

# When Ripley got lost

The British desert explorer Ripley Davenport was called a modern 'Lawrence of Arabia'. He was known for his extreme solo expeditions and made it to a list over last century's most important explorers - before he disappeared.

*By Lasse Rahbek Petersen*

*Additional reporting by Mads Olrik Berthelsen*

"Please do not give any indication of how, where and when you met Ripley," it said in the email. "I know, it may sound weird, but there is the reason for our request."

It was Laura Davenport, wife of desert explorer Ripley Davenport, who contacted me. I hadn't heard from them in years, and all of a sudden she reached out to warn me about some crazy American.

"Ignore him," she wrote about the man who had been harassing Ripley for almost three years. "He will contact you or maybe he has already."

When the email popped up in my inbox, in late September 2012, it had been a long time since I first met Ripley Davenport. At that time, in 2009, he lived in Denmark with his Lithuanian wife Laura and had just started working at the English private school The Cosmo in Kolding. He was popular with the students. They spent a lot of time outdoors, learned how to use a compass, and was promised a ski trip with Ripley.

"He was a very charismatic person, a sort of person that inspires immediate trust when you just sit and talk over coffee," says then head of the school Simon Mosekjaer that gave Ripley the job after seeing his resume. Ripley had experience from the British Special Forces and boasted two university degrees.

At that time I worked as a temp at the private school, and during a lunch break Ripley and I talked back and forth - he told me about his time in the military, I told him I made movies.

"Now you get me thinking," he said, leaning his friendly, soft face with stubs over the table so that only I would hear him.

"You see, this job... it's just to feed my family. What I really do is expeditions." He caught himself smiling broadly and paused to check that nobody was listening in.

"I'm an adventurer and I am preparing for the world's longest solo expedition ever."

Ripley's plan was to single handedly walk through Mongolia's Gobi desert. He offered me to film his preparations.

A few months later I drove out to to film Ripley on one of his training sessions. In the driveway in front of his modest, red brick house he sat on his knees, tying two bulging sport bags on to

something that looked like a rickshaw with no seats. The cart - dubbed 'Molly Brown' - had two bicycle wheels on each side and was covered in stickers with names of sponsors. That very summer it was to be loaded with three months worth of gear and food and hauled 2700 kilometers through the unforgiving Gobi desert. Supplies and equipment would put a 250 kilo strain on the little cart, but that day the bags was only loaded with cushions. Four large sofa cushions.

"It's just for the camera today," Ripley said, zipping the last bag.

He had grown a little paunch for his body to eat in to in the Gobi, his bald pate was covered with a thin hat. He waved to his wife and two little kids in the window, strapped himself to the cart and pulled it onto his neighbors snow covered field. Visibility was low that day, it was hard to recognize the flat, Danish landscape. My camera whirred while Ripley walked around on the field with the carabiners tinkling behind him.

"No pain, no gain," he said, his favorite motto.

We stopped after an hour, but when we uploaded the video to YouTube, he told me to call it "three days of training and trials in sub-zero temperatures, miles from nowhere". He went on these sort of trips all the time, he explained.

It was because of this video Laura Davenport contacted me in September 2012. She knew that the American - the "cyberstalker", as she labeled him - would find this video and find me.

### **The Travel Agent**

Laura was right. Just a few hours before I got her email, I had been contacted by the American - Kent Madin. He laughs at me the first time I meet him over Skype. 62 years old, white haired under the cap and with outdoorsy red cheeks.

"This must be very exciting for you."

Kent has worked about 40 years in the tourism industry, 18 of them in Mongolia, where he was one of the first Westerners to organize trips to the country immediately after the fall of the communism. After years of dealing with the country, Madin was named Mongolia's honorary general consul for the northern Rockies, where he lives today. It is mostly a ceremonial post, awarded by the Mongolian embassy in Washington D.C., but Mongolia is his country, he feels, and when someone says something about Mongolia, they say something about him.

