

7 EXTREMES
Holgate has gone as far north, south, east and west as possible in Africa and visited the continent's highest and lowest points and the geographic centre

33 ADVENTURES
The number of expeditions Holgate has completed

200 METRES
The sheer drop from the eastern edge of Africa at Ras Xaafun straight into the Gulf of Aden

Insight
Adventure

Sunday Times

Explorer Kingsley Holgate and his team drove along one of the most dangerous roads on the continent to reach the easternmost part on the Horn — and lived to tell the tale



DANGER AHEAD Explorer Kingsley Holgate on the road he and his team travelled from Somaliland into Puntland to reach the easternmost point of Africa, along with their armed bodyguards.

Perilous ride to edge of Africa

By MATTHEW SAVIDES

You'll probably be kidnapped on this road." The warning was from a police chief in Somaliland, an autonomous region of Somalia. But for explorer and humanitarian Kingsley Holgate, avoiding the road wasn't an option. He and his companions were on a trip to the extreme eastern point of Africa, an outcrop about 120km south of the continent's horn. The "pimple" of land, as he describes it, is near Hafun — spelt Ras Xaafun locally — a remote village in Puntland, in northern Somalia.

Having travelled for about five weeks through nine countries since leaving South Africa, Holgate's team arrived in Somaliland on the Horn of Africa. Somaliland broke away from Somalia 26 years ago and tensions between the two remain high.

The party was relatively safe in a place that Holgate described as "incredible", but the dangers ahead were also apparent.

To get to the very eastern edge of Africa, they would have to make a treacherous journey into Puntland, a semi-autonomous region in northeastern Somalia.

The team already had a two-man security detail — complete with AK47s — escorting them in Somaliland, but the trip ahead required serious reinforcements. "We were warned by our Somaliland friends: 'Don't go to neighbouring Puntland because there is a 40km to 50km stretch of no-man's-land between the two areas.' Officials in Somaliland sat us down... and begged us not to go into this disputed area or to go into Puntland at all," Holgate said this week from his home in Zinkwazi, north of Durban.

Drone attack on Islamic State

The warnings were justified. Xenophobic tensions in South Africa, often with Somalis as victims, meant that a South African team would not necessarily be welcomed. There was also the risk of foreigners being kidnapped for ransom. And their three sophisticated 4x4s made a tempting target for hijackers.

At the time, a US drone attack was launched on Islamic State terrorist targets to the north of where they were heading. In Mogadishu, capital of Somalia, a terrorist group detonated a bomb, killing about 400 people. It was "not a good time" for Holgate's team to be there.

But the group convinced the police chief and a "fixer" in Somaliland to help. The police chief agreed to take them "at high speed, with a bunch of armed guys down through the disputed area".

Roughly halfway, reinforcements appeared in the form of a cavalcade of three vehicles mounted with light machine guns. The bakkies also carried a total of 25 soldiers, each armed with an AK-47. They roared off at breakneck speed to Garowe (spelt Garoowe locally), the Puntland capital, and straight into a lock-up compound. "That was our welcome to Somalia," said Holgate's son Ross, the Extreme East expedition leader.

For Holgate, facing dangers like this isn't uncommon.

"Most of the hair-raising stuff, sadly, comes from people," he said.

"I remember a child soldier in the DRC [Democratic Republic of Congo] poking a flare pistol up my nose.

"We were once taken by rebels in the Central African Republic; I gave their leader a big hug and he called for one of his men to bend down and, using his back as table, he wrote out and stamped a 'right of passage' for us to cross his area.

"Many years ago, Ross and I almost died from dehydration on the Makgadikgadi Pans when Ross was 16. It was before the days of GPS and we were land-yachting the



From tip to tip

Kingsley Holgate and his team, from left, Mike Nixon, Bruce Leslie, son Ross Holgate and partner Sheelagh Antrobus, empty a calabash of water drawn from Kosi Bay (the easternmost point of South Africa) at Ras Xaafun, the most easterly point of Africa.

Extreme East



Graphic: Nolo Moima. Source: Kingsley Holgate Foundation

'Most of the hair-raising stuff, sadly, comes from people.'

pans and got becalmed. It took us days to walk out. We were eventually saved by some Tswana villagers.

"We've also had some close encounters with wildlife. Lions in camp, charged by elephants and, on a circumnavigation of Lake Turkana in northern Kenya, a croc took a bite out of the inflatable [boat].

"On the world-first Cape-to-Cairo waterway expedition in open boats, joining the lakes and rivers across Africa, I had to run for my life. I could feel the hot hippo breath on the back of my neck," he said. In the nick of time, he escaped.

But Holgate isn't one to be deterred by the challenges, not even when he felt he was going to die on his 2015 expedition to the "heart of Africa".

"The constant wading waist-high through swamps, vines tearing you apart, running out of food, constantly wet and bleeding.

"Just 1.7km from the exact GPS point [identifying the centre of the continent], I collapsed under a huge, 1 000-year-old tree and thought it would be my final resting place. But Ross and the rest of the team urged me on. At times I was crawling on my stomach and pulling myself along on roots. It's often like that, surviving these journeys is about the 'bravehearts' that I travel with and the wonderful team spirit that pulls us through," said Holgate.

A sheer drop off into the Gulf of Aden

It was this spirit that kept him and his team going to the extreme eastern point of Africa, and almost as soon as they had crossed the disputed area to Garowe, they were making plans to reach Ras Hafun.

"It was explained to us that we would leave at 3am, the vehicles should be bunched up, we'd sit at speeds of about 120[km/h], armed vehicle in front, armed vehicle at the back and our three Land Rovers in the middle, security either side of us," said Holgate.

They left in darkness and, 16 hours later, they were at the village. After a short nap, the trip to the most eastern point of Africa began.

"We got to the edge, and it was a sheer drop off into the Gulf of Aden. Endless cliffs. Vacant and empty. Quite beautiful."

They hurriedly erected an *isivivane*, a traditional Zulu pile of stones, to mark the extreme eastern point of Africa, with a goodwill message attached. They also emptied water from a calabash, which had been filled up at Kosi Bay, the eastern point of South Africa.

Back at the village they handed out mosquito nets (on his various expeditions Holgate and his team have distributed a total of 325 601 of them), water purifiers and vision-correcting spectacles to the Hafun villagers.

It was a momentous achievement. They had completed a 12 000km journey and the Holgate team had achieved its goal of reaching all seven extreme points of Africa. Going home should have been easy.

Back in Garowe the team was interrogated by a senior Puntland official. Were the team members US or al-Shabaab spies? Or geologists coming to "take our minerals"?

Thanks in part to a picture of Holgate with Nelson Mandela, the team was allowed to resume with a handwritten message from the interrogator: "You guys are very brave that you come and visit Somalia this time. Thanks."

"We were touched by the human spirit there. It's a few people who mess it up for the rest."

With this trip completed, will the 71-year-old explorer hang up his 4x4 keys? "Not by a long shot. There are far more journeys than we've got lives."