

MARTYN ANDREWS



**UP CLOSE & PERSONAL
WITH THE *WAYFARER*
OF RUSSIA TODAY**

by **Joseph Pedro**

My job is fierce, really, it is great. I get paid to explore the world," says Martyn Andrews while taking a small sip of his apple martini. With his wrinkle-free face, pressed jacket, and enthusiastic attitude, he hardly seems like he has just flown halfway around the world to New York. It is probably nothing new for Andrews who touches base in both Moscow and London each month and jokes that the immigration office is more like home than his flat. Now, with his own cooking show, a travel program, and a slew of presenter

gigs, Andrews doesn't show any sign of slowing down.

Andrews is currently a presenter on the English language, Russian television station RT, formerly known as Russia Today. Similar to networks like BBC News, CNN, and Al Jazeera English, RT can be seen globally and is becoming increasingly dominant in the worldwide news pool. Rather than acting as a desk-bound anchor, Andrews hosts a variety of programs that highlight Russia and the world in a new, intimate, and funny way.

Among his repertoire, he hosts a cooking show, *A Prime Recipe* (despite

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admitting he's not a very good cook), and a Moscow culture show called *Moscow Out*. His signature show, *Wayfarer*, takes Andrews across Russia's 11 time zones and into areas that rarely receive visitors.

As a result, Andrews knows what it is like to travel across the world's largest country, describing it as either "cabbage or caviar." One minute he may be in a private jet with an oligarch drinking Cristal like it is tap water, and the next, he could be in the freezing Polar Circle with local people living in a wigwam. "My job has been to showcase this to the Western audience and to laugh, cry, be serious, have fun, and sometimes, be political about it. Russia is probably one of the most unexplored countries." It is so big, in fact, people, including Russians, have never heard of many of the places that he has visited.

Although he may not have expected to explore vast frontiers, Andrews always knew exactly what he wanted to do. "When I grow up," he used to tell people, "I want to be in musicals and be a TV host." That is exactly what he ended up doing. This kind of go-get-it atti-

tude has resonated with Andrews ever since he was a kid.

Growing up in Liverpool, "I was the male version of Annie, freckly with a big mouth and always the center of attention," he says nearly popping off the sofa.

When he was 18, his energy and passion caught the attention of judges at a regional Shakespeare festival. The first prize was a presenting gig for a kid's spin-off of the super-popular, BBC religious program, *Songs of Praise*. After impressing the audience and the producers, he was asked back to sing.

With a major presenting appearance under his belt, Andrews then decided to follow a path in musical theatre. After attending the prestigious Mountainview Academy in London, he was cast in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Starlight Express*. "I was 21 in this musical, dressed up like a glittered turkey drag queen on roller skates, singing in German in the dark, and wearing a 50-kilo costume." He soon ventured on to other shows, like *Whistle Down the Wind*. Eventually, the repetition and lack of innovation involved in doing a show eight times a week got the best of him. "I wanted to be more creative. I always liked

writing, literature, text, and as an actor in drama school, I continuously played with texts, but as an actor in the profession, you just read someone else's. I found musicals were creatively stagnant, and singing *Whistle Down the Wind* became torturous," he quips.

In search of a more stimulating outlet, Andrews went to school for journalism and quickly fell in love with the creative processes of producing. "I loved it. I felt free, artistically free. You can be creative with your text and camera angles...you can write, edit, research, it is a whole creative process, much more fulfilling." He finally found the medium to nurture his creative side, while fueling his star quality.

Then came the reality of post-grad life as a journalist, "I did a chat show in the UK, which bombed, then I did a ghost program, which bombed."

Success eventually came after a move to New York, and his Russian destiny began to unfurl. "Maybe I was a Tsar in my past life, but everywhere I go, even on holiday, I make friends with a bunch of Russians," he jokes. His first encounter with Russian media came with a job offering from an oligarch's wife, who he describes as the most dramatic person ever. "She was like the Russian Anna Wintour on crack," he said with a serious face. "Why don't we do this dangerous diving program and see if you die around the world in the most dangerous dive sites?" he adds, imitating her voice. After training in Florida for five months for the program called *My Abyss*, Andrews found himself traveling the world. The award-winning show didn't come without obstacles—on one occasion he nearly died. During a notoriously dangerous dive in Egypt (where 250 people had died attempting it), Andrews nearly fell asleep. "I was trying to keep awake, and I was hyperventilating, having a panic attack in my snorkel. It was two hours of torture."

