

Exclusive: The European attends world premiere of Stanley Johnson's new China documentary

The world premiere of In the Footsteps of Marco Polo, a travel documentary starring Stanley Johnson and his son Max, took place in London last week

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/EINPresswire.com/ -- The world premiere of In the Footsteps of Marco Polo, a travel documentary starring Stanley Johnson and his son Max, took place in London last week– and The European was there to see it

Their fascinating travelogue retraces the Italian explorer's 4,000-mile journey from Venice to China along the Silk Road.



The European with Stanley Johnson

Mr Johnson completed most of the Silk Road on a motorbike with late Oxford University friends Michael de Larrabeiti, the novelist and travel writer, and Tim Severin, the historian and explorer, in 1961.

The trio made it as far as the Wahkan Corridor, on the Afghanistan-China border, but were unable to cross the High Pamirs on two wheels.

They vowed to return and complete the journey together, but Michael and Tim passed away in 2008 and 2020 respectively.

Mr Johnson, 83, said the 2023 documentary “picks up where we left off” and follows him and youngest son Max, 39, as they drive the remaining 5,000 kilometres to Beijing.

More than 300 guests including Mr Johnson's son Boris, the former Prime Minister, and Zheng Zeguang, the Chinese ambassador, attended the private screening at the Curzon cinema in

Mayfair.

Other prominent guests included the broadcaster Dame Angela Rippon, and the Olivier award-winning actor Tom Conti.

Speaking exclusively to The European, Mr Johnson Snr said the documentary was the result of an “exceptional Sino-British collaboration”.

He said: “Completing the Silk Road has taken 62 years and was something Michael and Tim, my two late co-conspirators, would have loved to have been a part of.

“To have been lucky enough to achieve this feat with Max at my side, thanks to what was an exceptional Sino-British collaboration, was a memory I will cherish forever.”

“But while this journey meant a lot to me personally, there is a bigger picture.

“The project – an example of exceptional Sino-British collaboration - presented an opportunity to show the importance of travel, multiculturalism and how the English language can be a force of unity that goes beyond borders and unites us all.”

The “hairbrained” idea of retracing Marco Polo’s steps along the Silk Road took root in late 1960 when a small notice appeared on the wall of his college at Oxford University.

It read, “Gentlemen are reminded that, while the college encourages vacation travel, they should



The European with Max Johnson



The European with Zheng Zeguang, China's ambassador to the UK

not forget the fact that at least ten weeks of study is expected from them during the Long Vacation.”

It was an instruction that Mr Johnson and fellow Oxford University undergraduates Michael de Larrabeiti and Tim Severin, were “resolutely determined to ignore”.

The trio had no means of travel, little money and could speak none of the languages they would en route.

Undeterred, the trio set off, on a couple of cadged BSA motorcycles, in a bid to follow the same epic route between Venice and Beijing, China that Marco Polo had taken in the 13th-Century.

The friends made it through Turkey, Iran and Afghanistan – some 1,500 miles – before grinding to a halt on the Chinese border. Their 500cc motorbikes, as powerful as they were, were weighed down with sidecars laden with kit and met their match in the High Pamirs.

The bikes, and the expedition, could go no further. After eight weeks on the Silk Road, the friends returned to Oxford, vowing to return the following summer to complete the journey.

But “life stood in the way of good intentions” and Michael, a celebrated novelist and travel writer, and Tim a renowned historian and explorer, passed away in 2008 and 2020, respectively.

And so it was that, more than six decades later, Mr Johnson accomplished that goal and fulfilled their dream. He was 82 at the time.

Accompanied by his youngest son Max, a fluent Mandarin speaker, the pair picked up where the Oxford expedition had left off in far West China.

In the Footsteps of Marco Polo follows their 2023 road trip to the Forbidden City in Beijing, the end of the Silk Road.

The 5,000km journey - undertaken this time on four wheels, not two – took them through some of the most beautiful places on Earth, few of which have been seen by Western audiences before now.

The feature-length cinematic version was shown to a star-studded audience in London, while four 60-minute programmes will air on Chinese TV and become available in other international markets soon.

An accompanying hard cover book of the same name, published by Telensky International Editions, recounts both of Stanley’s Silk Road expeditions. Its publication this month coincides with the 700th anniversary of Marco Polo’s death.

The documentary was supported by Global Education (GEDU) and its English Path language program, and was produced by One Tribe TV, the multi-award-winning British production company.

Zheng Zeguang, China's ambassador to the UK, told the audience: "I hope all of you, and people in the UK, will be following the footsteps of Marco Polo and also the footsteps of Stanley Johnson. Travel to China, see the culture, and meet the people. As the ambassador, I will do whatever I can to facilitate."

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