

Sharlene Versfeld
 for Kingsley Holgate Expedition Team

WITH adventures and exploits reminiscent of Jules Verne's 1872 novel *Around the World in 80 Days*, the Kingsley Holgate explorer team have completed the Mzansi Edge Expedition, a marathon humanitarian mission that delivered more than 250 000 meals to needy families affected by the Covid-19 lockdown. They clocked up more than 16 000 km in 80 days.

Starting at Kosi Bay mouth in northern KwaZulu-Natal in mid-September, the expedition achieved the extraordinary feat of tracking South Africa's total land borders with Mozambique, Eswatini, Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia, circumnavigating Lesotho, and following the length of the Atlantic and Indian Ocean coastlines from Alexander Bay in the Northern Cape back to Kosi Bay.

"This expedition turned out to be one of the most exceptional journeys I've ever undertaken without leaving my home country," said explorer and author Kingsley Holgate, who with his team has completed more than 30 geographic and humanitarian expeditions in Africa and beyond, many of them world-firsts.

"Every day was a new adventure, and we were constantly amazed at the spectacular beauty, geographic diversity and rich history to be found all along South Africa's borders and coastline, as well as the kindness and hospitality of people who 'live on the edge' of our magnificent country, and who fully embraced the expedition's mission and pushed us along."

The challenging route was also the first long-distance test for the recently launched Land Rover Defender on South African soil, with Kingsley and his son, Ross Holgate, putting two expedition-kitted new Defenders through their paces over some of the most difficult conditions on the continent.

"As a family, we have had the incredible opportunity to have ventured in every country in Africa but we never expected this home-grown Mzansi Edge expedition to throw so much at man and machine," said expedition leader Ross Holgate.

"The road conditions were a complete mishmash: deep sand ruts, sharp jagged rocks, high Kalahari dunes, overgrown tracks and wash-aways were part of our everyday journey. We also experienced intense heat up to 50°C and days of endless mud and torrential rain."

Joining the father and son duo were Kingsley's partner Sheelagh, Ross's wife Anna, Kingsley's 19-year-old grandson Tristan, and expedition veteran "Shova Mike" Nixon, one of only four people in the world to have completed every Absa Cape Epic, said to be the toughest mountain bike race in the world. He cycled more than 4 500 km of the expedition route. Other South African adventurers who joined the expedition for short spells included Project Rhino ambassador Richard Mabanga and mountaineers Andre Breidenkamp and Sibusiso Vilane, the first African to successfully summit Mount Everest.

Staying so close to South Africa's borders created some interesting moments for the team. "With travel bans still in place, some of the fence lines were heavily guarded by the SANDF and we had to get permission from the top military brass beforehand," said Ross.



AT THE edge of Sani Pass, Lesotho, from left, Anna Holgate, Ross Holgate, Mike Nixon, Tristan Holgate and Kingsley Holgate.

MZANSI MISSION

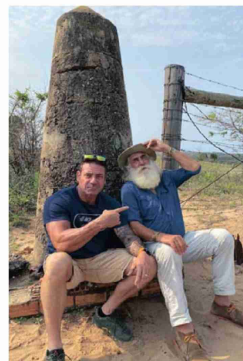
Around SA in 80 days: an expedition of hope

"They were always supportive of the expedition's mission, but sometimes the message wouldn't get all the way down the line and we'd have to do some fast talking. On one occasion, Shova Mike on his mountain bike was nearly shot when he crested a hill ahead of the Defender team and surprised a patrol unit on the lookout for border jumpers and vehicle smugglers."

The expedition witnessed the illegal cross-border trade, particularly along the Limpopo border with Zimbabwe. They also saw first-hand the devastation that closed border posts have wrought on communities who rely heavily on tourism and the trucking industry.

"It was disturbing to see border posts like ghost towns," said Kingsley. "No business at all – from the empty shisanyama and fruit stalls lining the road, to short-stay motels and upmarket game lodges – everything closed. The loss of income must be terrifying; it really brought home the severity of the Covid-19 lockdown."

"Building on our motto of using our adventures to improve and save lives, this expedition wasn't just a geographic mission – it also had a strong humanitarian focus," said Ross. "Supported by Land Rover, the DoMore Foundation and our partners at Goodbye Malaria and Project Rhino, we were able to distribute well over 250 000 meals-worth of vitamin-enriched DoMore nutritional porridge,



ROSS and Kingsley Holgate at the McMahon Line, the old name given to the border between Mozambique and KZN.



SA ADVENTURER Sibusiso Vilane helping with humanitarian work near Songimvelo NR, on the Eswatini border, during the Mzansi Edge Expedition.

as well as thousands of face masks, sanitising soap and digital thermometers to early childhood development centres, orphanages and needy families along the route."

On the final dash from Durban Harbour to Kosi Bay, the expedition's well-travelled Zulu calabash was borne up the coast on the National Sea Rescue Institute's Alick Rennie vessel to

Umhlanga Rocks and then flown by microlight from Ballito to the Tugela River mouth. Reuniting with the Defender convoy, it journeyed up the KZN North Coast, collecting water from key river mouths and lakes in the iSimangaliso Wetland Park.

To mark the end of its Mzansi Edge odyssey, expedition members then carried it on a 14 km beach trek from

Bhanga Nek to Kosi Bay Mouth, where it was symbolically emptied at the point where the expedition started 80 days before.

Of the people they met along the way, Kingsley said: "Especially in these difficult times, it's been good to be reminded of the unique diversity of nature, culture and community that make up our country."