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Driven by Curiosity

Martin Kraus once left the Grand Duchy for New York – and from there to the world



The Explorers Club

From Luxembourg to New York and around the world

Titel

Twenty-five years ago, his job brought him to the Big Apple, and love made him stay. And although New York is now home to him and his family, the world is still their home. Martin Kraus, his wife Daphne and their two children are born explorers and members of the Explorers Club. A life lived on the edge? Sometimes. In any case, one lived 'in action'.

Text: Jessika Maria Rauch • Photos: private



For Martin Kraus (right) and his family, exploration now quite often takes them underwater as well.



Sometimes the family's path also takes them into restricted areas, as this sign on an island belonging to a Taiwanese archipelago shows.

Large wooden doors shield the activity of the Upper East Side from view on this particular day. That evening, one of the year's biggest events would be taking place at the Metropolitan Museum, and traffic is still heavy before several streets are closed off. But here on 70th Street, between Madison and Park Avenue, another world awaits the guests of this extraordinary club.

Surrounded by historic expedition flags, stuffed animals, model ships and display cases filled with memorabilia, the history of exploration seems present everywhere. Framed badges, photographs and letters from astronauts who took part in various Apollo Moon missions, photographs of legendary expeditions, monitors, and flags that have already reached Mount Everest or the North Pole.

For more than 120 years, curious and inquisitive people have come together at the Explorers Club, united by one thing: the desire to understand the world better. They want to live by the club's guiding principle: to conduct field research and, through exploration, help protect natural resources. One of its roughly 4,000 members worldwide is Luxembourgish Martin Kraus, who has belonged to the club for eleven years.

The Explorers Club in New York, which has occupied this prestigious address since 1965, is no ordinary club. Its members have included Neil Armstrong, chimpanzee researcher Jane Goodall, the first American woman in space Sally Ride, ocean explorer and filmmaker Jacques Cousteau, and Amazon founder Jeff Bezos.

Since 2024, Grand Duke Guillaume has even been an honorary member of the Explorers Club — something Kraus helped to arrange. Since 2026, the club has also had a Benelux 'Chapter', a kind of local branch headed by surgeon Patrick Peters as its president. The Luxembourgish, who has already travelled to the North Pole, is regarded as an expert in polar expeditions.

Those admitted as active members have generally done more than simply undertake extraordinary journeys. In their own way, they have contributed to expanding our knowledge of our planet — or what lies beyond it.

Martin Kraus welcomes us in the lounge of the historic clubhouse. As we walk through the rooms, he greets several members who are present, among them Joe Shutter from Iceland, who leads expeditions primarily in his homeland and Greenland. Others

whom we meet today will shortly afterwards apply for membership, such as James Scott, an amiable 90-year-old seismologist. His programme for the summer: climbing Kilimanjaro.

The Explorers Club feels less like an exclusive club than a place where people who share the same passion repeatedly come together. At heart, what binds them above all is curiosity about the world and the desire never to stop discovering and understanding new things. Here, people with very different stories and experiences meet, exchange knowledge and inspire one another.

'Curiosity in action' is how Martin Kraus sums it up. 'For me, that describes an explorer best.' It is a maxim that runs like a thread through his life story. And that story began just as unusually as one might imagine.

He was one of 30,000 applicants

Born in Switzerland, he spent the first years of his life in Geneva. At the age of ten, his family moved to Luxembourg, where he grew up, before continuing his education abroad.



At the Explorers Club, things can certainly be rather more exclusive.

'My wife and I never wanted to give our children adventures, but curiosity.'

Martin Kraus

When a position at the United Nations in New York was advertised in the early 2000s, he applied without particularly high expectations. Around 30,000 people submitted applications at the time. After several rounds of selection, only fifty candidates remained. One of them was Martin Kraus.

"I had never planned to live permanently in New York," he says. "But at some point you realise that this city changes you." Around 25 years later, what began as a place of work has long since become home. For his children, being "from Manhattan" is completely natural, says the 59-year-old. He himself speaks about New York with the enthusiasm of a man who has retained his fascination with it. Above all, he says, it is the people, the energy, the diversity and the countless encounters that make the city special.

