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GLOBALCITIZEN

THE NEW GENERATION OF MIDDLE EAST

COVER STORY: THE NEW LEADERS
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Ivan Kristoff testing the new extreme line of Traser H3 watches and Nike Dry-fit line during an aerial rope rescue procedure.

Vertical Challenge

High-rise safety expert rescues Middle Eastern market

■ NATASHA TOURISH

Ivan Kristoff is one of the world's foremost aerial rescue experts, he is also the founder of the Eiger High-rise Emergency Aerial Rescue Team, or Eiger HEART, a non-profit organization whose aim is to "minimize the loss of life and to increase the safety of the public."

As a Canadian citizen he initially created his company Eiger in Ontario, Canada because he felt that with over 12,000 high-rises in the city and sub-standard training procedures for rope

workers such as window washers and maintenance workers, accidents were bound to happen for which traditional emergency response teams would not be equipped.

In addition to six years in his native Bulgarian army as part of the airborne forces, where he received survival and emergency training, he has a lifetime of climbing experience that began with makeshift equipment when he was a teen. He also works professionally on high rises, doing inspections

and implementing safety guidelines for property managers, as well as endorsing products, which he says aid his work in extreme conditions and emergency incidents.

He has integrated his academic training as a mechanical engineer and the benefits of modern technology to ensure that safety comes first.

Kristoff hopes to share his expert knowledge of emergency rope access work and aerial rescue techniques with the MENA markets in the coming year, once he secures investment in the region.

How have you marketed your Eiger rope access business differently in the Middle East in comparison to when you first started out with your business in North America in 1993?

In 1993 I started my business in Canada from Tabula Rasa. I had an idea from the business and the background knowledge of exploration in the vertical world so from this I managed to turn it into an attractive and extremely specific business. I believe that this is something that only a few people can put into practice, as it requires a combination of perfect physical ability and an adequate engineering background. I realized that I was on the right path when the industry started to listen to me and the media began writing about me.

The Middle East and the UAE in particular, have always been attractive to me. Dubai is a unique phenomenon. Its economic boom during the last two decades was a great inspiration for me as an expert working on high-rise buildings. Only confident people with a drive for change can reach such tremendous achievements in such a short time. I knew that if I wanted to be successful in Dubai I should follow its unique business dynamics. That's what impressed me most when I came to Dubai for the first time, it's their business dynamic that helped them overcome the economic crisis. For me to succeed in the Middle East and UAE in particular, I knew I should follow my father's lesson "You never have a second chance for a first impression". My father was a diplomat in Libya in the 80's and a great fan of the Arabic history and culture. Therefore, prior to my arrival at the Dubai Helishow 2010, my team promoted our company to all the media outlets in the region and briefed them on my presentation with the help of our partners at the Helishow.

How has your business developed since then in terms of the advancement of the equipment used and the techniques employed by you

I WAS DEEPLY IMPRESSED BY THE TWO PRINCES THAT I MET AND WAS HONOURED TO BE IN THEIR PRESENCE

and your team when performing emergency rope access work whilst scaling the world's tallest buildings?

I have never waited for the advancement of equipment and techniques to develop; instead I took the initiative to predict the needs and weak points in my industry and develop some new techniques for rope access and aerial operations. In order to achieve my goals I had to work with the best technological experts from the leading world companies and, in some cases, I was receiving equipment before it went on the market. I was my own test animal for the techniques I have invented. Time and safety are very important when performing emergency rope access work and they are both dependent on the quality of equipment and techniques.

When I was chosen in 2003 to be the first person to work on the inaccessible places of the tallest tower in the world (at that time)—The CN Tower, the investment costs I had spent on innovative equipment and techniques were compensated for.

Do you still have offices in Ontario Canada and do you have any direct involvement?

I work on a consultancy basis only in Canada, since I reached the pinnacle of my rope access career and achieved my dream of working on the top of the urban world, I had nowhere higher to go. So I decided to take on a new challenge

and change direction in my professional career by entering into new fields of the vertical environment. And Dubai with its unique high-rise concept was such a challenge. I also look forward to exploring Abu Dhabi and the whole Middle East region in the coming years.

Currently, I am in Europe, where I work on creating a volunteer high-rise rescue team S.O.S. (Specialized Operation Services) as part of my philanthropic initiative.

Has the Middle Eastern market been receptive so far towards your business concept and have you closed any major deals in your recent trips to the UAE?

I have some interesting proposals to partner with very influential businessmen and companies in the region. As far as I am informed, however, some new legal regulations with regard to the business activity of foreign entities in Dubai are expected, so my final decision how to corporately and legally structure my business in Dubai will depend on them. My goals in the UAE are to introduce new concepts to the high-rise development industry and for this it takes more than a few visits to close a deal.

Tom Cruise recently scaled down the Burj Khalifa (tallest building in the world) for the filming of Mission Impossible 3, did Eiger assist them in any way during the stunt and if so how did this come about?

Before Tom Cruise arrived in Dubai, I had been approached by a liaison to the production company and asked if I was Paramount certified for stunt work. However, this was not the case with me. When I came to Canada, the safety aspects of my conservative industry and Health and Safety standards were in total contrast to the stunt profession. Now, that I am going to study Film and Television Directing, I would be pleased to get involved with stunt rope work.

You presented His Highness Shaikh Mansoor bin Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum with a gift Traser H3 code Blue Swiss made watch at the Helishow 2010 in Dubai last year. How much revenue does your business generate each year from the endorsement of such products?

