

Robin's Gilded Cage



*Thirty years in the biz have taken their toll on Robin Leach — the man who brought the jet set world into our living rooms with *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Having covered nearly every corner of the world to hob-nob with the ultra glitz set, he lives a lifestyle many envy. But all is not “champagne wishes and caviar dreams” on the fast track. Exhausted, overweight and possibly permanently jetlagged, today the 54-year-old founder of tabloid-esque “Jacuzzi” journalism is ready to run away to his own deserted island.*

PBI: Your journalism career began at age 15 in England as a general news reporter for *The Harrow Observer* and, later, the *London Daily Mail* where you became Britain's youngest page one reporter. In 1963, at age 21, you took a leave of absence and moved to New York. Was your decision based on money or opportunity?

LEACH: Money. I had gone as far as I could go monetarily. I would have had to wait another eight years to qualify for an increase. While my

plan was to come to the States for two years, once I saw New York harbor I knew I was home. I never left.

PBI: You worked odd jobs for a while: sold shoes at *Lord & Taylor*, manned the night desk at the *New York Daily News* and eventually landed the decade-long post of show business editor of *The Star* and on-air reporter for *Entertainment Tonight*. In 1983 you and *TeleRep* president and founder Al Masini developed and launched *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, which is seen through-

out the U.S., Canada and 24 other countries. While the show has been a huge success, you seem to get more of the lime-light than some of your subjects. Did you seek out this level of visibility?

LEACH: No. Good God, no! I try to stay out of it completely. I never wanted to be in the public eye. All you hear is my voice. And that's more than enough of me.

PBI: Speaking of that voice, your accent sounds like a true Cockney, but it's more a hybrid with a bit of Manchester, isn't it?

LEACH: Yes. My accent is working class English—bad English. Let's just say the Queen would frown at this voice. But, it's part of my signature.

PBI: Your show is the target of some criticism. In fact, you coined the phrase "Jacuzzi journalism" to describe what you do. But how much substance is there amid the sizzle?

LEACH: Total substance. It's a pill, and the medicine is that we have to keep the entrepreneurial spirit alive. Less taxes, less government is my motto in life. "Jacuzzi journalism" is the sugar coating.

PBI: In all fairness, isn't it true that some of your techniques have in fact been adopted by 20/20 and 60 Minutes?

LEACH: Oh, there's no doubt about it. None. It's a winning technique.

PBI: As a producer, why is it that viewers rarely see the face of the celebrity who's talking while the camera pans some luscious piece of real estate? Aren't you teasing your star-hungry audience just a little?

LEACH: We only do that with *Runaway*—the travel show, because that's what it's about. It's showing you a place through the eyes of a celebrity. Audiences want to see how people spend their money. You should know, living there in Palm Beach. People love to see other people's homes; the opulence, the lifestyle. And they also like to get ideas from what they see. *Architectural Digest* has made a nice living doing just that. No doubt that the readers of *Palm Beach Illustrated* are the same. They want to see interview subjects at home—in the kitchen, the living room.

PBI: In September you dropped "of the Rich and Famous" from the show's name, changed the music and added some new faces. Why?

LEACH: It's been overused. The show is in its 12th year and normally, most shows are dead within five years—five years if you're lucky! But this is a show that will not die.

PBI: So why the change?

LEACH: Since I'm not prepared to walk away right now...

PBI: I didn't know you were thinking about it.

LEACH: Well, let's face it. You can't have me on a television show slightly overweight and balding, screaming at everyone from a rocking chair. I can't fire myself but I can make some changes right now. And those changes will partially solve my loathe of

traveling for the rest of my life by keeping me on the ground a little more.

PBI: Is this stage one of your eventual retirement?

LEACH: Soon, but not right now. The changes to the show will feature Shari Belafonte and Katie Wagner. Remember *Charlie's Angels* when John Forsythe would send the three girls off on a mission? Well, that's what I'm going to do—except that I only have two. I've known them for years and they

are both extraordinarily talented, perfectly suited. Besides, they are much younger than I am and they definitely know more about Kiefer Sutherland than I do!

PBI: Is there a danger in making these changes?

LEACH: Sure. If it ain't broke don't fix it. But we weren't broke and we aren't fixing anything. Just making some cosmetic changes...a youthening. I want to ensure the life of what I created. And that means change.

PBI: Do you ever wish you could live on the other side of the *Lifestyles* camera, in a 30-room mansion with a live-in staff of 40, maybe? Or ride

around in a limo everyday while drinking fine champagne?

