

Journey to the heart of Africa

KINGSLEY HOLGATE EXCLUSIVE

PART 3 (FINAL)



We've been told about a track that could lead us towards the Heart of Africa – the geographical centre of the continent. It's called the Corridor des Elephants - an old forest elephant path. Wet with sweat, we cut, winch, dig, saw and slash. The sweat bees attack us in bloody droves. Big Deon Schurman who's built like a baobab, slashes at the bush with his machete. He played Club Rugby in France and is as tough as nails. He jumps back as a snake slithers into the undergrowth. A giant silverback lowland gorilla races across the track in front of Ndhlovukazi, the big Landy Defender that's carrying all the supplies.

The humidity rises and the hard work continues. 'Can't do it,' says Brad Hansen, the expedition naturalist. 'Can't carry on like this.' Ross Holgate nods his head. 'Brad's right – it's impossible.' A bit despondent, we turn the three Landies around and attempt another route. Sunset comes. We camp on a forest track: the fallen trees like poached elephant carcasses, dead behemoths that have fallen to the chainsaw, as the logging tracks push deeper and deeper into the unending forest.

Our wet, muddy clobber hangs over the Landies like a Chinese laundry. Ross sends up a drone. 'Forest as far as the eye can see,' he reports. 'The GPS can't pick up a signal - tree canopy too thick.' He hoists it high into a tree to learn that we are 27Kms - as the crow flies - from the GPS coordinates that mark the Heart of Africa.

Looking at the impenetrable forest, my spirits fall. It could take forever. How

would we cut a way through the thick undergrowth? Ross comes back into camp. 'Massive storm coming,' he says. 'Looks really nasty – from the east, and you won't believe I saw chimps hunting. Incredible!' 'Shovashova Mike' Nixon tells us he saw gorilla as he was cycling in. He's mountain biked alongside the expedition Landies all the way from South Africa and will go as far as he can before the jungle defeats him and we're all on foot.

Right now our mission seems impossible. The humidity grows. The bugs swarm around our head-torches. We're getting rain-forested out. It's incredibly beautiful, but we're southern Africa savannah boys and not used to this. That's when Naz - our Congolese expedition member and interpreter - comes up with the idea of hiring Ba'aka Pygmies: 'They are the true forest people, the only ones who really know this world of swamps, rivers and following forest elephant tracks; they are one with

the spirits of the forest. There's a group that lives in the village of Landoungo,' he tells us.

THE HEART OR BUST

We park our 'Braveheart' Landies at the end of a forest track, pushing them hard to get them this far in. Now it's on foot. Shovashova Mike has scribbled the words 'Heart or Bust!' on the map tube stuck jauntily into his backpack.

Around me deep in the rain forest, sit 14 Ba'aka Pygmy porters, the expedition team, a pile of tents, canvas bedrolls, water bottles, two pots, five days of basic food supplies and porter rations of cassava, salt, tins of sardines and a charged satellite phone. Then there are matches, the first aid kit, 3 GPS's, expedition journal, a roll of paper maps, the traditionally decorated goatskin gourd carrying water from the Cradle of Humankind and our Heart of Africa Beacon – specially designed by Durban-based Barrows – that's being carried in



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I'm so exhausted I could just give up and die. Naz our interpreter is also 'man- down' and has been left behind at our last camp.

However, Ross is having none of it. 'We've come this far and we will not fail.' So using sign language and Big Deon's French, we persuade the Ba'aka to lead us on. Later they told Naz that it was the wild determination in our eyes that they were touched by. Ross pulls me up by the hand - father and son - and the finest expedition team of diehards I could ever wish to journey with, gather around in support.

Seven hours later, in a daze of pain, we arrive at the co-ordinates as verified by the International Geographic Union and the University of Cape Town's Department of Geographic Sciences. The hands of the Ba'aka and the expedition team slowly screw the Heart of Africa Beacon into the roots of an ancient tree and then with some emotion, I pour out the symbolic water that we have carried all the way from the Cradle of Humankind in South Africa.

On the Beacon are the colours of the Republic of Congo and the words 'Geographic Heart of Africa' and the coordinates: 17.05291E. 2.07035N. On the other side is a small engraving of an elephant and the words 'A tribute to Africa's Elephants'. It's unacceptable that every 15 minutes, an elephant falls in Africa to the guns of ivory poachers.

