

UNTOLD TALES FROM THE EDGE

‘Africa – always challenging, always home and never dull.’ Kingsley Holgate, South Africa’s bearded explorer, shares moments that make a life on the edge worth living. By STEPHEN SMITH

KINGSLEY HOLGATE

is Africa’s favourite adventurer, a man who has dedicated his life to traversing Mama Africa and doing good as he does so. An effervescent, larger than life character, he focuses on the noble he finds in even the unlikeliest place, but if you persuade him to sit down with

a beer and tell the tales he doesn’t often share, about how things almost went horribly wrong, you realise how much dedication it takes to repeatedly put yourself in harm’s way over a lifetime of travel.

Our chat begins as Kingsley, his crew and I sit in Istanbul. The Holgates’ current expedition, from Cape Town to Kathmandu, is stalled due to paperwork. The Landies, two spanking new Discoverys and their old Defender 130, are stuck in customs after being shipped from Dar es Salaam, and so we can’t get on to the road across Turkey as planned. The paperwork has taken weeks.

For hours, over Turkish tea and beer, Kingsley regales me with stories; of a hippo almost biting a man on an expedition boat, of a crocodile attacking a rubber duck and puncturing its pontoon, when the boat was miles from land and safety. He mentions the time when he and his son, Ross, then 16 or so, almost perished of thirst and heat on the Makgadikgadi Pans of Botswana while trying to circumnavigate them by homemade land yacht, and then getting becalmed, then lost when walking back to their Landies. It was a last minute, chance encounter with ☺

Nick Abdrige





men collecting rocks for building that saved them. Needless to say, Kingsley's wife wasn't very impressed with his fathering skills when they returned home. He also speaks of the countless times a member of the team lay sick with malaria, not far from death's door. And yet, when Kingsley starts to talk about a recent expedition, to the geographic centre of the African continent, you begin to realise that he is not an adventurer for the plaudits or for fun – this is his life, so much so that it could end in his death.

During their travels the Holgates have visited what they consider the Seven Iconic Geographic Points of Africa. The most northerly point (Ras ben Sakka at Cape Blanc, Tunisia), southern point (Cape Agulhas, South Africa) and western (Pointe des Almadies, Cap Vert Peninsula, Senegal) were visited on their Outside Edge expedition, during which they travelled the shoreline of Africa by Land Rover and boat. Their Great Rift Valley expedition took in Mount Kilimanjaro, the highest, and Lake Assal, the lowest point in Africa. On their Extreme East expedition, they reached Ras Xaafun, in Puntland, Somalia, Africa's most easterly point. Two years previously, in 2015, they had set off for the 'Heart of Africa', to locate the continent's geographic centre point, deep in the rainforests of the Republic of Congo.

Armed with definitive co-ordinates from the International Geographic Union, they drove their Land Rovers from South Africa to the north of the Republic.

'It was an incredible effort to get to the geographic centre of Africa, and it very nearly killed me,' Kingsley tells me. 'We got as close as we could get to the heart of Africa by vehicle, where not even our Landies could go a kilometre further. From there we trekked 17km on foot. We managed to arrange for some Ba'aka pygmies to guide us. They had never been guides before, and actually didn't know the way – they don't often stray from their regular routes. But they showed us how to survive in the forest, feeding ☺

BOAT, CAR, FOOT

On the African Rainbow expedition, they sailed a dhow along the Swahili coast (left); on the road to Kathmandu (top); in the Congo, negotiating with UN Peacekeepers (below)



CAPE TOWN TO KATHMANDU

The Holgate Foundation completed its first Africa and Beyond expedition, departing Cape Town on Mandela Day, 18 July 2018 and arriving in the ancient, mysterious Kathmandu on 11 December.

'Having been to every country in Africa, traced the outside edge of Africa, travelled its major waterways and visited the Seven Iconic Points, we felt like we had wrapped up Africa,' says Kingsley, 'as much as this beautiful

continent can be wrapped up. With that in mind we started looking beyond its borders and came up with the idea of expeditions that were Africa and beyond, to other iconic places.'

After a number of fireside chats about where to go next, expedition member Mike Nixon said: 'What about Kathmandu?', stabbing his finger at an atlas. 'And that's how we like we had wrapped up Africa,' says Kingsley, 'as much as this beautiful

continent can be wrapped up. As always, the crew did humanitarian work along the way – doing eye tests and handing out spectacles for Mashozi's Rite to Sight campaign, and doing a lot of education around rhino conservation. They also visited the Chitwan National Park, on the border of Nepal and India, which has not lost a rhino to poachers in three years.

