

THE OCEAN EXPLORER

Armed with only a paddle, a flag, and a few basic instruments, Jon Bowermaster is kayaking the seven seas to find the tides that bind.

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Even that explorer/adventurer/writer Jon Bowermaster has spent most of the past 20 years traveling to and through the world's wild places, it's not so surprising that his nominal home is a rambling menagerie of the faces and places he's left behind. Inside the farmhouse 100 miles north of Manhattan that he shares with his girlfriend, the photographer Fiona Stewart, the walls are filled with large photos—mostly from friends like Neal Slavin and Peter Beard (with whom Bowermaster lived in Kenya while writing a book about him). When I note that his bedroom bears more than a passing resemblance to Beard's Hog Ranch outside Nairobi, Bowermaster, 54, admits that he's stolen something of his pal's interior style: "I had the advantage of hanging out with Peter and his old friends—ne'er-do-wells, shagbags, politicians, big-game hunters, and that whole crowd—back when Peter was still giving things away."

Bowermaster has just returned from three months of kayaking, climbing, hiking, and sailing in Antarctica, the culmination of *Oceans 8*, a ten-year odyssey that has taken him (with film crews in tow) to the Aleutian Islands; Vietnam; the Tuamotu Archipelago in French Polynesia;

WATER WORLD

1. A photograph by Peter Beard.
2. A Vietnamese talisman bag.
3. Bowermaster's carabiner utility tool.
4. A favorite read and his leather-bound journal.
5. His wooden fid.
6. The flag for his National Geographic expeditions.
7. A carbon-fiber Werner kayak paddle.
8. His Chilean Mapuche coin necklace.
9. First edition of his 1991 book.
10. His good-luck rubber crocodile.
11. An anemometer.
12. His silver elephant-head dagger.



LIFE STUDIES

the altiplanos of Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile; the coast of Gabon in West Africa; the Australian island of Tasmania; and the 1,246 islands off the Adriatic coast of Croatia. Bowermaster settles into an Adirondack chair outside the house to explain the *idée fixe* behind his numerous books and eight documentary films. “The beauty of the kayaks is that they’re like ambassadors,” he says. “Only once has somebody said something like, ‘What are you doing here?’

People generally assume that if you’re pulling in on a kayak, you’re cool.”

These journeys have been supported by Bowermaster’s status as a six-time National Geographic Expeditions Council grantee—the title fits his itinerant lifestyle—but while the foundation helps with funding, sometimes there’s no getting around, say, militant Socialist censorship. “I went to Hanoi a year in advance of the Vietnam trip and met with the head of the foreign press center to explain what I was planning,” he says. “He listened to my whole spiel and then looked up at me through a haze of cigarette smoke and very pleasantly said, ‘That will be quite impossible.’ I ended up paying him about \$8,000 for a ‘filming permit,’ and we were accompanied 24/7 by various monitors he hired to watch us.” The trip resulted in Bowermaster’s latest book, *Descending the Dragon*.

Each of the adventures—and the resulting films—provides a unique sea-level view of local cultures. But as a whole, they mean something more. “If you spin the globe, it’s easy to agree with the one-ocean theory,” Bowermaster says, pausing to admire a pair of falcons chasing each other over the far side of the pool. “It’s all connected. You wake up on the coast of Vietnam, or off the coast of Chile, and your lives are more similar than they are different.” But while his job includes raising eco-awareness, Bowermaster is more pragmatic than dogmatic. “It’s good that people talk about it more, but I don’t see a lot of action—me included. I fly a lot; I use fuel oil to heat; I drive a big vehicle. We’re not always our own best models.”

In the coming months, Bowermaster will be in Brazil, Senegal, Morocco, Portugal, the Galapagos, and French Polynesia. “It’s work,” he says, “showing movies and doing talks. I don’t ever really ‘go on vacation.’” He stays in shape mostly by a routine he calls “running and biking *enough*,” though he adds that since the photographer and videographer he travels with are fifteen and sixteen years younger than him, “I just have to keep up with them.”

