

THE POISON IS THE CURE

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"As a young kid, I wasn't thinking about being a medical researcher," began Dr. Zoltan Takacs, reflecting on the early days of his childhood in Budapest, Hungary. Like many other spirited youngsters, he was diving head-first into nature without too much thought: taking home toads, lizards, and snakes whenever he could get his eager hands on them.

"Despite the inherent dangers, I was completely captivated by venomous snakes and their allies," he continued. "This drew my interest further to study pharmacology."

Flash forward to the present, and Takacs' childlike sense of adventure and wholehearted embrace of the environment's wild side has only intensified. After studying pharmaceutical sciences in Hungary, as well as obtaining a PhD in pharmacology from Columbia, Takacs has embedded himself in the jungles and canopies of the Amazon Rainforest. Specializing in venom research, he's become a world-renowned scientist and explorer, discovering innovative cures for life-threatening diseases in uncommon

"I'm extremely passionate about my work — others would call it crazy!" laughed Takacs. "For me, it is an intellectual challenge and satisfaction that is particularly rewarding to be engaged in."

places. For instance, inside tiny spiders, marine snails, or the threatening fangs of a Gaboon viper.

"The very same power that can kill can be used to treat high blood pressure, heart attacks, diabetes, cancer, and HIV pain," explained Takacs. "Oddly enough, venom can save your life." Venom toxins, though often carried in a frightening package, have some of the most potent and selective molecules in the world. Moreover, they are one of the best templates for designing new therapeutic agents.

Technology helped my dreams come true. My ThinkPad is my office while I'm in the field.

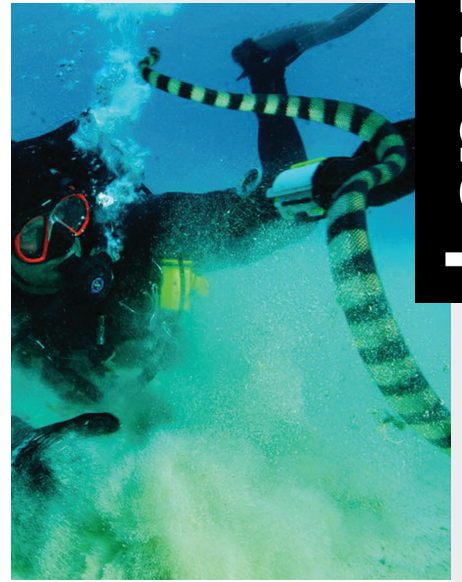
From the bottom of the ocean to the heart of the Amazon Rainforest, Takacs' work takes him all across the globe — often to places where technology doesn't fare well. Nonetheless, his ThinkPad can withstand the weather. No matter the environment, he has the tools he needs to innovate.

Presently, there are about 20 mainstream medications made from animal venoms, which are taken by 40 million patients around the world. The challenge is that there are still 20 million toxins left in the world that are completely unexplored. That's where Takacs comes in.

"I co-invented 'Designer Toxins' technology, which is a platform that screens millions of toxin variants for those with the highest promise to treat diseases," he said. "We are innovating on nature's already powerful toxins to push them ahead for drug development and other biotech solutions." To see Takacs in his element is truly an exercise in extreme contrasts. Illuminated

by the glow of a small bonfire on the rainforest floor, he types away at his ThinkPad with a flashlight headband strapped on. And even though he's been bitten by so many venomous creatures he's actually become allergic to antivenom, there's no way he plans on slowing down.

In his travels across 147 countries, Takacs has learned to dredge water from plants, outrun forest elephants, and how to find snakes by simply listening to the harmonious chirps of birds. But with 150,000 venomous animal species in the world, he still has many more daring adventures ahead of him.



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