I was deeply impressed by the two princes that I met and was honoured to be in their presence. I felt that they would be glad to wear professional military watches. They are young and sophisticated, and these watches would look good on them.

The revenue from presenting brands like Traser H3 has different aspects and the financial one is just a part. Yes, being an expert in a specific area I can earn quite good revenues from presenting different brands. However, that is not my goal. I am happy to have Traser as my partner, because their watches fit me best during extreme training and high-rise operations. These are some of the best products for pilots, divers, climbers, etc. – Men who like the extreme, so I decided to showcase them during the Dubai HeliShow 2010. I hope that very soon the Swiss made watches Traser will enter the Dubai market.

Is endorsing and selling products

like your limited edition emergency rope access car and special NIKE outfit for air operations more profitable to your business than the high rise rescue work you do?

I am proud that the world leader in sport NIKE is my official supplier of outfit equipment and clothing. When I am working at extreme heights my life depends on the quality of my equipment and clothing. There are other brands that provide me with the best possible equipment (Pelican, PMI, Epson, etc), so that I could rely on the best quality and latest technological achievements. Selling products has never been my business. I am just an

TIME AND SAFETY ARE VERY IMPORTANT WHEN PERFORMING EMERGENCY ROPE ACCESS WORK

exclusive promoter of some brands and I use their products in my work.

Do you have any Middle Eastern projects in the pipeline that you can tell us about?

That is the Million Dollar question. But if I tell you then I would have to kill you. That's a joke, of course. I am working on several options and after finalizing some projects I will be able to give some more details.

What is the current net worth of

your company?

2010 has just passed and I cannot be precise enough, furthermore I am entering into a new market and business development phase, which will definitely reflect on the final net worth.

Do you have the same love for the business development side of your work as the adrenaline rushing tasks that you did in the early days of your career?

Definitely not! That is why I decided to venture into new areas outside of the urban rope access, such as high-rise aerial response and helicopter operations. Love for the exploration of new dimensions and high adrenalin to power me up, go together in my life, and if the level is not very high, it is a signal for a change. That is why the last time I stood on the highest point of the world's tallest tower and I was watching the world under my knees, I said to myself - "This is definitely not high enough for me." I looked up into the sky, my adrenalin went up again, and I realized that my goals now are much higher than my eyes can see. That is why my love for aviation achieves new heights and I am working on new projects with fighter jet pilots.

Would you say that you have traded your Spiderman outfit for a corporate suit?

The Spiderman outfit is an old story now. There are too many copycats. Now I want to reinvent my outfit – one that suits my personality, capabilities and spirit. But that is not a corporate suit for sure.

How do you intend to develop this industry in the UAE in terms of developing the safety and maintenance standards?

Firstly, in the UAE to my knowl-



Ivan Kristoff with H. H. Sheikh Mansoor

edge, rope rescue is differently managed than in North America and Europe. So I will adapt to this different style by working with the best experts and rope rescue emergency responders in the region, who have the experience and knowledge of the local safety standards and safety work history. However, I strongly believe that I could contribute with new methodologies, new approaches and standards that come out of my personal experience worldwide.

Who are your main competitors in this industry?

My intention now is to create a niche market in Dubai, where my knowledge and experience in aerial/vertical operations surpasses that of my competitors. That exceeds the area of high-rise construction and repair, and includes procedures for helicopter rope work operations and specialized training for work in extreme conditions such as the summer heat.

Do you believe that the MENA markets are still competitive taking into consideration the effects that the economic crisis left?

Yes, I strongly believe that they are. Even more so, as this is the right time

for the MENA countries to change the trend. These countries were hardly hit by the crisis but are quickly recovering and I expect good growth levels in 2011 and the years to come.

How has the weakened European market affected your industry?

Construction concepts in Europe are much different than those in North America, UAE, China, Japan, etc. where high-rise buildings dominate. That is why the crisis had only a small impact on high-rise vertical access work in Europe.

Did your company experience a decline in product sales and investment over the past two years when the global economic crisis was at its peak?

Of course, that is inevitable. But these two years were the right time for restructuring and looking for new business perspectives and opportunities. High-rise emergency aerial response was my priority during the last couple of years and we had good achievements in that area but now it's time to progress.

Safety within the medical helicopter industry is obviously para-

mount. Has your company been involved in offering staff training to the UAE emergency services?

There was a great interest in my presentation "Creating a High-rise Emergency Aerial Response Team" during the Dubai HeliShow 2010 and after that. I had some professional discussions with the responsible local officials and I hope to start useful partnerships with them. Dubai is the highest city in the world and it needs well-trained and equipped teams for high-rise emergency aerial response. During the Dubai HeliShow 2010 I declared my good will to collaborate in the field and I am open to offers.

You have already conquered the North American market and are on target to securing investment in the Middle East so where next for Eiger?

The Middle East and especially the UAE is the place where I wish to develop my business in the next few years. Tall building construction and repair, as well as the aerial helicopter search and rescue will continue to develop in the region and I hope to contribute with my unique experience gained when working on challenging super high-rise projects.

Do you still offer your services on a non-profit basis in the emergency rescue missions in Canada and Bulgaria as part of Eiger HEART?

I have very strictly distinguished my business from the volunteer/philanthropic work. Any life saving operations is not for profit. Put it in another way, I would never benefit from the suffering of others. This is one of the things what distinguishes HEART from the rest. That is why I implemented my moral beliefs into the Eiger HEART Code of Ethics.