

# Smart Alex

*Alexander the Great cut a 20,000-mile swath across Africa, Europe, and Asia—and all we got was this spirited travelogue.*



**B**ESIDES BEING SHORT, ALEXANDER THE GREAT had unresolved Oedipal problems, not to mention the edifice complex that caused him to master-build so many Alexandrias after his rambunctious Greeks had plowed under so many garden spots in the Near and Middle East. His father, Philip of Macedonia, had divorced his mother, Olympias, to marry somebody who *didn't* sleep with snakes. While there is no evidence to suggest Alex had a hand in Phil's assassination, the hotheaded son did get so tired of hearing from the older soldiers that he wasn't the man his father had been that one drunken night in Samarkand, he ran one of them through with a spear. This was several weeks before he also wasted his own court historian, Callisthenes, apparently for refusing to prostrate himself before the god-king. When Alex wasn't dancing naked with his noble companions around the tomb of Achilles in antique Troy, he was cross-dressing, with a tiara, as a Persian shah. This can't be what his tutor, Aristotle, had in mind. Cal-

listhenes, after all, was Aristotle's nephew.

Such exceedingly rich material has been around for 2,300 years and one Richard Burton movie. Since Alex, like Jesus and Evita, died at age 33, we're just lucky Michael Wood got to him before Andrew Lloyd Webber did. Wood is the medieval historian, amateur archaeologist, and excitable roustabout who has dreamed up dozens of TV documentaries, mostly for the BBC. As if he had gone to the same school of peripatetic Greek philosophers to which Callisthenes himself belonged, he likes to hit the road—from Baghdad to the Congo. In order to follow **In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great** (Monday and Tuesday, May 4 and 5; 9 to 11 P.M.; Channel 13), he's had to hit that road for 20,000 miles, from northern Greece to Turkish Gordia to Lebanon; from Tyre to Gaza to the Nile; up over the Zagros mountains to Persepolis and down again to the shores of the Caspian Sea; from the steppes of Central Asia, across the Hindu Kush, into present-day Uzbekistan; by Khyber Pass to the Indus River—where the battle-weary Greeks were surprised to learn there was a lot more hostile territory out there than they'd bargained for. And so they made their god-king straggle back to Babylon, where he expired, in 323 B.C., from a combination of too much date wine, despair over the death of his noble companion and lover Hephaestion, and an arrow in his armpit that had punctured his lung.

Wood's genius, as he reads aloud from the pro-Alex Greek historian Arrian and the anti-Alex Roman historian Curtius, is in dragging us along with him over sometimes impossible terrain, in weather often wretched, at night when the Macedonians had to, pausing on occasion to dicker for supplies, or persuade Israeli border guards that the BBC is not political, or go underground to inspect Egyptian graffiti, or hitch a whirlybird ride out of Syria, or talk to a horse in Iran, or outflank bandits and dodge the Taliban advancing on Kabul. Thus, at the end of the twentieth century, we see into the Panhellenic past through Alexander's obstinate eyes, at the grunt level of his indefatigable infantry, from under the hooves of his lightning-quick cavalry, in the rainbow arc of his corps of archers, in the light of fires he set to burn down palaces.

But our ears are full of Wood's opinions on everything from flat-bottomed boats and altitude sickness to Zoroastrianism and war crimes. (Surrender to Alex, and he sets you up as his satrap, with the usual imperial perks. Resist, and he massacres the men and sells the women and children into slavery.) We hear about Roxanne (a marriage of convenience) and the Queen of the Amazons (who left without the child she wanted, because he couldn't get it up). Like the Athenians, Wood

seems inclined to blame some of Alex's excesses on Aristotle's pedagogy—hadn't the Golden Mean himself instructed his princely pupil that Greeks are supposed to rule barbarians?—although surely Aristotle, a proponent of city-states, had some doubts about imperium. (And also opposed the whole multicultural idea of mixed races and mixed marriages, unlike Alex, who is said to have been good for the Jews and other minorities.) Nevertheless, Wood concludes his dazzling mini-series with a poet's lament for "the loneliness and insanity of absolute power."

Photograph by David Wallace.

Hail the conquering hero: Historian-archaeologist Michael Wood, on location for *In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great*.