

Nature's medicine cabinet

Medicine hunter Chris Kilham has a medicinal plant for (nearly) every ailment. BY ELLEKE BAL

CHRIS KILHAM CAN'T GET OVER the fact that today's medical students are no longer required to study pharmacognosy, the science of medicinal herbs and plants. "The medicine used to treat childhood leukemia comes from a flower that grows on Madagascar," he cries. "Another example, Taxol, is used in chemotherapy treatments and comes from *Taxus* trees." Kilham's message: Nature is full of medicines, and it is more important than ever to make use of them.

Kilham calls himself a medicine hunter. *The New York Times* describes him as a cross between Indiana Jones and David

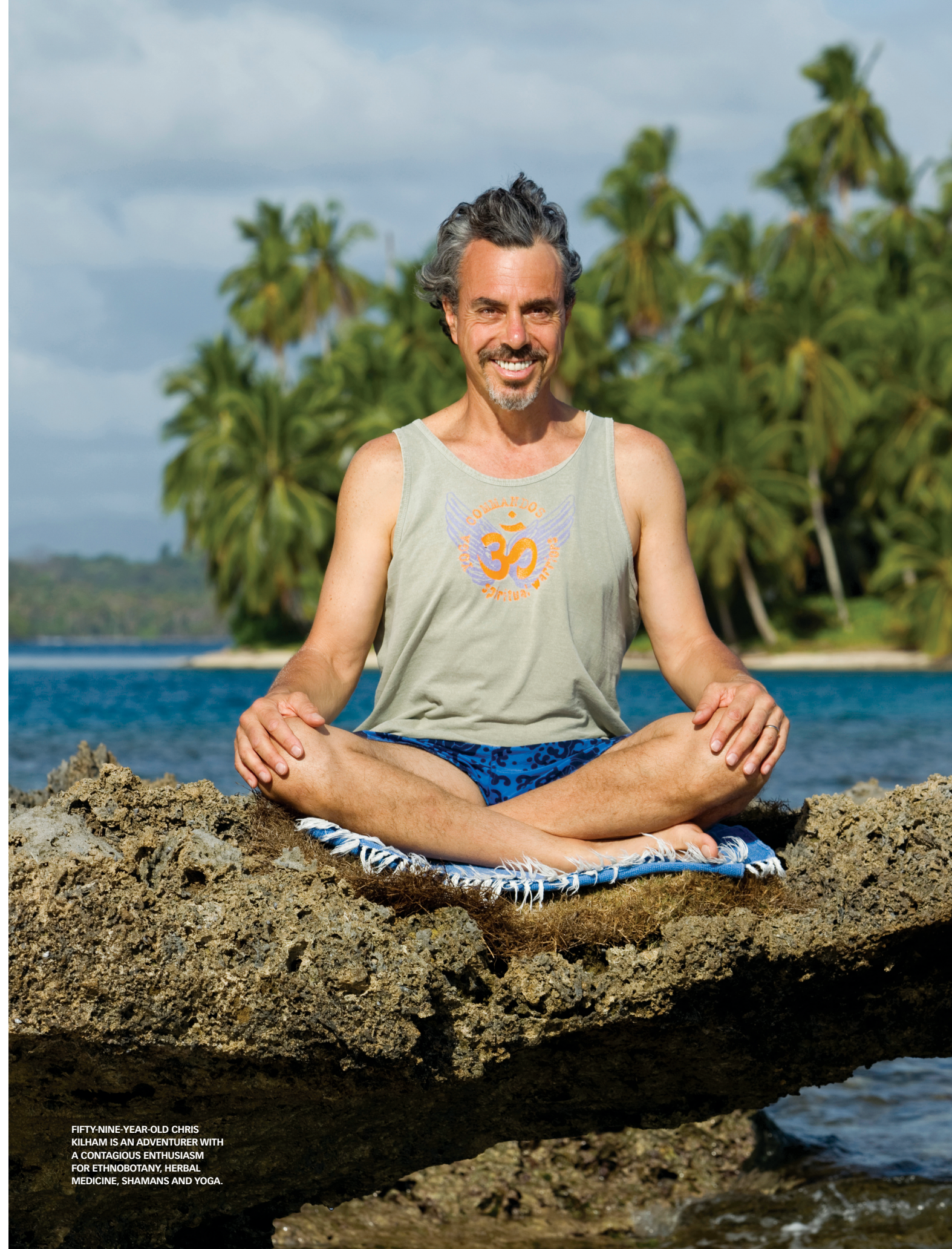
Attenborough. He's an adventurer with a contagious enthusiasm for ethnobotany—the relationship between plants and people—shamans, indigenous peoples, nature preservation and yoga. For years, he has traveled to places like the Amazon, the Pacific, India, the Andes and Africa to learn from local populations about medicinal plants and herbs. Back home in Massachusetts, he examines his findings using modern equipment, makes medicines and tries to bring them to market with various business partners.

And his interest extends beyond plants and herbs with medicinal properties. Dur-

ing his travels, he also developed a fascination for so-called "hot plants," which boost libido, like the roots of the tongkat ali, and plants that can bring on a spiritual "trip," such as the San Pedro Cactus.

Kilham has written 14 books and gained considerable renown. He appears regularly on Fox News, where, dressed in a Hawaiian shirt, he talks about the most exotic medicinal plants. These days, he no longer travels the globe alone, but with his wife, Zoe Helene. Kilham focuses on alternative medicines that can help make our lives healthier while supplementing and enriching traditional Western health care. And at

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FIFTY-NINE-YEAR-OLD CHRIS KILHAM IS AN ADVENTURER WITH A CONTAGIOUS ENTHUSIASM FOR ETHNOBOTANY, HERBAL MEDICINE, SHAMANS AND YOGA.



