

# ABC Online Interview with Alby - March 2023

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## Alby Mangels — Inside the legendary adventure travel filmmaker's secret new life

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## Alby Mangels — Inside the legendary adventure travel filmmaker's secret new life

ABC Far North / By Chris Calcino Posted Mon 20 Mar 2023



Alby Mangels and his travel partner Judy Green achieved widespread fame in Australia following the World Safari adventure films. *(Supplied)*

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Alby Mangels is in a reflective mood as he muses over the absurd ragbag of ingredients that somehow became his recipe for success.

## Key points:

- Alby Mangels rose to global fame following his World Safari adventure films in the 70s and 80s
- His films outsold many blockbusters of the era at the Aussie box office
- Mangels has shunned the limelight for decades, but is cautiously considering a return to the screen

"I never did anything for cinema, I just did what I wanted to do and what turned me on," he says.

The 74-year-old adventurer and documentary filmmaker, who created the World Safari films and Adventure Bound TV series of the 1970s and 80s, was a sex symbol in his own right: all tight shorts and sun-kissed sinew.

At the height of his fame, he even posed nude beside a smouldering fireplace for a Cleo magazine centrefold.

These days, he spends most of his time living under an assumed name in a secret island location, but he still has one more adventure in the works.

"In hindsight, [the World Safari films] should never have done as well as it did," he says.

In the hierarchy of understatements, that's like saying that getting lost in the Sahara Desert in a two-cylinder van was a rather balmy affair, or riding bareback in an ostrich race could be a tad bumpy – both of which Mangels has done, by the way.