It was not least his own openness towards people that eventually led him to the Explorers Club. The story began in 2015 at an event in New York. There Martin Kraus met Richard Garriott, entrepreneur, space traveller and son of a NASA astronaut. Their first encounter developed into a friendship. Garriott took him about the Explorers Club and encouraged him to become a member. But it was not the famous names that impressed Kraus; it was the attitude.

Being an explorer means constantly travelling to extraordinary places. While many people initially associate the word "explorer" with spectacular expeditions, Kraus describes something different. An explorer is not defined by the distance travelled, he says, but by the questions that drive them: Why is something the way it is? What can be learned from it? And how can that knowledge be passed on? It is something his wife Daphne also shares and lives by. Ultimately, both are driven by the desire to expand their knowledge and pass it on.



Explorers Club today: every Friday evening, members meet at the clubhouse to exchange ideas. Sometimes it's someone who has just returned from an Antarctic expedition. Another time it's a deep-sea researcher, a volcanologist or an astronaut. New expeditions are often the starting point, but just as often it's a conversation over a drink.

"That openness is incredibly inspiring," Kraus says. "And curiosity has no age limit — I see that here week after week."

Many members are well into their seventies or eighties and are still planning expeditions to Greenland, Mongolia or the polar regions. "Nobody here tells you that you're too old. Quite the opposite."

Climbing Kilimanjaro, diving with sperm whales

Perhaps it is precisely this environment that explains why, for Kraus, the Explorers Club has long since become much more than an association. It is a community of people who inspire one another. That attitude now also shapes his family life. When his twins, now 15, were four years old, he and his wife decided that rather than simply enabling them to travel, they wanted to introduce them to the idea of exploration. Together with



A quick selfie in the hinterland of the Chinese province of Fujian — and then onwards.



For Martin Kraus (left), mountaineering has now become just as natural a part of life as diving.

Richard Garriott, the "Young Explorers" programme was created. Since then, children have taken part in scientific projects, lectures and expeditions in an engaging and playful way.

They have already climbed Kilimanjaro, dived with sperm whales, taken part in citizen-science projects at the North Pole and are already planning their next expeditions to Japan and Taiwan. Diving has become just as natural a part of their lives as mountaineering. "My wife and I never wanted to give our children adventures, but curiosity," their father says.

It is one of those sentences that stays with you for a long time. In fact, their journeys are rarely about records. During an expedition to the geographic North Pole, for example, the family collected samples for research into microplastics. Other projects deal with biodiversity on the documentation of marine habitats. Expeditions thus become research journeys — even when they take place on a relatively small scale. "It is always about contributing something," Kraus explains. "Not simply about having been there."

His own spirit of exploration predates his membership of the Explorers Club by a long way. In 1993, he drove a Land Rover from Luxembourg to Cape Town — a year-long journey across the African continent. Later, he obtained his pilot's licence in Zimbabwe and for a time even dreamed of circumnavigating the world.

He was forced to learn painfully that adventure also carries risks. Sixteen years ago, he narrowly survived a serious plane crash in a Cessna at Greenwood Lake in New York State. Ask him what he remembers. Nothing, he replies. His brain "did its job" and erased the terrible experience, which, he says, is "not a bad thing".

Since then, he no longer celebrates his birthday on the day he was born, but on the anniversary of the accident, 20 June. Four and a half months later, his children were born, until shortly before their birth, Kraus still had to get around in a wheelchair. Perhaps that experience explains why he now speaks so calmly about ambitious plans. Which places particularly tempt him to travel? Greenland, for example.

But what interests him even more is less the landscape than the animals: the Greenland shark, which can live for hundreds of years and is still so little understood scientifically. Expeditions to Antarctica are also on his wish list. And space travel? That too is among the subjects he is passionate about. Through the Explorers Club, he has already taken part in training programmes for commercial spaceflight.

Many of his goals certainly sound spectacular. But the longer you listen to Martin Kraus, the clearer it becomes that he is fascinated by something else: human encounters, the stories and people — and the idea that curiosity can change lives.

Perhaps, in the end, that is precisely what makes an explorer: not the number of countries visited or adventures completed, but the desire to keep asking questions, to remain open to the world and to turn surprise into action.

"Curiosity in action," indeed.