

Qweekend.



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photography Russell Shakespeare

When Paula Constant decides to stretch her legs, it isn't just down to the corner store. At the halfway point of her mammoth trek across the Sahara, she stops to talk about ... why.

walk of

life

When Paula Constant decides to stretch her legs, it isn't

Mauritania is a north-west African nation of 1 million square kilometres. Yet a mere 3 million people call the Islamic republic home, perhaps because the western extremity of the Sahara is a dry biscuit of sand, rock and clay temperatures of up to 49°C.

At 33, Constant is a young woman who has crossed the world's largest desert on foot. She was a little girl in Mansfield, at the foot of Victoria's snow-drenched Mount Buller, when she had dreamed about a far-removed African desert ... and Arabian nights. "It seemed impossibly exotic," she says. "The strength sandstorm she encountered that day last year was beyond her wildest imagination. Four weeks before, on October 26, Constant, her guide and three cargo-lugging camels set off on her audacious walking tour of the Mauritanian Atlantic coast city of Nouadhibou.

It was to be a 7900km journey that would take her to the other side of the Sahara, at the end of September this year. Or so she hoped. But the trek, with howling blankets of sand and rain, hope swiftly became the nightmare. And then it got worse. "My guide, a former military man who walked at a steady 8km/h to my 5-6km/h," recalls Constant in Melbourne on an enforced break from her adventure. "He had some dunes, [the sandstorm] visibility lessened dramatically. I walked as quickly as Khabuss and I lost sight of him altogether.

Constant walked on a sand dune and could see perhaps 100m ahead, and he was nowhere in sight. She began following the trace left by the camels leading. Unfortunately, that camel was carrying all the water.

In an hour, Constant estimated him to be at least 100m away, too far to hear her call. The wind was howling. I was struggling to find the camel's tracks. I didn't see very far. At that point, the camel had obviously passed during the sandstorm and I arrived - the trace was jumbled by other animal tracks. I spent minutes casting about for the trace. I was frankly terrified. No matter how hard I searched, no matter how well he was, nobody can beat a sandstorm. He was howling how long it would continue or when it would come lost. If I walked in the wrong direction, I would never find my trace. I didn't know when to wait for him ... but for how long



Queen of the desert ... Constant at home in Melbourne (opposite) and (above) in the Sahara; (following page) her battered Birkenstocks.

could I survive with no water? Or should I continue to follow the quickly diminishing trace? Right then, I knew that dying was a real possibility."

Clinging to the two remaining camels, Constant pushed on. It was another two hours before she caught up with Khabuss. "I was aware that I had lost control, had landed myself in an unnecessarily dangerous situation, and vowed it wouldn't happen again," she says. "I made it clear that from then on, no matter what, the maximum distance between guide and me would be no more than 100m - something I have stuck to ever since."

WHY WOULD YOU DO IT? WHY, AS A RELATIVELY unfit, married primary school teacher with no second language, no expedition experience and the barest comprehension of Islamist religious and cultural mores, would you even contemplate traversing the harshest environment on Earth? Alone but for a relay of largely nomadic guides, all men and complete strangers? And in the age of the four-wheel-drive, what would drive you to walk it?

So many questions, but in Constant's case none of them answered by some existentialist motive. Hers is less a search for meaning and more a mission of doing. Although, having eclipsed the halfway mark, she is happy to admit that navigating the peaks and troughs of a relentless dune sea can't help but crystallise one's perspective. Sometimes in the most surprising ways.

"During the walk, I don't miss makeup and I don't look in a mirror for a month at a time," she says. "But

because I'm [usually] wearing the melekha [a head-and-body cotton swathe favoured by desert-dwelling women in northern Africa], you put on a different one every day and they're nice, they're flowy and comfortable. You feel free and light. And it's such a sexual culture in the sense that exposed skin is so provocative, you're actually quite conscious of your femininity all the time.

"So ... maybe it's because you're concentrating more on how you feel than how you look. But I never feel more beautiful than I do in the desert."

Tanned and solidly built, she appears genuinely overwhelmed - and more than a touch relieved. The first 25 years of her life, she explains, were blotted by dissatisfaction. Despite a free and active childhood, she and convention were never a good fit. "I felt very enclosed by school and systems," says Constant, the second of three children to a journalist/teacher mother and shire secretary father.