ACCORDING TO TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE, THE GOJI BERRY, SHOWN HERE BEING HARVESTED IN NINGXIA IN NORTHERN CHINA (CIGARETTES OPTIONAL), DETOXIFIES THE LIVER, PROMOTES HEALTHY EYES AND IMPROVES OVERALL VITALITY.

59, Kilham looks incredibly healthy. The trick, he says, is natural food, lots of exercise and, of course, natural medicines. Some 85 percent of the world's population uses plants and herbs to treat medical ailments and problems, Kilham says. "Why don't we?" he wonders.

For years you've been promoting the use of medicinal plants and herbs. Has this led to any changes?

"A lot changed. People are much more open and receptive to the field of plant medicines than they've previously been. When I started in the late 1960s, people who were involved with this were considered social outcasts. Media would ridicule the whole sector and the people who were involved in it. Now the tables have turned. Most media outlets are enthusiastic about this category of medicines, because

their readers and listeners can't get enough of it."

What changed?

"Science on plant medicines is gigantic now. There are hundreds of thousands of scientific papers about herbal medicine. Journals that are publishing about drugs and other types of medical interventions are also publishing on herbal medicine. That has made an enormous difference, especially in the scientific and medical community. Additionally, in the U.S. every year about 300,000 Americans die as a result of using chemical medicines recommended by their doctors. With herbal medicine, almost nobody dies. People are starting to wise up to this. They think, 'Gee, before I try something that will cause insomnia or hurt my kidneys or liver, I might try something else.'"

Is someone suffering from a migraine better off taking a plant-based medicine?

"Yes, there are very good botanicals that show excellent effectiveness for migraines, at least as good as any other medication but without some of the hazardous effects. One of them is called feverfew, a very common herb. It's been around for a long time and is undergoing human clinical studies for the treatment of migraine headaches. Of course, there is no herb that works for everybody, but it works for some, and it does so very safely."

What would you advise for someone with cardiovascular disease?

"The No. 1 most beneficial substance for dealing with cardiovascular disease is cocoa: chocolate. It reduces cholesterol and triglycerides better than any known drug. And if you look at a population of

people in Panama—the Kuna, who consume more cocoa than any other population in the world—they have almost no heart attacks, stroke or high blood pressure. They consume massive amounts of hot cocoa, because they don't really have access to much else. They've been studied over a period of about 20 years, and it's unquestionable that the cocoa is responsible for their very low rates of cardiovascular disease. But we also have the herb hawthorn. The leaves and berries and flowers of the hawthorn tree create a powerful natural medicine that lowers blood lipids, strengthens the heart, improves cardiovascular function overall and improves the health of the blood vessels."

How can plants help combat obesity?

"Here's something that people don't like to hear: There is no supplement, no pill, no tea, no magic potion, no elixir that is going to make them thin. If they eat completely natural foods and exercise faithfully every day, they will lose weight."

That's disappointing.

"I do know about ways to keep yourself fit. I've been practicing yoga every day since I was a teenager. I know for sure that this practice keeps my health better and keeps my energy up. People rely too heavily on medicines and their doctors. They let it get out of hand. They become overweight, out of shape. And then they say: Now I need to go on drugs or medication. I wrote a book called *The Five Tibetans*. It's about a 10-minute daily yoga practice that also

enhances your strength, flexibility, metabolism, circulation and overall nervous system function. This can be tremendously beneficial."

From medicinal herbs to yoga; what's the connection?

"They're all alternatives to so-called modern medicine, which doesn't offer us enough to keep us fit and healthy. We need different methods and techniques. That's why I also want to tell you about

healing and transformation. This is another whole different set of skills and tools and methods that are available to us for healing. Shamanism is on the loose. Shamans show us that health care is not just about keeping people going while they struggle valiantly with hideous diseases. It's that actual healing is really possible."

What can shamanism offer us?

"Because shamanism is largely nature based, I hope that in the course of using

"Shamans show us that healthcare is not just about keeping people going while they struggle valiantly with hideous diseases. It's that actual healing is really possible"

shamanism. In addition to my own now multi-decade practice of yoga and study of medicinal plants, over the last 18 years I've had the opportunity to spend time with shamans in South America. And I think that just as yoga and meditation kind of exploded in the late '60s and early '70s, we're seeing the same thing happen with many of the practices of shamanism. Think about different trance-state-induced types of healing, and the use of Amazonian medicines for different purposes, and specifically, the use of the psycho-active plants like ayahuasca and San Pedro cactus for

the medicinal plants, this will get people a bit more in touch with things natural. We're destroying nature at such a rapid rate, we're ripping down forests, stripping down mountains, polluting lakes, trashing oceans, destroying coral reefs, poisoning the air. And I know that many shamans hope that their work will cause people to become more conservation minded. It might help people wake up to the fact that nature gives us life." ■

ELLEKE BAL now feels free to eat chocolate responsibly.

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OdeNow The Shaman's Pharmacy, an evening with Chris Kilham

The New York Times calls medicine hunter Chris Kilham "part David Attenborough, part Indiana Jones." Join us for a spellbinding trip into the wild world of shamans and healers, whose medicines for body and mind promote health and transformation. An author, educator and adventurer, Kilham has conducted medicinal plant research in more than 30 countries, appeared on hundreds of radio and TV programs and is a health correspondent for FOX News. The Shaman's Pharmacy features remarkable stories and rare images and is a special OdeNow event on March 8 in Los Angeles and online.

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