

Paula Constant has been walking the Sahara solo and plans to continue her journey, writes **Josie Gagliano**

Desert explorer

To say that Paula Constant is a woman with a mission is an understatement. How else would you describe a woman whose to-do list includes crossing the Sahara – in a pair of Birkenstock sandals.

Forced to take a break from her mission last month due to rebellion in Niger, Constant explains during our phone interview that the unrest in Niger has now escalated into an “all-out war”, which will delay her return to the region until October or November this year.

“This outbreak of war may now mean they will resolve things in the region. If things haven’t calmed down by late October, I will have to change my plans to go back to Libya and walk from there,” she says, as she describes how she was arrested when she first arrived there, her passport confiscated.

“I was under house arrest and was lucky the Canadian ambassador explained what I was doing. Until that point they must have thought I was some idiot wandering around. I told them I was on an expedition, and I knew what I was doing. After that, they were really prepared to listen and help me, which they’re still doing today.”

Constant began her walking journey more than three years ago, in London.

“I originally wanted to walk all the way to South Africa, but I think I will let that go. I wanted to travel and write, and I wanted to do it in a way that allowed me to be a part of the landscape and the cultures around me, rather than just dropping in and out of planes and cars. That was really the motivation at the start.”

Constant describes in detail her initial journey: Going from London down to Dover, she entered France at Calais, then walked down to Paris. At Paris, she picked up the Camino de Santiago, which is a pilgrimage trail that runs through France and over to the Pyrenees through Spain, then walked across the north-western part of Spain all the way across the west coast. She dropped down from Spain into

Portugal, walked through Portugal then back into Spain at the border west of Seville. From there she went to Algeciras, took a ferry across to Morocco, walked all the way down to Casablanca and to the south of Morocco, and that’s where she stopped. That was the first 5000km.

Taking a month off, Constant started walking with camels, all the way down to Morocco and the Western Sahara, through the border town of Dakhla, where she had to miss a section between there and Mauritania because of land mines.

“It started to get complicated. Up until that point, I was entirely self-funded so unless I could get funding or sponsorship, my walk would be finished. My mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer during that time and my marriage had broken up.”

Constant came back home, then started walking again in June last year.

“I came back to decide whether I still wanted to do it, and decided I did. I would walk for breast cancer and I wanted to walk in good shoes so I approached Birkenstock, and went to Dove because I like their ad campaign about real women.

“And to my vast amazement, they agreed. So I returned to the desert in October, bought my camels and set off.”

Asked what prompted her to do all of this, Constant simply replies: “I had travelled a bit, but I’d never tried to do anything physical and I’d never tried to do an expedition. You wouldn’t have called it an expedition at the start. My goal was always to reach the desert, that was where I really wanted to go. I was really fascinated by Bedouin culture and customs. I was always fascinated by the whole thing.

But I started in London because I needed to know whether

or not I could actually hack walking. It seemed a bit silly to dump myself, unfit, into the desert. I felt that if I could walk through

Europe it was a soft landing, which it wasn’t. Actually, it was very difficult. Just carrying a pack was hard, whereas when I was walking in the desert I had camels helping me. But of course



shoe photo: russell shakespeare

clockon: interview

Europe was easier on many other levels. That was the preparation walk. Later, in Morocco, I trained myself to organise proper guides and contacts to buy camels, and learn camel-handling.”

Not surprisingly, Constant has learned much from her expedition and experiences. She has written a book called *Learning to Walk*, which is due out early next year.

“I have learned the invention of the wheel is a very good thing,” she jokes. “And I have a lot of patience and am diplomatic because I am always surrounded by other nomads and often with families living in tents. I became less precious about personal space and more understanding of other people. I’ve learned about my ability to learn new skills. I had a lot of difficulty in the beginning when it came to handling camels and packing things in an organised way. It was rewarding to learn I can plot a course on a map and use a compass. It was satisfying to learn they’re

not mystical things only men can handle!”

Constant says she is looking forward to going back to the desert, although she does have a new appreciation for food and friends while on her sojourn in Australia.

She now does publicity for Dove and the National Breast Cancer Foundation, with Dove providing most of the funding for her last journey. Birkenstock have also put in a great deal of money, even modifying the sandals she walked in. In fact, she walked 4200km in one pair of Birkenstocks.

Her next walk will be a six-month journey from Tilia in Niger, then onto a track near the Libyan border, then into Egypt, ending up in Cairo.

“I anticipate I’ll walk from October to April, but things can go wrong and camels need to rest. I walk for about three months, or 2500km. Without the camels, I’d be lost. They carry 120 litres of water, and food. They are the expedition. As for my calves? Yes, they are looking pretty staunch.”