It turns out that Madin and I got to know Ripley Davenport around the same time. The Britons name turned up on Madin's computer screen when he announced his plan for the 2010 solo expedition through the Gobi desert. Back then it was not hard to find Ripley Davenport in cyberspace.

"The guy had an impressive resume," Kent Madin recalls.

A quick internet search unearthed a mosaic of blogs, sponsor references and media coverage, which in combination formed a picture of a recognized and experienced adventurer. As a paramedic in the British special forces Ripley had, among other things, been deployed in the Balkans, the Falkland Islands and during the first Gulf War. But it was the desert that occupied Davenport's mind, ever since he as a little kid got hold of a worn copy of 'Lawrence of Arabia', his web site claimed. After Ripley left the British Special Forces in 1997, he went to Africa and crossed the Namib Desert with a few camels as his only traveling companions. After that he went to the Karakum Desert in Central Asia and later to Niger in sub-Saharan Africa. As far as

Kent could tell, Ripley had completed a total of nine expeditions from 1992 to 2001, through both scorching deserts and frostbitten polar regions, before he took a break and started a family in Denmark. His image as a desert explorer still lingered, though, nine years later, and in his Facebook profile picture his face was wrapped in a purple turban.

Madin's interest in Ripley Davenport was spiked by the expedition to Mongolia, because the whole project seemed like a mush of ideas about charity and records.

"The idea of the white man fighting his way through a savage wilderness with only his bare hands, doesn't belong in the 21st century," Kent says over Skype and explains that the idea is a relic from the days when there were still unexplored spots left on the world map. And the concept of unassisted travel doesn't fit with the nomadic culture of Mongolia's wide steppes, where you can be sure to find hospitality and help from strangers.

"Besides that he wanted to beat a world record," Madin says and shakes his head through the pixelated connection.

"But you have to know what a record is in order to beat it, right? No one knows what the world's longest walk is, how would you find out? Distances that far exceed the Gobi desert has been completed by people for thousands of years."

He wrote his critical questions in the comments box on the Ripley's website.

"Thanks for the comment," Ripley replied dryly.

Kent felt he was onto something. But he had no idea of the extent of what he was about to discover.

### **Sand in the bearings**

In early 2010 preparations for the expedition to the Gobi desert was in full swing in Denmark.

"I have already walked across Mongolia, in fact, several times in my head," Davenport said in an interview with the website *Explorer's Web*. He allegedly spent three hours a day on mental preparation. "If you can actually see yourself doing it and succeeding in it, then surely you must be able?"

Danish media, such as newspapers *Fyens Stiftstidende* and *Copenhagen Post*, also wrote about Ripley Davenport, and he enjoyed telling about his adventure, where he was to fight off wolves, blizzards and total isolation. The publicity and Davenport's own marketing brought in sponsors, and he had filled an entire room in his house with sponsored gear. And the help was needed, because he no longer worked at the private school in Kolding.

"He started making promises to the students," says then head of department Simon Mosekjaer.

"I had to explain the parents that I knew nothing about the ski trip to Norway, Ripley had promised their children."

Then, when Davenport couldn't provide diplomas for his university degrees, Simon Mosekjaer had to let him go. Davenport claimed he had quitted himself.

My own collaboration with Ripley Davenport ended just as swiftly. The plan was for me to accompany him to Mongolia and film the start and finish of the solo expedition - apparently, Discovery Channel was interested in the footage. But a few weeks before departure a sponsor pulled out, Davenport explained in an email, and I had to pay for my own expenses.

"Can't you borrow money from your family? What about your grandmother? It's an investment in

your future!" he tried. But I declined. A few hours later my name and image was erased from the expedition website.

Half heartedly and independently from each other, Kent Madin and I followed the solo walk online. After a few days Davenport was forced to interrupt his expedition - sand had gotten into the bearings of 'Molly Brown', a malfunction in the construction that apparently had gone unnoticed during the training in Denmark.