LEACH: Oh come on! Yes, I drink champagne and ride in limos but that's not what this is all about. Come work with me in an edit bank at 3 in the morning, drinking cold coffee out of a styrofoam cup. Because that's the real truth. That's how it gets done. Plus, I have a business to run. Someone was just telling me about the phenomenal parties that go on during polo season in Palm Beach and how I must attend. They don't realize that I have a business to run! I have offices in Europe and California, a staff of over 200—I can't just walk away to rock and roll. You tell me how glamorous a lifestyle that is?

PBI: Then why do it?

LEACH: I want to stop. I'm sick and tired of traveling the world. I am so physically tired...I go to Pittsburgh on Friday night. I come back late Saturday night. Sunday morning I go to New Orleans for three days. I come here to the (New York) office on Wednesday morning and that night I fly to the south of France. I do an interview on Thursday night with Karl Lagerfeld and Princess Caroline and then come back Friday in time to entertain some

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people from San Francisco. That's no way to live. In order to produce 280 hours of *Lifestyles* broadcasts each year, I travel some 300 days, covering more than 250,000 miles. I travel for four weeks at a time, return home for 10 days or so and then it's off to another locale.

PBI: Why then do you maintain homes in Connecticut and Los Angeles and an apartment in New York?

LEACH: Going home is like making a stopover. Why do I have them? Everyone needs a home.

PBI: The nature of *Lifestyles* requires that you revisit many places during the year. Do you ever say, "Oh no. Not that place again!"

LEACH: I don't think I would admit it if I did.

PBI: How does one qualify for your show. How rich does rich have to be?

LEACH: Anyone famous, from Mother Theresa to the kids on Beverly Hills 90210. As for rich, I would like them to either have \$50 million or to have given \$50 million away.

PBI: But since you've dropped the "Rich and Famous" criteria from the show's title, who qualifies?

LEACH: It will definitely involve a broader base but we'll still have high standards. Our core belief is that there's nothing wrong with being rich; there's nothing wrong with being successful.

PBI: Has anyone turned you down for an interview?

LEACH: No one, really. If they can't do it it's usually because of a scheduling problem. That's all.

PBI: Who's on your hit list of people you would jump at the chance to play 20 questions with?

LEACH: I would have given anything to have interviewed Greta Garbo or Jackie O. That's about it for regrets.

PBI: How do you prepare for your interviews or segments?

LEACH: I don't. A good interview means having a good conversation. That means no notes. If my subject is terribly complex, I do some research.

PBI: You are always focused on the life and loves of others. You have been married once before and have three sons from that marriage. Who is the love in your life now?

LEACH: My girlfriend—a Swedish girl.

PBI: Tell me about other projects you're working on.

LEACH: We do a nightly show on the food network. This is very exciting. It's the very beginning of the

interactive highway in terms of electronic food couponing. I'm also involved in two travel tests of interactive television in which you can make air and hotel reservations with the click of a remote. This system will also extend to concierge shopping, where you can shop from store to store with your remote.

PBI: These are both extraordinary. After so many years in the business, are you surprised to be so excited about these new ventures?

LEACH: No, because I have always loved to be involved in start ups—at the very beginning. Today's technological breakthroughs are just outstanding. How can I be flitting around up in the air when all of this is happening on the ground?

PBI: That's a good question. How can you?

LEACH: Well, I can't.

PBI: How often do you come to Palm Beach, and when you visit, what's your favorite place to stay besides friend Donald Trump's Mar-A-Lago?

LEACH: Been there many times. I haven't yet stayed at the new Ritz-Carlton. It's on my list. Of course, The Breakers Hotel and the Boca Raton Resort & Club are my favor-

ites. As for my favorite activity, polo is it.

PBI: Barring travel, what then will retirement consist of for Robin Leach? I understand you've already built your retirement home: an Italian villa with two guest cottages on a 1.5 acre site at Jumby Bay, a 300-acre resort community on Antigua.

LEACH: Yes, and I've also just finished cultivating an organic vegetable garden. We've installed and built a ceramics studio for pottery, and for activities there is a tennis court, a croquet lawn, a swimming pool and the sea. I want to learn how to sail and fish and make my own pottery—so I can be completely self sufficient.

PBI: So that's your idea of paradise?

LEACH: Yes.

PBI: Why did you choose Antigua as your retirement home? Why not some place more exotic like off the Amalfi Coast, your purported second favorite place to live?

LEACH: The Caribbean is basically sunshine 365 days a year.

PBI: Yes, but why Antigua?

LEACH: It's got the best flight schedules in the Caribbean! Direct New York, direct Toronto, one-stop L.A., direct London, direct Italy...♦

