

FROM OUR CONTRIBUTORS

PADDLING THE SEAS

Jon Bowermaster's Descending the Dragon chronicles 800 miles of Vietnam's craggy coastline and those who call it home.



Men's Journal

Rob Howard documented some of the 28 million Vietnamese living along the coast.

HE'S PROBABLY THE ONLY MAN ON EARTH TO KAYAK A DESERT. A complicated feat, riddled with irrationality, dragging a boat across hundreds of miles of salt flat at 13,000 feet. But paddling the ancient sea now known as South America's Altiplano was just part of Jon Bowermaster's larger plan, since completed, to kayak each of the world's seven continents and Oceania. Called Oceans 8, the project also took Bowermaster and a small rotating crew of photographers and adventurers to the Aleutian Islands, Antarctica, Polynesia, Gabon, Croatia, Tasmania, and Vietnam, the last the subject of his new book *Descending the Dragon: My Journey Down the Coast of Vietnam*.

Oceans 8 began as a pure expedition, but it soon became a way to shine a spotlight on the environmental health of the world's oceans. Nearly half the world's population lives within 100 miles of a coast, a fact made more obvious with every cyclone, tsunami, and few inches of sea level rise. What surprised Bowermaster and his team most was how much the 3 billion people living on the shore had in common.

"Whether they're in Vietnam or Chile, coastal people are more similar than they are different," says Bowermaster. "They're linked by plastic pollution, climate change, and overfishing."

Dragon is really the work of two men. The evocative landscapes and portraiture of photographer Rob Howard recall how Walker Evans's images enhanced the written word of James Agee, except, of course, Howard captures watery Asian shacks and fishing boats instead of New Deal-era sharecropping. (Until this trip Bowermaster's Evans had been longtime MJ photographer Barry Tesson, but he died in a kayak accident just two months before the pair planned to leave for Vietnam.)

Understandably, a trip based on boating for leisure's sake was seen as peculiar and risky in a country still scarred by decades of war. But the kayaks were their point of entry as much as they were vehicles. "The fact that we had hair on our legs seemed weirder than that we were in kayaks," says Bowermaster. "Everyone was in boats." —ERIN BARNES