



The Great TREK

BY KERI HARVEY

Without money, without provisions, without preparation—and depending only on the hospitality of the people they met—they walked from Cape Town to the Sea of Galilee. They were following the first migration route of humankind. For three

years, Alex and Sonia Poussin had two simple thoughts in mind: to meet new people and experience life one step at a time.

How did Africa Trek come about?

ALEX: It's the journey of life, of evolution. It's a human journey, made complete by being with my wife.

When did you take your first step?

ALEX: On the first of January 2001. We wanted to start at the beginning of the third millennium. We left from Voortrekker Road in Cape Town and we arrived at the Sea of Galilee—13 874km later—on the 16th of March 2004. Our route was from South Africa through Zimbabwe, Mozambique,

Keri Harvey chats to Alex and Sonia Poussin, who walked over 13 000km through Africa, depending only on the hospitality of the people they met



Malawi, Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan and Egypt to Israel.

How did you train?

SONIA: We didn't. The first day we walked 12km, then 15km then 20km, getting fitter each day. We tried to walk a minimum of 30km per day and to average about 40km daily. Sometimes we walked up to 60km a day because that was the distance between villages.

What research did you do before you left?

SONIA: None, really. We wanted to be fresh with no preconceived ideas. We prefer to discover things for ourselves and see what the truth is. We had a map and consulted with local people along the way. That's how we travelled.

ALEX: Each morning we would wake up not knowing where we would end up that night. This is the true meaning of adventure. Let it be. Let things happen. Let things come to you.

How did you finance the trip?

ALEX: We had no sponsor. It was self-financed and unassisted. I started my adventures when I was 20 and wrote about my travels to fund trips. Now our three books sell well, but it has been 15 years of very hard work, with little free time.

How did you manage without a support crew?

SONIA: We wanted to travel very light—in the spirit of our journey. We had no extras and just a litre of water each. I had just one set of clothes. We washed

our clothes at noon and they dried in the sun while we had lunch and took a nap, then we put them on again. We carried just a small daypack each, and Alex shot the film on a handheld video camera. He also wrote notes every night, which became a book.

Why did you wear a skirt throughout?

SONIA: When I was in India I realised traditional society was more welcoming and friendly to me when I wore a skirt. It was a simple solution that I thought would also work in Africa, and it did.

Was the walk more mentally or physically demanding?

SONIA: It was not so difficult at all, because it was like a pilgrimage for

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us, and very meditative. The African people were so generous and hospitable to us, and in three years we were never refused hospitality. We stayed over with 1 200 different families, but always only for one night. It made our stay so powerful and magical. It was special and intense.

Were you ever bored?

SONIA: Never ever. We met new people every day and lived in the moment. We learnt that nothing is random, and we took time to notice the small things that escape one in the busyness of life.

ALEX: We talked as we walked every day. We became soul mates, one individual with four legs—a donkey, maybe! There was no way for us to argue, because the trifles, vanities and stupidities of the material world were not there. We were living a truly

beautiful and spiritual life. We just had to walk and live.

Did you have a backup plan?

ALEX: Just Chinese noodle soup. We had no backup plan. We would simply have died if things went really wrong because we didn't even carry a phone. We carried \$200 only because if you carry money it becomes a threat.

It shows from the outside, in your behaviour. Visas were not an issue either, and we could buy a visa on the spot everywhere. Nothing stops walkers.

Was the trip more difficult than you expected?

ALEX: It took longer—double the time we thought—but walking is walking. Sonia loves walking, but for me it's just a means to an end—to meet people.

I'm not actually a big walker.

Did you ever think you wouldn't make it?

SONIA: No, we never thought of it. We just thought of walking daily and lived one step at a time.

The highlight?

ALEX: South Africa, for sure, it's the only place we have come back to—and we especially love Barkley East. But there are many other favourite places, like Mumbo Island in Lake Malawi, Lake Natron, Olduvai and Ngorongoro Crater in Tanzania, Lake Turkana, Zanzibar, and so many places that have no name but where very special people live.

The lowlight?

ALEX: Ethiopia, because we were



rejected, stoned, beaten with sticks, and insulted all day every day for four months. So we understand rejection and racism; it's a terrible pain. It taught us that racism has no colour. It's just a lack of knowledge and open-mindedness. It is just stupid. We were the first ever to walk unassisted across Ethiopia, so the people were suspicious and ruthless. We saw a little boy being stoned by other children, and the adults just stood by and laughed. I stopped a huge stone to Sonia's head and broke my finger. We had to run for our lives many times in Ethiopia. But each time we were saved by other kind Ethiopians—of course there are some that are kind. It was a crazy place and a complete exception to anywhere else.

Did you ever get sick?

SONIA: Never from food, but we both

had malaria twice. Alex had cerebral malaria in Ethiopia and was cured with an infusion from flower petals of Artemisia.

Would you do things differently next time?

ALEX: There is nothing to change. It's like Darwinism, like natural selection. I would only take more Chinese malaria pills.

Did walking Africa change your perceptions of the continent?

SONIA: I thought I would be raped behind every baobab, and that we would be robbed and attacked. I was scared, but nothing really bad happened.

How did you feel when you reached the Sea of Galilee?

ALEX: We remembered all the links in the chain of hospitality and solidarity, beautiful faces of humanity. We were not there because of money or ego; we made it thanks to the people. It was magical and beautiful, and proof that we can live apart from the material world, but not from other people. I believe the future of the world lies in Africa; it's just a question of management. The potential of the continent is huge, if not wasted and spoiled. I am highly positive, and we are now African ambassadors and tell our stories in Europe.

The next trip...

ALEX: Will be with our two children, but not in Africa—because you never bathe in the same river twice. But we will always come back to Africa, we just have to. **GT**