

ERIC MENDOZA

BOTANICAL EXPLORER

For five days a week, he juggles the books for a local building contractor. When the weekend comes, though, Eric Mendoza's alter ego takes over. As a botanical explorer, he has braved some of the most dangerous places on earth.

When the alarm beckons him to start his journey, he immediately turns it off and grabs a dog-eared map from his nightstand. Plotting out a course to reach a destination is critical, but even with a detailed plan, who knows what unforeseen obstacles loom beyond the horizon. What is around that next bend? What world will open up in the next break of dense foliage?

After eating a hearty breakfast, our intrepid adventurer heads for the garage, as he does every morning during the week. He walks around the Ford Focus, an economical, yet comfortable means of travel. Such a vehicle is not suitable for Eric Mendoza, Botanical Explorer. Removal of a camouflage tarp reveals a forty-year-old Jeep complete with roll bars, winches on the front and back, and

large mud-grip tires. This historical vehicle has everything an explorer could want—extra fuel cans, racks for all kinds of weapons or tools, places to mount large water cans, and on and on.

Inspection complete, he backs the Jeep out of the garage and onto the street, once again leaving the comfort and safety of civil life. The start of his journey could be the most dangerous part of his itinerary. Yes, driving on Interstate 4 has changed many a man. Normally mild-mannered, law-abiding citizens during the week transform into race-track bravados, daring elementary physics to stand in the way. Those speed limit signs are merely suggestions for the faint of heart. Little wooden crosses adorn the road shoulders, but they mean nothing. Eric's knuckles regain their color when he pulls off to get gas. Pulling into the gas station, he passes another Jeep owner, and they tip hats in respect. Back onto the highway, he has seven more miles to reach his exit. Finally reaching his destination, he is surprised at the size of the parking lot to the launch site. Could there really be that many fellow explorers out there?

Taking a packed tram to the entrance, he stands in a long line to gain access. The tickets are steep, but he would gladly pay more if they

asked—adventure never comes cheap. The people in line behind him have a crying kid that just won't stop, and they haven't even started the trek. The man inspecting his backpack for any invasive species questions the container of food he has in a side pocket, but Eric quickly answers that he sometimes likes a mid-afternoon snack. He would never reveal that it was a defense against marauding squirrels. Always being prepared for the unknowns carried Eric through many a chance occurrence.

Shooting is Eric's passion, with a camera that is. He always carries three cameras with him, each set up for a specific purpose. These valuable tools provide the evidence of any discovery that he makes.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the young woman. “Could you take a picture of us with my smartphone?”

“Uh ... sure,” answered Eric.

While quite knowledgeable in identifying plants himself, he always appreciates those who've gone before him and set out markers for the names of exotic species. Usually with no expectations, he takes each plant as it comes. Today, however, he has one particular species that he feels he must

encounter. The *Bioarboreus multifaunus*, or more commonly, the Tree of Life, is tops on his agenda. Having done a fair amount of research on this species, he is fascinated by what he's learned. The Indigenous people of the area have done much work carving local animals into the tree's massive trunk and buttress roots. One might expect that such invasive carving would have a detrimental effect on the health of the tree, but the tree is as healthy today as it was twenty years ago. Another fascinating characteristic of this tree is that it looks the same every day of every season. Droughts, freezes, oppressive summer heat, flooding—nothing seems to bother this tree.

Crossing a weathered bridge, Eric sees the massive Tree of Life directly ahead. As he expects with a specimen of such prominence, fellow explorers pack the rail surrounding the tree with many taking somewhat goofy shots of themselves with the notable tree in the background. The guide near the rail is answering questions, so Eric gets in line. When he reaches the guide, he asks some basic botanical questions about the tree. She seems pleasant enough, but her answers seem generic and not indicative of someone who has delved into the science of the species.

“I wonder,” Eric says to himself. “If she really knows what’s going on in the delicate biology of the *Bioarboreus multifaunus*, the deep hidden secrets this tree has held within its massive frame for years.”

Having taken sufficient long-range pictures, Eric makes his way down the paved path to the base of the tree.

“Fascinating, fascinating, fascinating,” our explorer says. “The detail of these carvings is magnificent. These massive roots almost seem more like some form of concrete than they do wood.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said an elderly woman. “Can you take a picture of my grandson and me with our smartphone?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Eric replaces the battery in one of his cameras, it being exhausted from so much use at the tree. He feels somewhat exhausted himself from the experience.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a burly young man. “Can you take a picture of my girlfriend and me in front of this tiger carving?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Leaving the Tree of Life, Eric heads farther into the jungle. Remarkably, even as he gets deeper into the more remote areas, civilization has not diminished. He notes one characteristic many of his fellow travelers seem to share. Undoubtedly, there are a number of local tribes that frequent the area whose members seem to pride themselves by wearing the tribal headdress. Numerous members adorn their heads with bands that have rather large ears, almost mouse-like. They don't lack for imagination, though, as the ears come in all colors and embellishments. Other tribal members, commonly seen, wear a headdress that honors a deity of some sort with long floppy ears resembling a dog. Rarely seen and quite striking when it emerges, is a head covering depicting a dragon-like creature with a purple body, orange horns, and small orange wings. Those who wear the dragon must be a peaceful tribe, as their emblem always seems to have a smile on its face. The creature almost looks like a cross between reality and, well, a figment of the imagination. Normally, Eric doesn't focus on such non-botanical matters, but sometimes understanding the local population gives context to understanding the flora of a region.

Continuing on his way, Eric stops and looks under the shade of a small waterfall.

“Could it be?” he wonders. “I’ve seen the *Tacca chantrieri*, the Black Bat Flower or Devil Flower, before, but this appears to be a white version. Undoubtedly a *Tacca* species also, I believe I can get a good shot to take home for further identification.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said a young lady. “Can you take a picture of my boyfriend and me in front of this waterfall?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Crossing a small bridge, Eric gazes down to the stagnant water below.

“My goodness,” he says. “Yes, I do believe those are *Victoria amazonica*, Amazon Water Lilies. If I remember correctly, they are a hybrid *Victoria x longwood*. Amazing!”

On a less traveled path, Eric feels the rush of wings and the peck of a bird taking aim at his pith helmet. The bird lands on a nearby *Strelitzia nicolai*, or White Bird of Paradise. He notes a Mockingbird taking a sip of water from the boat-like flower of the tree.

As he winds back to a more well-traveled path, he senses that he has entered an area reminiscent of his journey to Asia. Then he comes across a snow-covered mountain, casting an eerie shadow across the small lagoon.

“That peak reminds me of my trek around the base of Mount Everest, only a smaller version, of course.”

“Excuse me, sir,” said the balding, middle-aged man. “Could you take a picture of my wife and I with the mountain as a backdrop?”

“Uh ... sure.”

Having been in some dangerous places in his botanical travels, Eric has developed a certain sense about when it was safe to proceed and when it was not safe to proceed. There was far too much screaming coming from the area around that mountain peak. Perhaps he would venture there at another time.

Eric spent the rest of the day observing and taking photos of plants. Although he already knew most of the plants he saw, he still got a few to research and try to ID when he got home. Despite his previous knowledge, it was interesting seeing the

fruits and flowers of some of the plants he already knew.

Today he survived the dangers of the jungle, but the most treacherous part still lay ahead—the return trip on the interstate. Fortunately, the thick traffic on the interstate frequently came to a stop and prevented anyone from speeding. Arriving home safe and sound, Eric pulled his trusty Jeep back into the garage and covered it up.

The following day, the metamorphosis began anew. Khaki, survival belt, and pith helmet changed to the plain black tie and gray suit of a mild-mannered numbers custodian.