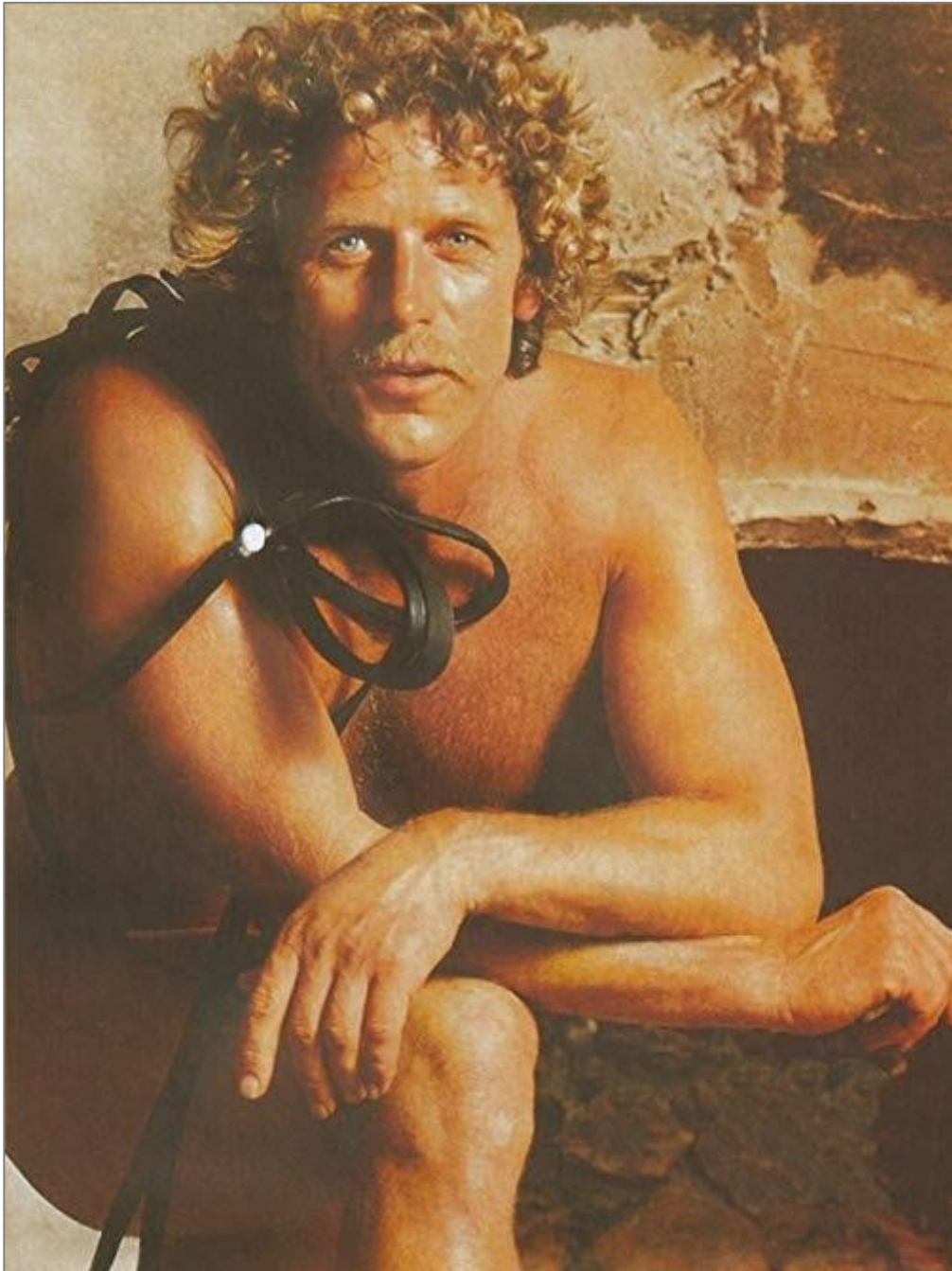


Alby Mangels (left) and Judy Green catch a lift in the Torres Strait at the beginning of a long journey to South America.*(Supplied)*

## **Private helicopters, farms and properties**

Mangels inherited none of the key ingredients that might traditionally be associated with success in the public arena.

He was a primary school dropout who forged his mother's signature and lied about his age in order to leave school after year 7.



Alby Mangels stripped down for a Cleo magazine centrefold shoot at the height of his fame.*(Supplied)*

He had an absent father, and grew up dirt poor with his mum until she died when he was 15.

Prior to setting off on the journey that would leave his mark on the world, he had notched up a bizarre curriculum vitae that included stints as a chook farmer, jockey, shearer, baker and builder — but certainly nothing that might presage his climb to the pinnacle of Aussie film and television.

"I was always a bit of a dreamer and I thought, if I do a trip around the world I might be able to sell it ... so I'll give it a try," Mangels says.

"Lots of people said I was crazy to go on with it, it'll never do any good."

In the 1970s and 80s, Alby Mangels was up there with Australia's biggest celebrities. But today, he loathes the thought of even being recognised in the street.

That animosity towards fame ran so deep that Mangels left Australia to live under an assumed name on an undisclosed island.



By the time he launched World Safari II Alby Mangels had made a fortune, but it wasn't to last.*(Supplied)*

"I've been away for 10 or 12 years now and I'm where nobody knows me at all and I like it," he says.

"I've even changed my name, sort of. Not legally or anything, if they want to know my name, I'll call myself Jim or anybody else.

"Because today they can just look you up on the internet ... next minute there's pages and pages of it.

"It's been years since I've called [myself] my name."

## Alby's limelight reluctance

Mangels has rarely given interviews in the past couple of decades, and he takes a while to open up over the phone.

When he does, he's charming, soft-spoken, and philosophical about what he has achieved in life.

For all of his distaste for stardom, he has been dipping his toe back into public life on Australian soil.



Alby Mangels leads a much quieter existence than the heady days of celebrity in the 70s and 80s. (Supplied: Roman Kondratiuk / Rodney Fox Shark Museum & Learning Centre)

"It's only when I come back here and do some medical appointments that I use my name," he says.

The silver screen swashbuckler has hosted two viewings of his World Safari films in the past month at a hotel in Victoria's Macedon Ranges.



