

'I THINK THAT we tend to demand instant answers and opinions about how the world works and what the problems are, but it's so complex,' Michael Palin says.

'I'm very wary of generalisations,' he continues. 'You can visit a country and find a village that has a completely different way of life to another, 5,000 feet [1,524 metres] higher up. I suppose I'm trying to see the bigger issues through the specific story of an individual, as a way of learning about situations some people might find themselves in.'

Musa Ibrahim, a 26-year-old Somali refugee from Bristol, certainly found himself in a unique situation as Michael's first guest in November. Taking centre stage at the Society's Ondaatje Theatre, Musa shared with his host and a rapt audience a moving account of how he fled his war-torn home country to seek asylum in Britain.

'I wanted it to be as if we were sitting in a café, just having a chat,' Michael says. 'I didn't want to get overwhelmed by one particular issue. I just wanted Musa to be able to explain in his own words why he left Somalia, his efforts to acquire refugee status, and what happened in between. I hope he helped the audience to look beyond the headlines about immigration and consider the background to asylum seekers' lives and to feel a curiosity, a desire for more information about how the system actually works and what we can do to make people like him feel a bit easier.'

As with his travel documentaries, Michael says that the idea of 'Michael meets....' is 'not

'I think story telling is so important'

Society president Michael Palin's generosity as a listener has enabled people from around the world to share their stories on screen. Now, he's bringing these conversations to the Society's stage with 'Michael meets...'; a series of occasional talks he's hosting

to deal with generalities such as culture, religion or politics', but with the lives of the singular people he has 'eavesdropped' on along the way.

Michael was introduced to his next guest, Maan Barua, when filming the BBC *Himalaya* series along the Brahmaputra River in Assam, India. He's looking forward to having what he describes as the 'best kind of conversation': live, with no television cameras, internet or edits, something that everyone in the room can feel part of.

'Everyone being there at the same time, in the same place, is important,' he says. 'My intention is to bring the person and the audience together to make a connection that probably wouldn't normally happen. Maan is different from Musa in that he has had access to a good education and his life has been

more secure, but I think he'll talk about things we don't often hear about in this country.'

Although Michael accepts that Society members who attend Michael meets... may already be aware of the situations described by his guests, he believes that unusual, sometimes revelatory, tales can still be found. 'It's a step-by-step approach,' he says. 'The idea has been to invite people who aren't British nationals to talk about their perspectives and how they connect with this country.'

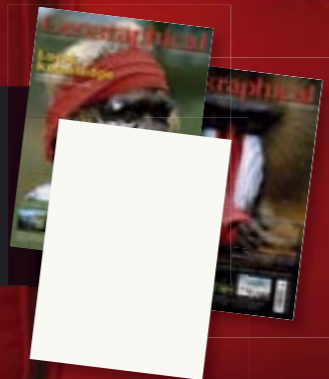
'I would regard myself as being pretty well informed, but I learnt a lot from Musa,' Michael continues. 'I was very impressed by the way he articulated how badly he felt when he came here, and how his attitude changed from negative to positive when he started volunteering at Refugee Action, the national charity that works with refugees to build new lives in the UK. Through finding compassion for others who were having similar problems, he was able to build up his own sense of self-worth. To me, that seems like a fundamental human quality.'

■ 'Michael meets... Maan Barua', an evening for RGS-IBG members and guests, will take place at the Society in London on 18 February. For further details, see the event listing opposite. Michael and Musa first met through Refugee Action's Simple Acts campaign, which inspires individuals to use small, everyday actions to get to know newcomers and change perceptions of refugees. Refugee Week 2010 runs from 14 to 20 June. To learn more, visit www.simpleacts.org.uk and www.refugee-action.org.uk

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ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY (WITH IBG)

SELECTION OF EVENTS



1 FEBRUARY, 6.30PM FROM DREAMTIME TO MACHINE TIME

(Lecture, London)
Rebecca Hossack, former Australian cultural attache, talks about her passion for Australian Aboriginal art and culture, from its ancient creation myths and unique views of the land to its engagement with contemporary Australian life.

Free to RGS-IBG members and one guest



10 FEBRUARY, 10AM DRINKING SPACES AND PLACES: Who drinks alcohol, where and why?

(Environment and Society Forum seminar, London)
The impact of drinking alcohol in excess affects both individual health and disorder in public spaces. This day-long seminar focuses on the need to recognise the importance of where and how people drink.
Tickets (including refreshments): full £60, academics/RGS-IBG members £40, students £15. To book, please contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

18 FEBRUARY, 7PM MICHAEL MEETS... Maan Barua

(Interview series, London)
At this second Michael meets... evening, Michael Palin talks to Maan Barua, who guided him down India's Brahmaputra River in the BBC *Himalaya* series.
Tickets: free, booking essential, two per RGS-IBG member. To book, contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100, or book online at www.rgs.org/whatson



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9 FEBRUARY, 7PM THE LONGEST WINTER: Scott's other heroes

(Regional lecture, Winchester)
Uncovering the story of Robert Falcon Scott's 'other expedition', writer, historian and Antarctic aficionado Meredith Hooper will relive the hardship and adventures of six of Scott's men. Venue: College Science Centre Theatre, Kingsgate Road, Winchester, SO23 9PG.
Tickets: RGS-IBG members £2; non-members £5; College staff and pupils free. For more information and to book, please contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

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16 FEBRUARY, 6.30PM NEW LIGHT ON XANADU

(City lecture, London)
Kubla Khan's Xanadu was, and is, a reality. John Man describes the origins and significance of the place where Marco Polo first met the world's most powerful ruler, and reveals what Coleridge's 'stately pleasure-dome' may have looked like. Venue: The Clothworkers' Hall, London EC3R 7AH.
Free for RGS-IBG members and guests. This lecture is a repeat of the 15 December lecture at the Society. For further details, please contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100

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23 FEBRUARY, 7PM DISCOVERING PEOPLE: Catherine Destivelle

(Interview series, London)
Join journalist and author Libby Purves in conversation with one of the world's greatest climbers, Catherine Destivelle. The first woman to solo-climb the direct north face of Cima Grande di Lavaredo in the Italian Dolomites, her life story is one remarkable ascent.
Tickets: RGS-IBG members £7, non-members £10. To book, please contact the Events Office on events@rgs.org or 020 7591 3100, or book online at www.rgs.org/whatson



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