



Kingsley Holgate and son, Ross Holgate.

A Family's Affair with Africa

Kingsley Holgate, one of the most globally recognised names associated with adventure, launched a new book – *Africa – A Love Affair with a Continent*, in July this year, on the day he and his team embarked on their latest expedition from Cape Town to Kathmandu. Sharlene Versfeld caught up with him and the people close to him who helped bring this colourful book to life.

Words by Sharlene Versfeld
Photographs supplied



Ross Holgate and Babu Cossa (the Mozambican malaria education team member) distribute bed-nets to mothers and pregnant women at high risk of malaria at the Carapira maternity clinic, Mozambique.

Meet Kingsley Holgate, well-known humanitarian, adventurer, TV personality, Land Rover Ambassador, Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, renowned speaker and a legend who has been called, 'the most travelled man in Africa'. He is tall, gregarious, warm and funny. Iconic in looks, with white locks and sprawling beard, and in deeds with his humanitarian work done on enthralling expeditions.

But, no man is an island - behind all of this, stands a family and team, who help to drive, support and execute the incredible work done under the name of the Kingsley Holgate Foundation, which uses adventure to improve and save lives.

Their current expedition, expected to end December 2018 or January 2019, sees them travel through southern Africa to the edge of the European world, then through ancient Asia to the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal. Covering 17,000 kilometres, this new Land Rover journey follows in the footsteps of Marco Polo along a branch of the ancient Silk Route, through Turkey, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Iran, Pakistan and India.

The expedition's core team includes Holgate's son, Ross Holgate at the helm, playing a pivotal role in the operations and planning of the expedition, well-known conservationist, Sheelagh Antrobus, mountain biker and adventurer Mike Nixon, and photographer Bruce Leslie. Base-camp manager is experienced adventurer and journalist Anna Holgate, who is married to Ross. With two young children, Anna holds the fort but dips in and out of the expeditions when she can.

"Kingsley basically tells the stories, and I ensure he has the campfire around which he can tell them," laughs Ross. "This is definitely a team effort," interjects Kingsley. "We would not be able to do the adventures and impact on people's lives through the humanitarian work we do, without these amazing people who play very important roles."

Ross who has been on all 30 expeditions with his father, and who heads up the Kingsley Holgate Foundation, speaks about the choice of their Cape Town to Kathmandu expedition. "Having being hugely privileged to complete journeys of discovery to all 54 countries on the African continent and being the first exploration team in the world to discover the geographic centre of Africa and reach all seven extreme geographic points on the continent, we felt we needed a fresh, new adventure theme."

"We came up with a series of expeditions called 'Africa & Beyond' - starting in Africa with a strong humanitarian and community conservation focus, then going beyond to explore new countries and exciting new locations. This journey from Cape Town to Kathmandu is the first, and it will also be the first time that these All New Land Rover Discoveries undertake a trans-continental journey from South Africa all the way to Nepal."

With so many other fascinating, awe-inspiring, as well as some rather frightening experiences over the years, I ask Ross if they've had any quirky or unusual experiences. "Of course," he laughs. "An entire expedition was nearly scuppered by a little furry creature that got behind the dashboard of one of the expedition Land



The expedition stops at church Nampula province Mozambique.

Rovers and chomped its way through all the wiring. It took days to finally re-join all the little pieces of electrical wire, by which time the rat had found an escape route and taken up residence in the grub boxes in the back of the Landy!"

Ross says they always find something to laugh about. "Humour is one of the most important qualities for a successful expedition, especially on journeys that often take months – even years. Kingsley is a renowned practical joker which often adds to the fun."

After so many different expeditions over several decades, does Kingsley have favourites? "Hell, it's impossible to choose any favourites. We feel hugely privileged to have undertaken geographic and humanitarian adventures to every country in Africa, including all of the island states."

"The ones that stand out are the 33-country, 449-day odyssey to track the entire outline of Africa; a south-to-north expedition in open boats from the Cape of Good Hope to Cairo and the mouth of the Nile near Alexandria; taking Land Rovers around the world along the Tropic of Capricorn; and our east-to-west journey across Africa from the mouth of the Zambezi to the mouth of the Congo rivers."