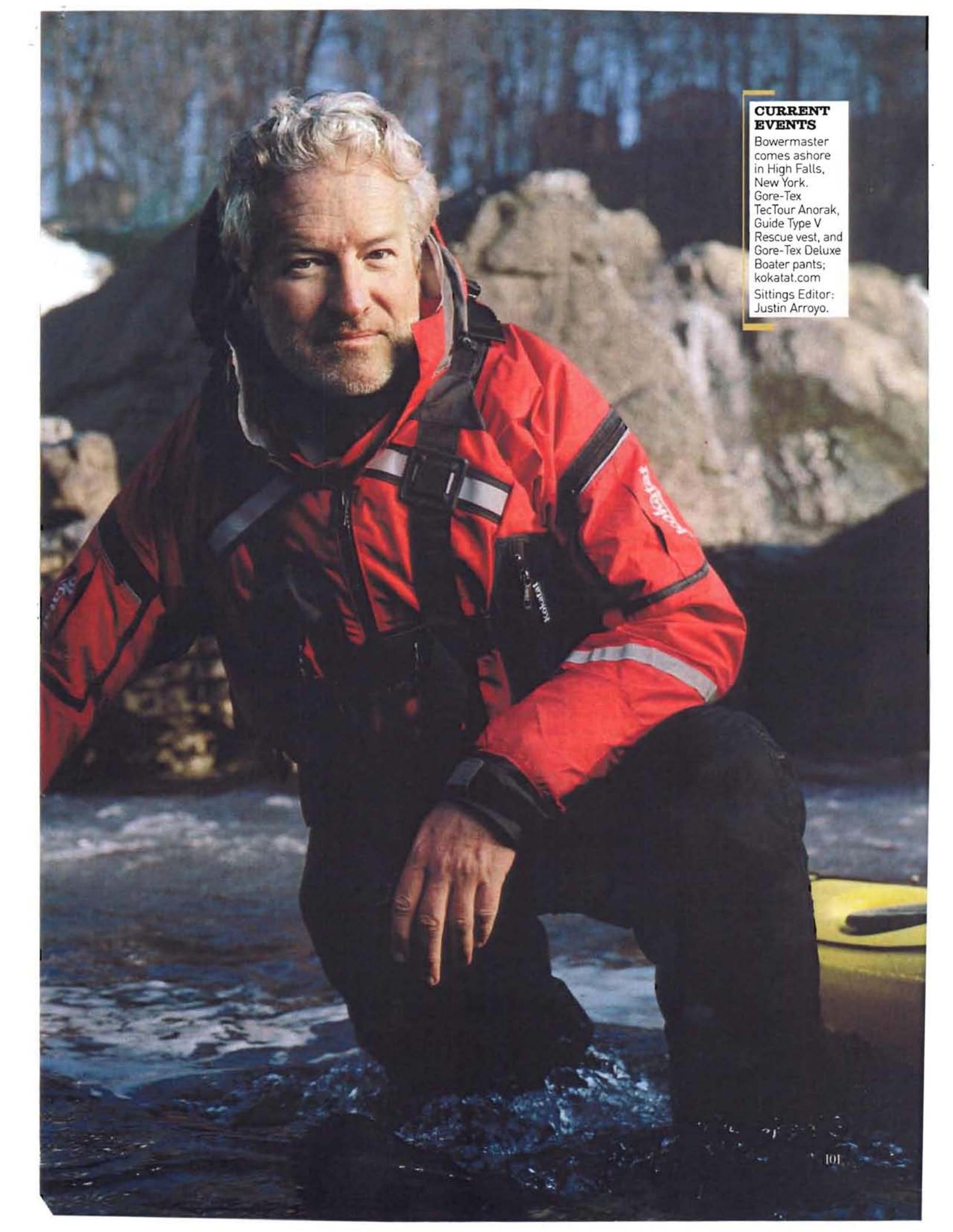
Still, the man knows just about how far he can push this whole “tough job” business. “Most of my friends here work large machinery,” Bowermaster says. “I’ll come home after being away for two or three weeks with some sob story about getting stuck in an airport, and they’ll get out the little violins. So yes: My friends have the authority to kick me.”—COREY SEYMOUR

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Photographed by Julian Dufort



**CURRENT
EVENTS**

Bowermaster
comes ashore
in High Falls,
New York.
Gore-Tex
TecTour Anorak,
Guide Type V
Rescue vest, and
Gore-Tex Deluxe
Boater pants;
kokatat.com
Sittings Editor:
Justin Arroyo.