Alby Mangels makes a rare public appearance at a World Safari screening. (Supplied: *The Lancefield Lodge*)

"You wouldn't believe the fans that came out. Some of them had flown down from North Queensland, and a few of them had driven over from South Australia to this little hotel," he says.

"And they were so keen, and the stories that they told me — it's almost like I was God. They were fantastic, wonderful people.

"But I just didn't feel like I deserved all that praise."

Those old films are also in the gradual process of being remastered in the hope they might find a new market on streaming platforms.

"I couldn't believe it myself, and it inspired me," Mangels says.

"It's like a brand new film, and it's beautiful colours and you've got wide-screen."



Alby Mangels (right) dusts off his old bartending skills with fans at a World Safari screening at the Lancefield Lodge in Victoria. *(Supplied: The Lancefield Lodge)*

## **'You're mad! What are you thinking?'**

Mangels was 21 when he and his mate John Fields set off with a single film camera and a \$400 budget for what became a six-year pilgrimage to 56 countries across four continents.



Alby Mangels strikes a classic pose in his hit 1977 adventure documentary film *World Safari*.*(Supplied)*

They called it a day in Holland, with Fields admitting himself to hospital for hepatitis treatment and Mangels heading to London with about a kilometre of film to sell to the BBC.

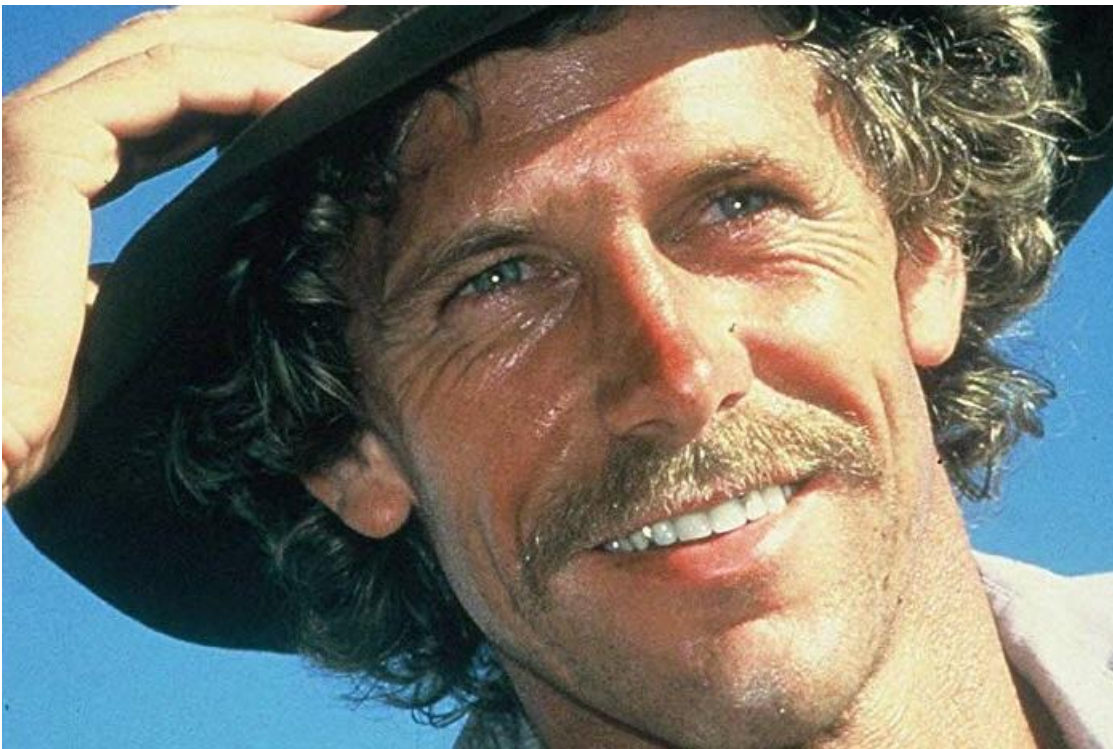
The broadcaster had initially shown interest in the film, but that all changed after seeing the quality of the footage.

