

Kingsley Holgate - the king of African explorers

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Knowing that adventures are conceived as romantic dreams but birthed through very real labour pains experienced as personal and life-transforming moments, and knowing the stature of the man to be as imposing as the epic "firsts"; he selects as a fun family adventure, it was hard not to have preconceived ideas about South Africa's intrepid adventurer, Kingsley Holgate. Holgate - a man who dreamed of following in the footsteps of David Livingstone and his ilk; of circumnavigating his way around the African continent; of following the imaginary line of the Tropic of Capricorn around the globe - turned those dreams into very real and tangible adventures. The long, comfortable strides of a man accustomed to walking and the piercing steel-grey eyes that seemed to bore deeper into my soul than I would like, fitted my preconceptions perfectly.

With two ticks on the preconceived list, I was surprised when number three (rough calloused hands hardened by many a tough adventure) did not fit the man. His hands were warm and soft when they shook mine in a friendly greeting.

Preconception number four of a man too busy and too reclusive to bother to talk to strangers was the next to fall. Unsuccessful attempts at obtaining an interview and tales of Holgate's reclusive nature fuelled my expectations of getting a curt brush-off when I approached him.

Instead I was disarmed by his friendly smile and exceedingly open and accommodating nature - despite the fact that it was the afternoon before departure on his next major trip and that a whole lot of packing still needed to be done.

Perhaps if I'd stopped to reflect more about the nature and lessons of travelling in Africa I would have realised that Holgate, seasoned by many adventures, would be intimately aware that the essence of any journey is in the experiences along the way, not just arriving at the final destination - and that the highlights of a trip are often the unexpected things and chance encounters.

Holgate describes it best when he says: "You think you are going somewhere, then comes an invitation to a coming of age ceremony or a tribal wedding party up another tributary. There is always something new and exciting happening. It is the joy of Africa, not knowing what is around the next bend in the river or where you may camp. No two campfires are ever the same. Raising a chipped enamel mug and toasting another African sunset - It is never boring."

So, time was simply made for me to pose some questions - and for many others who came by to say hello or wish Holgate well for his travels the next day. All were welcomed warmly with an admirable equanimity.

Arguably Africa's most famous modern explorer, Holgate set off on his first epic journey with his wife, Gill, and son, Ross, in 1993. The mission before them was to travel from Cape to Cairo, but with an additional element of tackling the route in open inflatable boats on inland waterways, with back-up vehicles.

As has become a hallmark of all Holgate's trips, they filled a beaded calabash with water from Cape Point and took it with them across the waterways of Africa, facing bandits, wildlife and malaria.

Handwritten notes from this trip were later used as source documents for Holgate's first book, titled Cape to Cairo. Holgate considers a moment from this first trip as his defining moment as an adventurer.

"Each adventure has a series of defining moments, but if I think back to the past, it was our first emptying of our symbolic Zulu calabash of water taken from Cape Point in 1993. A positive wind of political change blowing across South Africa and for the first time in years, we South Africans being able to cross our continent. It was a journey on open boats from Cape Point to Cairo and Alexandria, linking the rivers and lakes of Africa. Somehow that early journey has made us true citizens of Mama Africa," says the commercial safari operator turned explorer.

Named after the adventurous missionary Kingsley Fairbridge who worked in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Holgate is the youngest of three boys. His love for adventure stems from his youth when his father, whom he describes as a missionary teacher-type, "carted us all over Africa in a 1946 Chevy";

Tales around the camp fires at night ignited a passion for Africa and adventure in Holgate. "I would hear stories of the early explorers. Men like Richard Burton, David Livingstone and Henry Stanley. Little did I know at the time that one day we would follow in their footsteps," said the bearded adventurer.

Holgate's next expedition was to navigate the crocodile infested waters of the Zambezi, crossing the African continent in a rough approximation of the route taken by Livingstone and Stanley. Then in 2003 the Holgate family set out to circumnavigate the world with the goal of crossing the landmass portions in Land Rovers following the imaginary line of the Tropic of Capricorn - although they ended up having to do some of it on foot.

This trip started in Mozambique and took 18 months to complete.

When asked how he keeps going after doing so many expeditions, Holgate said he is driven: "I think it is relatively easy in that it is a passion. We're just an ordinary family, friends and dog with an extraordinary passion for Africa."

Asked whether the journeys become easier given his vast experience, Holgate said: "Of course – but there is always an element of surprise and that sort of nervous anticipation in the pit of one's stomach before the launch of an expedition. I guess when that stops we should stop adventuring – then it's too easy."

