppose coming to terms with this is easy when you've been stoned for 40 years, which, with a proud laugh, Marks tells me he has been, "apart from seven years in the nick".

Marks now earns his living giving talks about his adventures at venues all over the

world. In his show, *An Audience with Mr Nice*, he discusses his life and presents his argument for why marijuana should be legalised. Apparently the talks are wildly entertaining — this must be true for them to sell out — but I find the concept of an engaging Marks difficult to fathom on this interview.

The irony of Howard Marks is this: he is the perfect reason why dope should not be legalised. If we were all smoking 20 joints a day — like he does — then we'd be as vacuous as he is.

I've smoked weed before, as have many people I know. The difference is the drug is used on the weekend or after work, and not in excess. Legalising marijuana means it

'I am all for the legalisation of every recreational drug ever discovered'

I could've spoken to Howard Marks, International Man of Mystery, rather than Howard Marks the Everyday Pothead.

● Howard Marks will speak at Wits Great Hall in Joburg on June 19, and at 14 Hope Street in Gardens, Cape Town on June 21. For details and tickets contact Josh on 0828818565 or info@88.co.za



SPLIFF PERSONALITY: Marks, a one-time smuggler, doing what he does best

Picture: ANTON HAMMERL

might be feasible for stoners to light up joints in their cars or around children. Is it logical to think that people can smoke marijuana like they smoke cigarettes and everything will be fine? Believing that adults would be responsible about its use if cannabis were legalised is far-fetched — drunk driving has proved that already.

"People will be able to have their drug of choice," says Marks. "Given that so many people seem to enhance their lives by smoking marijuana, it seems to me that the world would be a better place if they were allowed to."

When I suggest to Marks that legalising marijuana might lead to a rise in the abuse of chemicals like crystal meth and heroin, he appears excited. "That seems pretty low down on the list of the world's problems," he says. "I am all for the legalisation of every recreational drug ever discovered. I only campaign for cannabis, because I have a certain amount of expertise in that area."

And how unfortunate that is — if Marks had been a cocaine baron, crusading for it to be alright if we all did a couple of lines a day, no one would listen to him. One of the main reasons people support drives to have marijuana legalised is that they know they can grow it in their garden — it's a kick that won't cost them anything.

"Cannabis (can) be a totally inappropriate drug," Marks says. "I know a lot of people who I would advise not to smoke it, but that percentage is very small. Most people don't have these problems."

Research shows that long-term, daily use of marijuana reduces intellectual levels and affects attention span and the ability to learn. Most people I know who've smoked pot excessively for long periods — friends, girlfriends — have turned into social flops. They've gone from being ambitious and energetic people to indecisive bores.

When I ask him about his time in prison, hoping that seven years in the brutal Terre Haute will give me the first reply that is at least a minute long, Marks is vague and alludes to the racist nature of US prisons before his voice shrivels into a pile of disinterest.

"And what about all those aliases?" I ask. "To a certain extent there is role play, and you need to get into it, sure," is the reply. I wait for something more... but there's nothing.

Details are what I want, but I'm not getting any. It's a profound letdown when someone who has led a life of such rich experience has nothing to say because they're too stoned: *Most people don't have these problems.*

Marks says he has no regrets and I believe this. I don't think he has wasted his life — the stories he recounts in his book are too vivid and affecting to be of no significance. However, I wish he'd been able to lay off the weed for a couple of hours so