"They said, look it's not suitable, we can't do anything with it," Mangels recalls.

It was a devastating blow.

Fields gave up on the dream after repeated knockbacks but Mangels refused to accept defeat.

He decided to market the movie himself, eventually landing a royalty deal with a TV station and setting off to show *World Safari* in any town hall within the station's broadcast footprint.



*World Safari* adventurer Alby Mangels cuts a striking figure as he takes on some of the harshest terrain on the planet.*(Supplied)*

"I was in total control of everything," he says.

This stubborn young man would often have to sell tickets, then convince a customer to look after the booth so he could run up on stage and regale the audience with tales of his exploits.

"Then I ran up the back and started the projector, and then I went back down again and sold more tickets," he says.

"There's not a country town that I haven't been to.

"As long as there was a couple of hundred people there, and then I'd get 90 per cent of the people going to see the film."

It never should have worked but it did, and Mangels believes his unconventional childhood helped him across the line.

"If I'd had a proper upbringing and had a proper father, he'd talk me out of what I was going to do," he says.

"He'd have said, 'You're mad! What are you thinking? You're crazy.'"

"He would have ended up talking me out of it so, in that case, I proved them wrong."

## **Blonde bombshells and pecs appeal**

It's impossible to talk about Alby Mangels without mentioning some of his co-stars — women who accompanied him on his journeys such as Judy Green, Tina Dalton, Lucinda Dunn, and Michelle Els.

He was the envy of men all over Australia, but says there was no great secret behind how he found such glamorous travel companions.

"I just got in touch with girls that I sort of knew a bit, and [asked] them if they'd like to join us on the boat and sail around the Pacific Islands," he says.

"There's not many that would say no."



Judy Green and the Dutch-born Australian adventurer Alby Mangels pose for a photo shoot in 1983. (*Rennie Ellis, State Library VIC*)

And of his nude centrefold in Cleo magazine?

"It was sort of all about promoting the film," he says.

"That was a national advertisement, so I did it.

"I mean, you come into the Earth with nothing on and you probably go out with nothing on, so it's not much of a problem to have nothing on in between a little bit here and there."

## **Boom, bust and finding satisfaction**

He was on top of the world, but it couldn't last.

Mangels' star had faded by the time *World Safari III* came out in 1988, and he fell into bankruptcy.



A jet boat cruise in New Zealand has all the hallmarks of an Alby Mangels adventure. *(Supplied)*  
Suddenly his homes, farms, plane, helicopter and worldly possessions all evaporated — and it wasn't the only time.

"There were a couple of times where I went broke," he says.

"It was just not knowing ... maybe not having the right people with me.

"It was a bit hard to keep it all on track.

"You ride the highs and lows, but I don't want to have too many more lows now though."

These days, Mangels lives a simpler existence.



A chief from the volcanic island of Tanna in Vanuatu presents Alby Mangels with a gift. *(Supplied)*

He is a health fanatic who still cuts a striking figure in a singlet, but has no desire to live to 100.

"It blows me away what I've done, and the successes and the hardships that I've had," he says.

"But that, sort of, has made me pretty content with life.

"I just sort of take it day by day, and cruising along, I suppose you could say."

And yet, there is still potential for Mangels to come out of retirement for one last odyssey.



A Himba woman smokes with Alby Mangels in Namibia, which the acclaimed filmmaker counts as the most eye-opening place he has visited on Earth.*(Supplied)*

The pioneer of the adventure documentary genre has been quietly filming the wilds of Micronesia, and is considering certain proposals to get serious about going public.

He is in two minds about whether it's worth the hassle.

"I try to keep out of the limelight if I can, but there's a lot of opportunities and proposals put to me," he says.

"I'd do the film, but I'd stay on the islands, on the little island where I'm at.

"With the internet today, you can do all your promotions that you want to do from there."

As for the identity of that island ... that remains a mystery.