"That puzzled me. As a desert explorer you should know that there is sand in the desert," says Søren Braes, president of a small Danish watch manufacturer 'Pilotur', the main sponsor of the 2010 expedition to Mongolia. Braes had already thrown 50,000 kroner (around 9,000 US\$) after the project, but he gave Davenport an interest free loan for another 10,000 kroner for the expedition to continue.

It went more smoothly the second time around, but after 1600 kilometers Ripley Davenport had to terminate his world record attempt. 'Molly Brown' had slid down a hillside and landed on his ankle, he said in a blogpost. He returned to Denmark in July 2010, but it was months before Søren Braes from 'Pilotur' as promised received the video and photos from the solo walk.

"And suddenly the website - my showroom - disappeared," Braes says. Shortly thereafter he noticed that Ripley Davenport had created a brand new website, boasting plans for yet another expedition. In Montana, Kent Madin also noticed the new website, and he wasn't impressed with how the first expedition has been carried out.

"Did you know that he took people with him in 2011?" Kent asks at one end of the Skype connection.

"No?" I reply in the other.

With new sponsors backing him and an endorsement from the Danish countess Alexandra, Ripley Davenport was ready to take the responsibility for a group of adventurers and cross the Gobi desert once again. For the first time in his career, Davenport would not be going solo, but be an expedition leader.

"I was afraid," Madin says, "that something would go wrong and that some of the participants would get hurt or killed."

### **What happens in the desert**

In the summer of 2011 Ripley Davenport went off to the Gobi Desert along with 11 paying clients from around the world.

"It was an honor even to be on the expedition," says Christopher Schrader, the youngest participant.

The team started out in the cool Altai mountains. On the horizon it almost seemed green, but behind it waited extreme temperature swings, gravelly plains and high dunes. The goal was an altar, 1,600 kilometers away, where the expedition leader had started his solo expedition one year earlier. Ripley Davenport pointed towards a small group of trees that peeped over the horizon, not so far away. That was where the team would camp after the first day. When they went off, the caravan was quickly broken up, and some of the participants lost sight of each other. They ended up walking 30 kilometers that day instead of the 20, Ripley had promised. The last two hours there was no more water, a participant says. The trees, Ripley had identified and

navigated after, turned out to be a mirage.

Several of the expedition participants remember a leader who became more and more insecure the further they walked into the flat Gobi desert. They wondered why Ripley hadn't, as promised, brought tablets to purify drinking water for bacteria. Had he not been a paramedic in the British special forces? Even more remarkable was his assertion that one could train the body to drink less water - right down to a liter a day.

"Unless you are in an extreme dire situation, you never tell anyone to drink as little water as possible," Michael Preihs, an American team member, writes in an email. Several expeditioners claim that when Ripley followed his own advice, he had to spend the next days in the caravan car - that also transported supplies and a cook.

"In my opinion, Ripley was in over his head in guiding 11 people across the Gobi," Preihs writes. Ripley took suggestions for improvement as criticism, which he didn't tolerate, Florence Kuyper, a Dutch participant, remembers. If anyone questioned his decisions, he refused to talk to the person the rest of the day. After a number of small and big blunders, Kuyper no longer trusted Ripley and left the expedition.

"This expedition was my dream, and I had largely realized that dream, but I also wanted to get out of the Gobi desert alive."

On the expedition's Facebook page you could follow the team's progress, and as they struggled through the Mongolian summer, critical comments began to appear. But just as quickly the negative comments were written, just as quickly they were deleted. It was Laura Davenport who, from a desk in Ireland, censored anything negative.

"What happened in the desert and how it was presented on Facebook did not always correspond," says Nalanda Jogekar, an expeditioner from India.

Shortly after Laura wrote an email to members of the expedition:

"What happens in the Gobi Desert, should stay in the Gobi desert," it said.