"We also spent a year sailing an old, wooden, Arab dhow up Africa's east coast to Somalia and back, land yachting the Makgadikgadi Pans and Chew Bahir (the enormous dry salt lake in Ethiopia) and traversing the entire Great African Rift Valley. There was also a decade of travelling in the footsteps of early explorers – men like Livingstone, Burton, Speke and Stanley – each one special in their own right."

"More recently, the incredibly tough, world-first Heart of Africa expedition stands out; we were extremely lucky to locate the geographic centrepiece of the continent deep in the rainforests of the Republic of Congo and survive."

"Last year, we took off to complete our goal of reaching all of Africa's seven extreme geographic points on the hair-raising Extreme East expedition to Africa's most easterly point at Ras Xaafun in war-torn Somalia. This one is memorable because of the 5-day, high-speed dash across the deserts of the Horn of Africa accompanied by a contingent of 25 heavily-armed guards, and the constant risk of kidnap and ransom. But we made it and achieved a long-held dream."

"Out of all places he has been to, which ones keep calling him back?" I ask Ross. "We have to include beautiful South Africa and the neighbouring countries of Namibia and Botswana. To get a feel of West Africa, there's friendly Ghana that's known as 'West Africa for Beginners'. In the north, Morocco is so different with its exotic cities of Marrakesh, Casablanca and Fez, and ancient Egypt with its pyramids and ancient temples on the Nile. Then in Ethiopia, there are the extraordinary stone-hewn churches of Lalibela, the grandeur of the Simian Mountains and the colourful tribes of the south Omo region. And of course, one has to mention the vast, wildlife-rich plains of East Africa, the Serengeti, Ngorongoro Crater and Rift Valley lakes and the incredible 'Coast of Zinj'. What a wonderful continent!"

But it is not all fun and games, and glorious sunsets – much of what they are doing involves important humanitarian work. "We feel strongly about the need to give something back to the people of Mama Afrika and the by-line to our Land Rover expeditions is 'Using adventure to save and improve lives,'" says Kingsley.

"Every two minutes, malaria kills a child under five years. Africa endures 90% of all cases and deaths worldwide and 14 of the

world's most vulnerable countries are in sub-Saharan Africa. Our expedition team has also suffered from constant bouts of this silent killer – I have had malaria more than 50 times. So, as a family and team and using our own funding initially, we started to distribute life-saving mosquito bed nets and malaria prevention education to pregnant mums and mothers with children under five. Land Rover and other partners joined in and the programme has grown from strength to strength; it now also includes a Nando's-supported indoor residual spraying programme in southern Mozambique called 'Goodbye Malaria!'"

The Foundation's Rite to Sight campaign was started more than a decade ago by Kingsley's late wife, Mashozi (Gill Holgate). "To date, we've distributed nearly 150,000 pairs of reading glasses to mostly elderly, poor-sighted people in remote areas. The difference an ordinary pair of specs makes to a person's quality of life is instantaneous and always extremely gratifying."

"Dysentery is also a killer so another of our humanitarian projects is the distribution of Life Straws – a water filter that hangs around your neck, providing close to 1,000 litres of potable drinking water – very necessary especially for nomadic tribesmen in dry regions where sometimes the only source of water is a muddy, dung-infested waterhole."

In between the joys of travel, helping people in remote areas and having amazing encounters, the adventurers, however, do experience some frustrations, says Ross. "The endless paper work, I must admit is frustrating. Struggling to get visas and permissions, especially when you're doing something like tracking Africa's outside edge through 33 countries, and those situations where one country won't allow you to cross into another, for example from Morocco into Algeria."

"Luckily, there are plenty of polite, friendly types who just wave us on, or keep us chatting out of sheer curiosity," enthuses Ross. "They're interested in the team and the vehicles, the humanitarian work, our expedition Scroll of Peace and Goodwill and the 54 African country flags that adorn the Landies."