Three days later after more untold hardships, we complete our journey back to the expedition Land Rovers, where after paying our little Ba'aka pygmy friends their wages, bonuses and gifts and a rip-roaring party, we ask them to each scribble their names and place a handprint into the Heart of Africa Scroll of Peace and Goodwill.

The spirit of these joyful Ba'aka people will remain in the hearts of the expedition team forever as the true, unsung heroes of our Heart of Africa odyssey. Thanks to them, a Beacon that marks the geographic centre of the African Continent now stands at the base of a tree deep in the swamps of the Congo rainforest - the lungs of Africa - a vast area of over 200,000Km² of pristine Mama Afrika that needs to be protected and treasured for future generations. **W**

two sealed sections of plastic piping each with a shoulder strap.

Our quest to discover the geographic centre of the continent of Africa is what we are fired up to achieve and as the 'Greybeard' it's my time to talk. 'Vivangkwo - I greet you Ba'aka, men of these great forests and swamps: it is only with your knowledge that we can survive and cut a path to the Heart of Africa. My friends, we need your help.' They grin and laugh in agreement - they are the most delightful little fellows imaginable. However, it soon dawns on us that whilst these Ba'aka pygmies might have an incredible knowledge of the forest; they have little or no concept of what a map of Africa looks like, let alone a Congo map or the understanding of GPS coordinates that mark 'The Heart'. Still, they reverently place smouldering pieces of wood at the base of a massive tree and in the smoke, with much foot stomping and chanting, the little men shake bunches of leaves up and down the tree trunk, some of them rhythmically click bits of wood together, whilst all the time shouting a blessing to their God Komba and his son Todia, the one who brought their tribe fire.

Already the sweat pours off our bodies and the bugs attack in swarms. I look up at the sound of Mike spluttering with pain: whilst chanting he's been stung inside his mouth by a bee; it's his eighth bee-sting of the day and the poison is too much for his system. We realise he is in trouble as his left cheek quickly swells and one eye begins to

close. It's an emergency: Brad jabs in the Epipen before Mike's airway is blocked. A close call and it's just the start!

'What three things do the Ba'aka fear most in the forest?' I ask. 'Attack from big forest leopard, angry forest elephant or the bite of Ndolo - the Gaboon Viper for they have no cure,' comes the reply.

'Twende!' shouts Ross in Lingala - 'Let's go!' The lead porters swing their machetes - the bush skills of the Ba'aka are unbelievable. Thick vines are cut into pieces: raise the end to your mouth and out pours crystal-clear drinking water; roots are used as bush potatoes to add to the cassava pot and thin vines are used as string to tie up the loads.

The beauty of this forest wonderland is unimaginable: these are the lungs of Mama Afrika. A giant silverback lowland gorilla crashes through the thick undergrowth as we walk in the soft light under a canopy of ancient trees with buttress roots that tower above us. Using fingers and toes and monkey ropes, the Ba'aka climb dangerously high to smoke out bee hives, allowing us to greedily suck out the energy-giving wild honey from the waxy honeycombs.

'Dumidumi' shout the porters, pointing to the sky; the rain drums down relentlessly. Sopping wet, exposed skin torn by vines, we make camp in the pouring rain. It's incredibly tough going: six hours of skirting deep swamplands comes with the harsh reality that we've only made just over one kilometre as the crow flies - and this

is just the beginning in our quest to find the Heart.

Who would have thought that after a tough Land Rover six-country journey of over 9000Kms, it would be the last 17.6Kms that would almost kill us? It becomes a physical and emotional nightmare of endurance that runs into the longest seven days of my life: seven days of grabbing roots to pull ourselves on our bellies through muddy goo, constant deep mud wading, dragging, falling and cutting pole bridges. Endless backtracking and detours to skirt impassable swamps. Swatting, cursing and scratching - sweat bees crawling up our noses and into the corners of our eyes, constantly enduring the stinging pain of countless siafu (army ants) bites. Blood pouring from torn skin: one of the Ba'aka even takes to binding our shins and forearms with green broad-leafed Marantaceae leaves, favoured by the gorillas to eat and nest in. Soon we're all on strong antibiotics as infection sets in.

And then the moment of truth sets in. With 1.7Kms of dangerous swamp ahead to reach the 'Heart', the Ba'aka realise we have bitten off more than we can chew and begin turning back. I collapse my stinking, wet, aching body into a sitting position at the base of a tree that could well be over a thousand years old, one of which, if man - especially the Chinese - have their way, will be killed and turned into furniture and ornaments - just like our rhino and elephant that are slaughtered daily. Is this the end?