Through such Russian connections, Andrews heard about the launch of a new channel based out of Moscow, and jumped at the chance to interview. Sitting in front of a group of executives, he flashed his white smile and made them laugh with his bad Russian and witty sense of humor. He was soon offered a

spot on the channel as their cultural, travel, and cookery host. His job in the past five years at RT has given him the position of a lifetime—he is a modern day explorer, discovering the world for an international audience.

As the face of *Wayfarer*, Andrews visits some truly off-the-grid places and has transformative experiences. “I was in the Polar Circle on the Northern Peninsula, we flew across the tundra in this old Soviet helicopter and landed on a peninsula that is two-and-a-half times the size of France, that nobody’s ever heard of. I was walking with my guide and she turned back to me and said, ‘Martyn, do you realize that we are probably the only humans ever to step foot on where we are walking?’”

Other experiences have brought Martyn face to face with a whole different type of isolation. When filming in Outer Mongolia, he visited a place that used to be an industrial army base that was closed off during Soviet Russia. Clashing with this gray, Soviet military image, the locals were vibrant in every way. They wore “bright pink, green, orange outfits and they had gold teeth. Hearts of gold and teeth to match,” Andrews reminisces. He spent the afternoon eating local cuisine and dancing with the Russian housewives.

With so much screen time, getting recognized in public is bound to happen. On a flight from Moscow to London, Andrews was sharing first class with Paris Hilton. When the plane made a landing at the wrong terminal at Heathrow, the passengers were required to take a bus to the correct entrance. After all the economy passengers exited, Paris and Martyn were asked to leave. “I was on my way out, and there were these two guys at the end of coach, one of the guys looked up and then looked at his friend, nods, looked up again, and nods to his friend and then points and yells, ‘Oh my God it’s you off the TV.’ Both Paris and I pause and freeze. Paris takes off her sunglasses, but then the guy goes, ‘You’re Martyn Andrews off Russia Today!’”

Despite getting recognized at least once a day, he admits that all his globe-

trotting can get lonely. He does have one companion that he never leaves home without: a stuffed frog named Gilbert who doubles as his good luck charm and pillow. “He has a big frog face and I confidently sit him in front of me, even in business class,” he says. Andrews is an entertainer on and off the camera/stage, and when traveling alone, this can come in handy. He never goes anywhere without a magic trick—a talent he quickly proves when he makes my pen disappear. He also always carries a plastic, light-up ice-cube that he puts in drinks at bars. “The gays just flock to it,” he boasts.

When at home in Russia, he doesn’t need an ice cube to get attention in the gay scene. “It is a strong community there. Everyone knows everybody...it’s huge.”

Andrews’ remark comes at about the same time Moscow’s mayor called a proposed gay pride march “satanic.” Despite this comment, Andrews insists that Moscow is changing, “When everything is new, including food, clothing, Christmas traditions, or New Years...it just needs time. But, the gay scene is there, it’s huge. When all of my friends come to visit, they are always like, ‘Wow, Moscow is really gay.’ It’s far, far

gayer than people think.” Moscow’s evolving nightlife scene has something for everyone including an underground scene, big clubs, and low-key dive bars. “New bars are opening all the time. Places open and close monthly.”

As Andrews’ past can attest, his future is uncharted—the way he likes it. No matter what, Andrews knows that Russia will always be part of his life. “I never want to forget Russia, or move away from there 100 percent, but I am eager to do new projects.” He hopes that he can use his experience in Russia to gain new projects on Western television, especially channels in the UK and America. His dream show would be to travel around the globe going to places that most people would never choose for a holiday. He’d call it *Why Would I Want to Go There?* and visit locales like Chernobyl and Siberia.

Still, one must wonder if there is anything this professional wayfarer can’t do. “There is one thing that I am horrendous at. I am not patient. I am the most not-relaxed person. I could be in Puerto Rico and after two and a half hours relaxing by the pool, I’m like, ‘Where’s the paragliding? Where’s the bungee jumping?’” ■