Along the way, the team have had some rather interesting culinary experiences too. Kingsley says, "We love roadside food. East Africa's chipsi mayai (fresh omelette made with chips, tomato, onion and chilli), mandazis (deep-fried doughnuts) and chai maziwa (spicy, milky tea) are firm favourites, as are Ethiopia's goat or camel meat tibs (small cubes of meat) served with wat (a hot, spicy sauce)."

Perhaps their most unusual meals include "deep-fried flying ants, mopane worms and snake kebabs that are fairly common, as are field-mice-on-a-stick," says Kingsley. "Everything is about perception: we did battle a bit when hunting with the Hadzabe and all we were given were rats cooked straight on the coals. In return, we offered them slices from the last of our treasured wet and fatty biltong – they spat it out in disgust before roasting it on the fire!"

Anna Holgate and Sheelagh Antrobus, are the two strong women who add some feminine insights into the Foundation's vision and expedition operations.

With two children, Anna basically keeps the home fires burning, but still plays an important part in the expeditions. "It's a family affair," she says, "and I assist where I am needed. Once the team leaves on expedition, I head up the home base. But I am blessed to be able to join the expeditions from time to time and where we can, we take the kids. When they are a bit older we would like to create more opportunities for them to come



The expedition arrives in Fort Ilha de Mozambique, Mozambique.



Sheelagh Antrobus (centre left), Anna Holgate (centre right) and Kingsley Holgate (back right) handing out water purification family life straws in Kenya.

along and learn from the 'University of Life', get to know the bush, experience diverse cultures, take part in the humanitarian efforts and learn to love beautiful Mama Afrika."

Sheelagh, who describes herself as Kingsley's driving partner/navigator/in-car entertainment manager/snack-provider/note-taker/videographer and 'drive-by-shooting' photographer, tells me that the book, *Africa – a Love Affair with a Continent*, was started almost a decade ago but, following the death of Gill Holgate, Kingsley's wife, it was too painful for everyone to continue. Sheelagh encouraged Kingsley and the family to take up the task again.

She explains, "Kingsley is called 'Africa's most travelled man' for good reason, and there were so many incredible stories in the manuscript he had started – stories from all over Africa that no-one else in the world can tell. So together with Ross and Anna, we decided to create a book that would not only be a dedication to Gill and a keepsake for Kingsley's grandchildren, but also a visual celebration of Africa's iconic places, cultures and wildlife seen through the lens of expedition life."

The team started their three-year 'Expedition of Words' in 2015. "There were long months of writing and rewriting chapters, researching and fact-checking, fretting over what stories should be included and what to leave out, editing and re-editing, deciding on the book's look-and-feel, choosing a printer and finally, the angst-filled layout and design phase," says Sheelagh.

The self-published book was a collaborative family affair. "Anna and Ross spent months trawling through tens of thousands of photos from over 30 expeditions to select the best 300 images that bring life and colour to the book. We roped in long-suffering friends and past expedition members to help, and our expedition partners and colleagues from all over Africa kept us motivated with plenty of 'You can do it!' messages of support."

Indeed they did. So what's next? Ross explains that going forward, the Foundation will continue using Land Rover adventures to save and improve lives and "also to engender a passion for wildlife conservation among the youth. We want to ensure that new generations of adventurers continue to use the energy of exploration to do good and benefit mankind and wildlife."

And so the love affair continues.

Ross reminds me of the words of Beryl Markham, the British-born Kenyan aviatrix who became the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic from east to west, who best sums up his feelings for the continent. 'Africa is mystic, it is wild. It is a sweltering inferno, a photographer's paradise, a hunter's Valhalla, an escapist's Utopia. It is what you will, and it withstands all interpretations. It is the last vestige of a dead world, or the cradle of a shiny new one. To a lot of people, as to myself, it is just home. It is all these things, but one thing – it is never dull.'

Finally, I ask Ross, what is his most used phrase on the expeditions. He replies, 'Twende' and 'Phambile' (Forward – let's go!). Enough said. ■

More of these amazing stories peppered with photographs taken on their expeditions, can be found in *Africa – A Love Affair with a Continent* – available online through the Kingsley Holgate Foundation on <http://www.kingsleyholgate.com>

Follow the Cape Town to Kathmandu expedition on Facebook and Twitter.