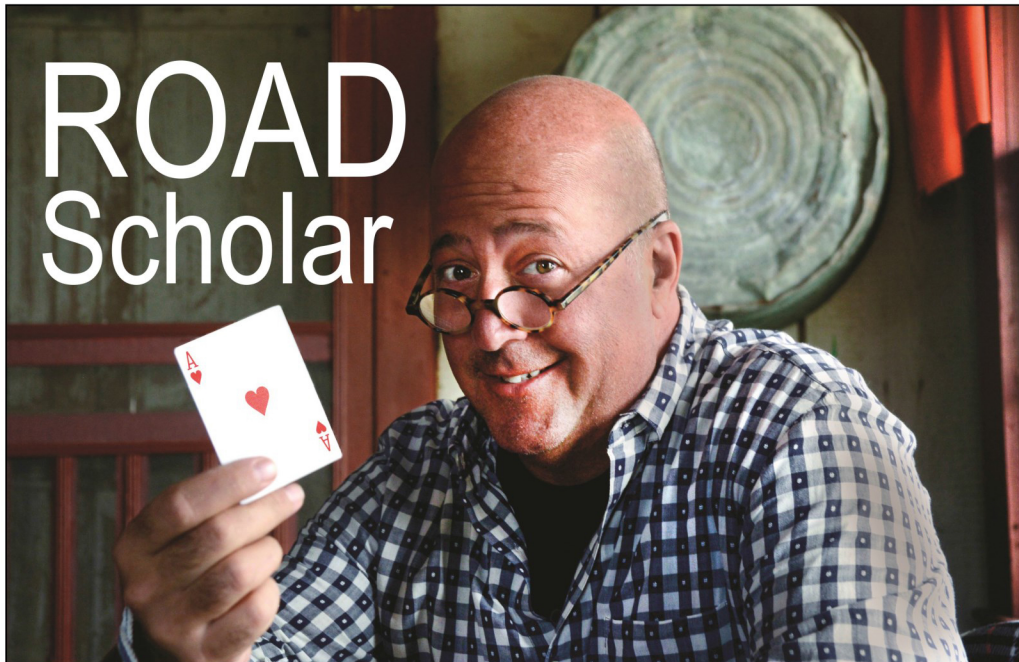


ROAD Scholar



Andrew Zimmern of 'Bizarre Foods' Wants to Eat Your Porcupine

Story and photos by James Gaffney

If you were to ask America's favorite globetrotting, insect-eating badass, he might tell you that he travels to wake up. Not just in the philosophical sense, but literally from all of the naps he takes on the couch at his Minnesota home when he's not on the road stuffing his pie hole with poisonous spiders and animal testicles for his red-hot "Bizarre Foods" TV series for The Travel Channel.

"When I'm at home, I'm a self-centered SOB — I just want to lie on the couch and not talk to anyone," he told *Seven Men's Magazine* during an interview in between segments he was taping for an episode of "Bizarre Foods America" at Los Islenos Museum, a living-heritage site for

Spanish-Louisiana culture near New Orleans in St. Bernard, La. All of which flies in the face of the Zimmern most of us have come to know on television: a gregarious, culturally curious and adventurous world traveler, who flings himself to the Four Corners in his take-no-prisoners quest to bring the planet's most truly bizarre culinary customs into our living rooms. Whether chowing down on ant-larvae beignets, Cambodian bats or African giant porcupines, the foodstuff Zimmern swallows with a charming school-kid grin would likely trigger the gag reflex of lesser travelers. No, let's be honest: it would make most of us guys vomit all over our Cole Haan loafers. Yet this is precisely why Zimmern seems to appeal to our inner 10-year-old boy no matter how many years we've put on the clock.