There were blue skies above the caravan when the fast group reached expedition's goal in southern Mongolia. From the dust rose a high hill, and on top of it stood a Oowoo, a kind of altar to the nomadic people. There was symbolism in that altar - it was here Ripley's solo expedition started a year earlier, he had told. But when Ripley's group caught up with the front, a strange feeling emerged. He did not seem to recognize the place.

Right after the expedition, the Facebook page for Gobi 2011 was shut down. Kent Madin had used the site to stay updated and discuss - under a false name out of fear of being blocked, he says - but he was now in direct contact with the participants that had returned home. Through them he got a hold of something crucial: a package of information that Ripley had sent out just before the expedition.

"It was a list of things you should bring, what to do in an emergency and where the expedition should start and finish," says Kent,

"But it was incoherent, vague and seemed to be written by an amateur."

In the information package Kent finally found a detailed resumé that had some tangible details about Ripley's expeditions around the world. In the early stages Kent had read somewhere that Ripley was on his first expedition in 1992, but the information package stated that he only began

his career as a desert explorer in 1997, with an expedition to Namibia. The solo walk with three camels through the Namib Desert started in the town of Oranjemund. Kent opened his browser and did a quick search on Wikipedia, but only a few lines into the description of the town he stopped.

"My God," he thought and felt the rush of the window he had just opened into a whole new world: "He's a fraud. He made it all up."

### **Shut off**

The Namib Desert, the world's oldest, stretches all the way up Namibia's coastline. The sand winds up and down to create enormous dunes that rise directly from the surf. There is no fluid and the desert overflows with relics from the time when Namibia was a German colony: old trenches, rusting shovels sticking out of the sand and dried up bones from the German's horses. Namib is a caricature of an impenetrable area, but it is Oranjemund, where Ripley Davenport claims he started his solo expedition, that drew Kent Madin's interest. The little village was created for mining and is owned by the diamond company Namdeb. Along with the Namibian state this company controls all traffic in and out of the desert. The area has been named "Sperrgebiet" - German for "closed area".

Browsing the diamond company's web site, Kent Madin found a man called Peter Shout who was the head of security for the "Sperrgebiet" back in the 90's. He found out that it is quite extraordinary to get permission to pass through the desert.

"The only one who has done that, with our knowledge and assistance, is Mr. Benedict Allen (a British explorer, ed.)," Peter Shout writes in an email. He has never heard about Ripley Davenport.

If the expedition actually took place, Davenport would have had to import three camels to Namibia - where they do not exist naturally - pulled them through a village guarded by the military and walked 52 days through a bone-dry desert with no sort of assistance, without anyone noticing him.

There was no doubt in Madin's mind: Ripley Davenport lied about his expedition to Namibia. And if he lied about that, what else on his resumé was false?

"The frustrating thing about examining Ripley online was that there were so few specific things you could grab on to," says Kent and send a few emails to show how Ripley Davenport has represented himself online. The history of the British military, for example, is vague and in some places contradictory. The number of expeditions Ripley had implemented varied from blog to blog, the same did the details, like the number of camels he pulled through the Namib desert. Davenport's resumé said that after Namibia he arranged a solo walk through the Karakum desert in Central Asia. But Madin could only find coverage of that trip in interviews with Davenport. Several places Davenport mixed up the order of the two expeditions, the duration of the walks varied and there were no pictures to find. In 2000, Davenport claims he went to the Sahara, specifically Niger, to live with the nomads. Again Madin could not find pictures, travelogues, press coverage or any other documentation. An expedition the Zugspitze in Germany with two handicapped children, a reconnaissance trip to the Thar desert in India, trips to the polar regions - it all existed solely as letters on a resumé, it seemed. Even the picture on his profile on Facebook was not of him. It was a picture of a bedouin, cropped and mirrored, Madin found.

“It became an intellectual exercise to find the truth,” says Madin, who was winding down his work life and had plenty of time to investigate. He was finding pieces of a puzzle that kept expanding.