She loved to write, fantasised about travel and would bury herself in historical/adventure fiction and the memoirs of explorers. But high school career counsellors struggled to manifest her passions into options. In 1993, she dropped out of an arts degree and spent the next few years in Melbourne sharing houses and bar and restaurant jobs. At her lowest ebb, Constant identified a "completely shattered" confidence. "I was feeling defeated and pretty lost," she says. "I just felt like I'd achieved nothing and was going nowhere."

She enrolled in a Bachelor of Education by correspondence. Around the same time she met her husband-to-be, chef Gary Constant. In 1999, six months after their wedding, the couple headed to Broome, Western Australia. And for the first time, she dared to believe her stars were aligning.

"All I'd ever wanted to do was travel and write books," she says. "And Gary had always aspired to be a photographer. We supported ourselves with odd jobs in Broome but, after a year there, we could see that every man and his dog were bumming around the Kimberleys in a four-wheel-drive trying to get the magic pictures, and there were more books on outback Australia than you could poke a stick at."

One morning, as the pair discussed venturing abroad, Africa leapt into Constant's thoughts. She trawled the internet for the blogs of recent Western adventurers to the continent. "The thing that got me," she says, "was that the focus seemed to be their car: whether their axle had broken or the tyres had gone down. They didn't seem to meet any Africans. And while they'd photographed the continent, they'd done it all through the television screen of the car window. They didn't experience it."

A month later she spied a book cover featuring a photograph of a bearded Sir Wilfred Thesiger in ►

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dress, leading two camels across a stark, sand dune. The tome was 1979's *The Last* chronicling Thesiger's four decades of Africa's remote deserts. The Englishman, a five years living among the Bedouin tribes of the Arabian Peninsula's Great Sandy Desert – the Empty Quarter – always travelled either on animal transport. "Maybe seeing the book ordained]," Constant says. "Much, much when I was in the desert, I remember walking right and looking back at my tent. I saw a shadowing in a tent and I could see a silhouette of nomads in their robes and turbans and there was a full moon and I was thinking, 'Almost identical to that photograph'. And on the other part, it was almost identical to some image I'd had from childhood. The moment I saw Thesiger's book, I'd just grabbed it and sat up reading it. And when I'd finished I'd say 'That's it. That's what I want to do'."

Three years, Constant and her husband lived in, planning and saving. Having qualified as a teacher, she taught at a tough, marginalised London school. Gary was with her for the "dry sector of their adventure, a mammoth walk" that kicked off in London on August 12. Over 12 months and 5000km, they walked from Piccadilly Square to southern Morocco. The trek would be a 3000km trek south through the deserts of Morocco and the Western Sahara.

The walk was always about the west-east crossing," Constant says. "But the political didn't allow us to go west into Algeria from the border is shut. So what I really wanted to take six months to walk down to the border in Tunisia, near where we could start. We could speak the language, culture and camel handling."

Weeks into this phase, she and Gary split after years of marriage. They have since divorced. Constant doesn't blame the walk. "I think it was that our marriage was falling apart on a lot of levels," she says. "And we both just say that it wasn't working. Still, it did come back when he said he wanted to leave. I said, 'I'm going as well, or just the walk?' and he said, 'I'm not sure'. I was pretty stunned."

Constant organised over whether to carry on. She had reliable guides more than \$10,000 to steer her through the Western Sahara, not far from the border. She trusted them, but she was now a woman in an alien, unpredictable world. "I was, 'egoistically, or somewhat stupidly, I felt it was something rather romantic and dramatic of a woman striding through the desert alone'". Months later she had completed her desert trek. And so the real journey could begin.

WESTERN SAHARA DESERT, MORE THAN 9 MILLION kilometres in total, can be breathtakingly beautiful. There are lunar-like rockscapes and date palms. But most extreme of all is an irony: the vastness of such extraordinary spaciousness, which Constant had never felt less alone. "My joke is that I've brewed tea," she says, "you'll see the pop over the hill."