According to reports, our brave frat brother from Omega Zeta Puke has downed 36 rodents, three bats, 15 snakes, 88 types of insects, 18 kinds of eyeballs and 48 reproductive organs — and still counting. As might be expected, it gets worse. Far worse. In Iceland, for instance, he sampled the national delicacy *hakari*, a fermented shark meat whose consistency and aroma has been described as a strong cheese slathered in ammonia. In fact, since the debut of "Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmern" in 2006, there are only two things the Vassar graduate, long-time travel writer (he's still a senior editor at *DeltaSky* magazine), and former New York executive chef has refused to eat: Moldy chicken intestines and, once in New Delhi, "crispy snacks drizzled with brown sludgy water coming out of a spigot in the wall on the street." Good call, that.

To Zimmern there is a bigger and certainly loftier goal behind his gastronomic shenanigans. Namely to reveal the common humanity that connects us all within the breathtaking diversity of global food traditions, and how even the simplest recipe can often tell the story and history of an entire people. In Zimmern's world, eating witchetty grubs is no less significant to the culinary heritage of many Australian aboriginals than the Monday tradition of dining on red beans and rice is to folks in New Orleans. "We tell people this all the time on the show," he says. If Zimmern seems intent on teaching the world to eat in perfect harmony, he certainly has the right pitch. It doesn't hurt that he's also a damn good storyteller.

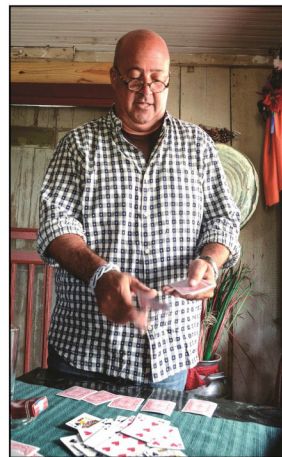
Zimmern began careening down the road less traveled at the tender age of 15. "It's only recently that I've been able to get cameras to follow me," he says only half-jokingly. Compared to his palpably jaded and aloof (former) Travel Channel comrade Anthony Bourdain of the popular series "No Reservations," Zimmern seems passionate and fully engaged in the moment, especially when conversation turns to life's lessons travel teaches those willing to boldly venture beyond their comfort zone.

"There is a transformative power that comes with travel that is unlike anything else in the world," he says, looking his interviewer directly in the eye. "And it doesn't have to be some exotic trip to tribal Africa either — it can also be something as simple as a road trip that you and I make to Cleveland." (Bucket list add-on: Road trip to the Ohio riverport with Mr. Zimmern.)

As easygoing and affable in person as he appears on TV, Zimmern seems surprisingly (and refreshingly) free of ego. He doesn't view his passport as a scorecard nor does he over-pronounce foreign words like some self-conscious college student just back from his junior semester abroad.

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At 52, he wears middle age like a favorite pair of well-worn shoes and clearly seems at ease in his own skin, peering over a pair of round eyeglasses more like a kindly uncle than a household name. Perhaps this helps explain why the celeb seems unaware — or at the least unfazed — by his own star traction or the fact that he's probably the most interesting guest at any dinner party. Even his tried-and-true anecdotes about his glamorous life spent tramping the globe — the stuff armchair travelers can only dream

about — seem securely lassoed to his version of a self-checked humility. It's not so much what Zimmern says as how he says it.

Yet, despite his jovial demeanor, his brown eyes and laugh lines reveal wisdoms gleaned along a timeline briefly spent in the darkest corners of life. In Zimmern's case this has included his well-publicized battles in the early 1990s against heroin, cocaine and alcohol addiction, not to mention the year he spent homeless on the streets of New York, seeking shelter in abandoned tenement buildings where at night he fought off rats and roaches. Today he eats them for a living on television and gets paid handsomely for the pleasure. Talk about sweet irony.

At the end of the day, it's probably not the spiders and insects and bats that lure Zimmern from the comfort of his Minnesota couch and back to the open road for another season of "Bizarre Foods." To dyed-in-the-passport guys like him, there is something far more existential about the wayfarer's life that no amount of money can buy. "When I travel," he says grinning, "I find that I'm the best possible version of myself I can possibly be."