### **War in cyberspace**

Ripley Davenport and his wife Laura claimed to Kent Madin that they could prove that all the expeditions had actually taken place. But they denied to do so - they did not want to “entertain his illusions.”

“We choose not to give him the evidence. That is our right,” Laura Davenport wrote in an email to me in October 2012.

To get answers, Kent Madin started a blog, *Ripley Davenport fact finding*, and started contacting Davenport’s sponsors and associates.

“It turned out that these companies had blindly thrown gear at this guy. When one had done so, the others followed suit,” Madin says, puzzled by the lack of critical thinking in the outdoor business. At first sponsors met him with distrust, but as the circles of Madin investigation increased, a few companies slowly started to turn their backs on Ripley Davenport.

“But I actually don’t think several of them were interested in demasking him. He was an investment.”

Through one of Ripley Davenport’s former associates Kent made another big discovery. A woman from Northern Ireland, claiming to be Davenport’s ex-girlfriend, revealed that Ripley Davenport is a made up name. Davenport was originally named Colin Dormer and changed it in the middle of the 90’s. The British Royal Navy informs that Colin Dormer has in fact been in the navy, but only for four year, not seven. But the track turns cold, because the military is not allowed to disclose whether or not Colin Dormer was a paramedic and elite soldier, as he claims. They can only say that it is highly unlikely to be accepted in the special forces after only four years of service.

Ripley Davenport has refused to document his time in the navy, just as he won’t give the name of the university where he took his degrees.

“If Ripley’s resumé is all true, it would be so easy to prove,” says Kent Madin.

“Pictures, stamps in his passport, people who have seen him in the wild - anything. He could push me away like an irritating fly.”

But instead of hard evidence, Ripley and Laura Davenport started attacking Kent Madin on his own turf. In autumn 2011 the embassy of Mongolia in Washington D.C. received a letter where Davenport attacked Madin’s position as Honorary Consul of Mongolia. Davenport wrote that Madin’s actions bordered on harassment and commercial opportunism and he accused Madin for wanting to hurt a competitor on the Mongolian travel market. The local police in Kent Madin’s hometown was contacted by Laura Davenport that reported Madin for “cyberstalking”. Steve Crawford of the police department in Bozeman, Montana, writes in an email that they dropped the case since it was matter between two private parties and not of a criminal character. Finally Madin was contacted by what seemed to be a Lithuanian lawyer who threatened to sue for libel if he did not leave Ripley Davenport alone.

“It’s hard to know how one can besmirch a reputation like yours lacking form an substance” Madin replied in an email to Davenport and the lawyer.

“I suggest you spend your energy on answering my questions.”

The Davenport couple did not follow this advice. In January 2013 Laura Davenport started a blog in Kent Madin's name. On the blog she describes herself as a housewife whose family is under attack. She published Madin's emails, described how Ripley suffered under the harassment and told about the investigation she claimed was underway in the US and Europe of Kent Madin's cyberstalking. At the same time, new plans emerged on Ripley Davenport's website. He prepared expeditions to Death Valley in the US, the Atacama desert in Chile, the Patagonian Steppe in Argentina, and he also wanted to compete in the *Marathon Des Sables*, an endurance race through the Sahara. None of the plans were realized, it seems, and they proved to be the last convulsions of Ripley Davenport.

One Thursday in February 2013, as every day, Kent Madin sat down with his morning coffee in front of the computer in his basement in Montana. He opened his browser and clicked on the bookmark for Davenport's website to check up on the recent developments. But the link didn't work. He went on Facebook, but Ripley wasn't there either. Twitter, Flickr, his profile on National Geographic and even Laura Davenport's new blog - everything had been taken down. The adventurer I had gotten to know in a school in my hometown, the elite soldier with university degrees, paramedic, environmentalist and motivational speaker Ripley Davenport, didn't exist anymore.

