

INTERVIEW BY ROB MCGIBBON

SHRINK RAP

Inside the head of... Richard Branson

The airline tycoon – and failed budgie baron – doesn't bear grudges... even against his former enemy British Airways. But he's still stung by 'hurtful' speculation about the Virgin Galactic disaster... and nervous about the prospect of his own space flight

What is your earliest memory?

Being taken out in my parents' old bumpety-bump car at night when I was three. We lived in the country and money was tight, so babysitters were avoided whenever possible. If they wanted to go out for the night, my two sisters and I went too. We drove to a friend's house, parked on the driveway and us lot snuggled up in the back. I have a vivid memory of Dad saying, 'Now, don't wake up!'

What sort of child were you?

Pretty naughty and not exactly easy. I remember one clash in the car on the way back from my grandmother's house when I was six and Mum ordered me out and left me to find my own way home. I got lost, it got dark and I got scared. She never did that to me again. I was always coming up with mad ideas as a kid. When I was 15, I discovered that Budgerigars breed really quickly, so I thought I'd be able to make some money. I started a flock but they bred so rapidly while I was at boarding school that Mum got fed up and set them free.

Describe the best night of your life

It has to be the night I lost my virginity, aged 16, to a Dutch girl called Rudi. But not everything went to plan because Rudi had an asthma attack. Initially, I thought it was because I was a real stud, but when she told me what was happening I had to call an ambulance. Oddly enough, I got a letter from her a few weeks ago. She said she had discovered about 60 love letters from me and she wants to meet up and hand them back to me. She says they might be of historical interest. I look forward to saying hello again after all this time.

And what has been the toughest...?

In recent times it was the Virgin Galactic test flight accident in Mojave. I was on Necker when I found out and left straight away to be with the team in California. We lost a friend and brave test pilot as well as a spaceship. The wild speculation in the immediate aftermath of the accident was irresponsible and exceptionally hurtful to the families involved and our dedicated team in Mojave. Some said that most of our future astronauts had or would leave the programme. Neither was true – the community is stronger than ever and is continuing to grow. Others predicted the end of Virgin Galactic but our SpaceShipTwo Serial No 2 is now two-thirds complete, and our plans for creating a microsatellite business called LauncherOne is making promising progress.

Who would be your dream dinner date?

I'm not sure he would be much fun, but I'd love to have dinner with President Putin and talk him out of this conflict in Ukraine. I'd like to understand what his issues are and what he is paranoid about. I remember the fall of the Berlin Wall and since then it has looked like Russia and Europe were becoming friends. We were going to trade together, marry together and party together, but suddenly we are heading back to a Cold War situation. I'd urge him to let us live in peace. We are all Europeans and we have bigger problems in the world to sort out, starting with ISIS.

Which living person do you despise the most and why?

I honestly don't despise people. Life is too short. The best bit of advice I can give is, if you fall out with someone, call them up, have dinner, talk it through. After we won that famous court case against British Airways in the 1990s following their dirty tricks campaign, I had lunch with Colin Marshall [BA's then chief executive]. We became friends for the last ten years of his life, even though BA had really tried to push Virgin out of business. I believe there is a good side to everybody, you just have to seek it out. If I said something horrible about someone when I was a child, my parents sent me to stand in front of the mirror. I had to look at myself for five minutes. My parents were basically showing me that saying bad things reflected badly on myself. It was a good lesson.

What is your most treasured possession?

Definitely Necker island. It has been the jewel my wife Joan and I found when I was 27. We live there now and it is the most beautiful place in the world. My kids have grown up there and it has become a magnet for some of the most fascinating people on the planet – even Nelson Mandela stayed there. It's a great place to think and to come up with wonderful ideas. I will end my days on Necker.

What is your best and worst character trait?

My best and my worst traits are the same: saying yes! I am known as Dr Yes because I have great difficulty saying anything but yes. The downside is that I end up doing too much, which means you can wear yourself out.

Who would like to say sorry to and why?

The Queen because Virgin Records signed the Sex Pistols and brought out their single *God Save The Queen* on her Silver Jubilee. When I was knighted I was a little nervous she would chop my head off, but I think she has forgiven us.

Tell us a secret about yourself...

I am worried about being sick when I go up in the Virgin Galactic spaceship. This is something I have never admitted before. I know there is going to be a lot of interest in that flight and I don't like the thought of me throwing up becoming the focus of world attention. Everyone assumes that I am capable of doing any kind of action stuff, but as a kid I was scared of the dangerous rides at fairgrounds and avoided them. That inherent nervousness still exists today. I need to make sure the brain is working properly before we go up, or it could get messy.

Which words or phrases do you most overuse?

'Screw it, let's do it' and 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'. They are the two mantras for my life. They have got me into all kinds of tricky spots, but they have also brought extraordinary excitement into my life. *'The Virgin Way: How to Listen, Learn, Laugh and Lead'* is out now, published by Virgin Books, priced £20

'I'M WORRIED I'LL BE SICK WHEN I GO UP IN THE SPACESHIP'

THE LAST WORD

LAST FILM YOU SAW

Gravity. The effects are brilliant, although I'm worried it might put people off going up in our spaceship. Sandra Bullock was great and looked very sexy!

LAST BOOK YOU READ

South, Ernest Shackleton's memoir of his

doomed voyage on the *Endurance* to Antarctica. The story of how he rescued his men is truly remarkable.

LAST TV SHOW YOU LOVED

The Bridge. I love those Scandinavian series. They really draw me in.

LAST GIG YOU WENT TO

The Rolling Stones 50th special at the O2 in 2012. It was a fantastic gig, but I would say that – Virgin Live sponsored it!

LAST THING YOU WANT TO SAY

See you up there...wherever there is!