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created by the drilling of wells) for water, trade and provisioning stops. As many as six families might be camped in a spot, and social exigencies such as the sharing of tea and exchange of gifts are mandatory.

"In this culture, personal space is a non-existent concept," Constant says. "Some days, you think, 'If I could just take the camels off and walk on my own, I'd be okay'. It's a communal life and the difficult thing, too, is that I feel isolated within another culture. I've learnt a bit of Arabic but you can't express yourself, you're constantly struggling to understand the conversation and you're answering the same questions: 'Unti jay a maneen?' (Where have you come from?) 'Timshi a maneen?' (Where are you going?) 'Unti a tarkabu?' (Do you ride the camels?) 'Matarkabu?' (You don't ride?) 'Da imaan gutera!' (All the time walking!)"

Her guide is generally a nomad who stays with her for up to 800km. On the whole she has been lucky with her selections though she got off to an inauspicious start, sacking the first one, Harraba, just 280km in – his method of lashing her baggage to their camels had resulted in her laptop and RBGAN (a high-speed device enabling web and email access via satellite) crashing, irreparably, onto rocks when one of the animals shied. With just her maps and Global Positioning System, she spent five days on her own before recruiting a replacement guide.

Constant acknowledges her guides could pose a more menacing threat than plain ineptitude. "I think with every guide, certainly the inference is that if I were up for [a sexual relationship], they would be too," she says. "But that's normally able to be deflected with a good sense of humour. And I know it would be the height of disrespect for a Muslim man to force himself on a lone woman. The other thing is I've got a nine-inch blade Tuareg knife, and I guess if they tried it, I'd go for them."

of the region and normally knows most of its nomads ... So he's your [access] into tents and can act as a barrier between you and other people as well."

Bandits are the scourge of the Sahara, organising refugee-smuggling operations and running hashish, cocaine and weapons. Constant recounts one instance when a carload of shadowy figures "pulled up in front of us and jumped down, ostentatiously carrying the guns". Demanding money, the men punched her guide several times. Constant was forced to hand over the local currency equivalent of \$500. "There's been a lot of times unsavoury characters have come into my camp. You know they're bandits because they've turned up with a fancy turban, nice robes, sunglasses and a nice watch," she says, mildly amused. "They're not sophisticated and I can honestly say that I've never felt my life was in danger from them. People involved in smuggling aren't really interested in tourists. With us, they're like kids playing games."

Constant has managed to sidestep landmines and the odd deadly snake. But when she crossed the border from Mali into Niger in early May she was unwell, suffering an acute recurrence of a urinary tract infection. She was treated, but not before police had picked her up and shuffled her through diplomatic hands all the way to the Ministry of Interior, Albade Abouba. The upshot of a meeting with a very harassed minister was that Constant could not be granted a visa because of the danger posed by armed Tuareg rebels in the country's north.

"I was advised to return to Australia and come back to Niger in October, when it will be cooler, and by which time the political situation should have stabilised," she says. "Of course I was disappointed I had wanted to walk all the way through the hot seas to Cairo. I had wanted to do the crossing in one hit."

She had made most of her ground in winter, when daytime temperatures rarely climbing above the high 20s. Travelling for about seven hours from sun-up to just after noon, she accomplished 25-30km a day. "With walking, you do really become part of the landscape around you," she says. "You're just totally immersed in where you are. It's never boring."

Adamant her lay-off has not tarnished her undertaking, Constant is making the most of Victoria's finest food and wine. When she resumes the desert trail it will be goat meat, tinned tuna, rice, onions, nuts and dates all the way. She has received \$40,000 in sponsorship from Dove and sandal-mak Birkenstock, and as far as she is aware, when she finishes her journey – probably in May next year – she will have been the first woman to make a guided, walking solo crossing of the Sahara. She is planning one book on her escapades, maybe two.

"My feet are no problem at all," she says. "I've actually done this whole 4200km stretch in the old pair of Birkenstocks. I get tired ... but my arms are where I get sore the most, because you're continually lifting and unpacking really heavy weight."

"I've got 3700km to go. In all, I have walked more than 12,000km from London. But this has never been about breaking records or being first. I think every individual needs to find success for themselves. And for me, success is succeeding at something you value, putting yourself into a challenging environment."