### **Forgotten photographs**

Well, that's not exactly true. Because the Internet remembers, no matter how hard you try to make it forget, and fragments of Ripley Davenport's career as a desert explorer still hung around the web in the form of blog interviews, press coverage and photos. Kent Madin thought that Davenport had given up on his adventurer business and he hoped that he had learned something from it.

"It was never my intention to drive him into a hole," says Madin. "But it's not my responsibility that he can't take care of himself."

In an email to me Laura Davenport wrote that Ripley had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis (MS). In consequence he had resigned from his life as an adventurer and just wanted peace from Kent Madin's harassment. But that statement was only true for a couple of months, until Ripley Davenport suddenly started to show his face again on the Internet. In an interview with the website *Life in spite of MS* Ripley Davenport announced that he handled his situation by doing what he does best: walking through deserts.

Three months after the battle online had come to a preliminary close, Ripley Davenport's own website suddenly re-appeared. This time it said nothing about his career as an elite soldier and the university degrees. But Davenport linked to a photo album on the image sharing service Flickr with photos that Kent Madin had not seen before in his investigation. It was a mix of pictures from the expeditions to Mongolia, from Davenport's younger years and a few from his stint in the navy. But there were also pictures from Africa and the Karakum desert; one of a road sign in Namibia, one of a snow covered mountain peak and one of a diary with the title "Namibia 1998".

Several times Kent Madin had offered to retract all his accusations, if only Ripley Davenport would provide solid evidence of his credentials. At first sight, that was what was happening, but after a little research, Madin's suspiciousness was confirmed. The photographs had been taken



from Russian travel blogs. Davenport had cropped them, changed the colors and put them up on his website under his own copyright.

### **The angler**

It is almost impossible to prove a negative - to prove that someone *hasn't* done something. Theoretically Ripley Davenport's expeditions could have taken place. The amount of circumstantial evidence that points to the contrary is overwhelming, but Kent Madin is yet to find the final evidence proving that Ripley Davenport has forged his career.

"The only way we can find the smoking gun is if Ripley Davenport himself steps forward and admits," Madin says. "But why would a man who has built his career on online publicity not be interested in answering my accusations and get passed them?"

Initially it was the love for Mongolia that prompted Kent Madin to take a closer look at Ripley Davenport. Today the motivation to go on is something else. His plan is to write a magazine article about false identities on the web.

"I've been sucked into this story because it is fascinating how the Internet has given Ripley Davenport the tools to create an image and how the Internet has spread the story so far out that it seems true," he says. "But at the same time, the Internet has given me and others the tools to test the truth and see how the dots are not connected."

It's impossible to say what Ripley Davenport's motivation has been. He has not become a millionaire from his life as a desert explorer, and there's nothing that suggests that he walked away from his expeditions with huge profits, even though he has received loads of sponsored gear and earned money as a guide and speaker. When I think back to the man who stood in a classroom at the private school in Kolding, Denmark, I remember his profound wish to inspire and to broaden the horizon of his pupils. Davenport spoke of taking the kids out into the desert and teach how to take care of themselves without mobile phones and bottled water. Maybe, as a little boy, Colin Dormer fell so in love with the story about "Lawrence of Arabia", that it ended up being his own reality.

Today Ripley Davenport lives in Ireland. On his website you can read about his future expeditions, and there are a bunch of new sponsors on the front page. Kent Madin has also found Davenport on a website for a new company that arranges fly fishing trips. The name Ripley Davenport doesn't appear anywhere, but on the front page you can see Ripley, smiling, with a fishing rod in his hand. It is also him that picks up the phone when you call. Davenport also appeared in another Irish company under the name 'Rip', as a part of a search and rescue dog team. Davenport's dog, a brown labrador, is named 'Molly' - the same name Ripley gave the cart he - maybe, maybe not - pulled through Mongolia in 2010.

*Ripley and Laura Davenport declined to comment on this article.*