The Holgates travelled from Istanbul across Turkey, into Georgia, Armenia, Iran, Pakistan, India and finally Nepal. They reached Kathmandu in one piece and on schedule, arriving on 11 December, and performed an end-of-expedition ceremony at Nepal's world famous Boudhanath Stupa to conclude yet another epic adventure for Africa's Greybeard.



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us on things like wild honey and showing us how to get water from vines. Even with their help the last 17km took us seven days, wading through swamps, some days not even doing 100m, sometimes even ending up further from our goal than when we started, because we had to go around something. There was constant rain, we were cut to pieces by slashing leaves, we were stung by countless bees. We had safari ants in the corners of our eyes.

‘I got to a point where I could just not go any further. I sat down, my back against the trunk of a tree that was probably 1,000 years old, looked up at it, covered in blood and barely able to stand, never mind walk, with septic sores all over my body, and thought to myself: “It’s not a bad place to die. Close to the very heart of Africa – 780 steps to go or something, I think.” I knew it was the end, but my thought was at least I would be buried at the foot of this beautiful tree.

‘I lay there, and Ross came to me. “Pops, understand – we can’t leave you here. There are 700 and something metres to go. And how would we get you out?” He pulled me up, and I covered most of the next 700 and something metres on my belly, pulling myself on roots and branches. But we made it. We fixed our beacon to a tree root right at the centre of Africa. I don’t even want to talk about what it was like to get out of there, but we made it.’

Kingsley moves on to even more harrowing stories, of his encounters with man.

He speaks of child soldiers in Zaire, now Democratic Republic of Congo, 12 years old and high on cocaine. The

‘HE PULLED ME UP, AND I COVERED MOST OF THE NEXT 700 AND SOMETHING METRES ON MY BELLY, PULLING MYSELF ON ROOTS AND BRANCHES. BUT WE MADE IT’

THE END OF IT

Kingsley Holgate thought his journey to the heart of Africa would be his undoing (above); but the expedition team finally reached their destination (right)

Holgates were trying to get from the mouth of the Zambezi to the mouth of the Congo River, and were billeted in an old hotel in Lubumbashi.

‘We were the only travellers, but the hotel was filled with these child soldiers and their commanders. They were called the Magic Boys because they had walked into Lubumbashi led by witch doctors and carrying magic charms. The trained troops holding the city had fled at the sight of them, such is the power of magic in Africa.

‘But we got chatting to them, as they spoke Swahili, and it was fascinating – how they’d been dragged off the streets and turned into real dogs of war. And some of them were nice kids, they were good to us.’

‘Those sorts of situations are tough to handle. But we have survived them, and we continue to spread peace and good will, and choose to believe in and spread the positive stories of Africa.’

King moves on to another touch-and-go moment, in Angola during the early days of exploration. ‘I had been dragged away from the others by Unita forces, to a little

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village where I was interrogated for four hours in a hut, all shot up, by the rebel forces. I still remember clearly the inside of that hut – a leopard skin, sun dried and stretched out with wooden pegs on one wall. The Unita insignia on another. Me sitting on the only chair, surrounded by rebels, their guns leaning against the walls of the room, and my translator, who I could see was becoming terrified... I remember thinking: “Well, this is where I’m going to die.”

‘But I’d noticed that the men were constantly referring to Daniel, who was obviously the leader. I decided to take a chance. I turned to my translator and said: “We have one chance. You need to translate everything very carefully and succinctly, or we will die.” I got off my chair, and before they could scramble for their guns I pulled Daniel up in a handshake, gave him a massive embrace and said: “I’m



sorry, I haven’t introduced myself correctly. We’re just a small family and we’re travelling this beautiful river of yours, and we mean you no harm.”

‘For a second I thought I was about to die, but that moment of getting up broke the ice. They laughed and paraded me through the village, asking if we didn’t want to come and live there and trade diamonds. Eventually they came to share our campfire that night, and told Mashozi and Ross and the team: “The reason we didn’t kill him is because he is so friendly.”

‘So while things can go wrong very quickly and unexpectedly the overriding feeling of Africa is that of ubuntu – a little bowl of fish, a little bit of sadza, shared around an old black pot, eating with thumb and forefingers. You have to balance it out, you know.’

And now Kingsley and his crew are on their latest expedition, heading beyond Africa’s shores, driving from Cape Town to Kathmandu. ‘On this expedition we have left the Africa that we know for the unknowns of Asia. But that doesn’t mean that we’ve left danger behind with it – we’re crossing Iran, then heading into a section of Pakistan where we will need to travel in an armed convoy. Then there is one of the world’s most dangerous roads, the Karakoram Highway, and Khyber Pass. Who knows what we will find or what will happen. But isn’t that the beauty of travel?’ ■



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