"Each journey has its own set of logistics. Imagine the last one: 448 days around the outside edge of Africa. Thirty-three countries, 66 border crossings … logistics in Africa are never a piece of cake. While the Swiss may have invented the clock it's good old Mama Africa that owns the time. There's no other continent quite like Africa. Here you can feel the texture of the cloth; it is always exciting."

This expedition, dubbed "The Outside Edge", was undertaken with the purpose of providing humanitarian aid, and the adventurers distributed tens of thousands of mosquito nets to assist in the fight against malaria, and also included the Right to Sight and a literacy programme, Teaching on the Edge.

When this expedition crossed from Mozambique into Holgate's home province of KwaZulu-Natal at Kosi Bay, they all knelt down and kissed the tar. "When you've one full circle (around the perimeter of Africa) you realise what an absolute paradise we South Africans live in," said Holgate.

Holgate is attracted to the solitude of places off the beaten track and there are many he would like to go back to. He has many favourite places in Africa.

"I like the wild places where few tourists go. Places like Turkana land in northern Kenya, or up the Omo river in southern Ethiopia, the forests of Gabon … the solitude of the ancient Namib and the Sahara … these sorts of places."

As for the prospect of hanging up his boots and giving up adventuring, the suggestion got a quiet and determined "never!"

Holgate thinks there is still enough time to turn back the damage we have done to the earth. "There is a growing interest in environmental issues and our next expedition – Boundless Southern Africa – is all about linking nature, culture and community through nine countries, seven transfrontier conservation areas, 30 game and nature reserves and communities that live in adjacent areas."

On this trip they will once again carry a symbolic traditional calabash of water from the Indian Ocean to the mouth of the Orange on the Atlantic, and along the way the Land Rover convoy will use the opportunity to teach rural schools about the importance of conservation.

"All our expeditions use adventure to improve and save lives. There is the One Net One Life project distributing mosquito nets to pregnant mothers and children under the age of five, the Right to Sight project for poor-sighted people and the supply of box libraries to improve literacy. Education will go a long way to saving Mama Africa," said Holgate.

This latest expedition left the International Convention Centre in Durban on May 11, 2009 during the international travel and tourism exhibition known as Indaba. The expedition was escorted out of town by a convoy of 50 Land Rovers before heading from the Indian Ocean to the Atlantic.

The route will take the explorers from Durban to the Maloti Drakensberg Transfrontier Conservation Area (TFCA) bordering South Africa and Lesotho, through to the Lumbombo TFCA linking South Africa and Swaziland, then the Great Limpopo TFCA which links parks in South Africa, Mozambique and Zimbabwe.

From there Boundless Southern Africa moves to the Limpopo-Shashe TFCA linking Botswanan, South African and Zimbabwean conservation areas, followed by the Kavango Zambezi TFCA between Botswana, Zimbabwe, Angola, Namibia and Zambia, then the Kgalagadi TFCA bordering Botswana and South Africa.

The trip is scheduled to end at the Ai-Ais – Richtersveld TFCA bordering South Africa and Namibia at the mouth of the Orange River, where the calabash's current cargo of Indian Ocean water will be poured. Boundless Southern Africa hopes to increase tourist traffic flow through the various TFCAs through consolidated marketing, co-ordinated infrastructure development and investment promotion efforts.

The trip also has various humanitarian efforts, which have become a new hallmark of Holgate family expeditions since their 2005 African Rainbow expedition from Durban to the border between Kenya and Somali and back, in an Arab dhow and back-up vehicles distributing mosquito nets for the One Net One Life campaign.

In addition to the One Net One Life, Right to Sight and Teaching on the Edge mobile library campaign, the Boundless Southern Africa trip will also assist with the upgrading of soccer fields and will hold community days within each TFCA, which will include soccer matches to promote the sport and market the 2010 FIFA Soccer World Cup.

At the age of 63, Holgate who is also the founder of tourist attraction Shakaland up the north coast from Durban, is still going strong, with no plans to stop adventuring any time soon.

He's staked a claim on many exploration "firsts" including the first circumnavigation of the Makgadigadi Salt Pans in central Botswana and has also travelled the perimeter of the world's largest desert lake, Lake Turkana in Kenya.

The Holgate family and friends have also followed more of Livingstone's explorations, including a trip up the wild and largely unexplored Rovuma river between Mozambique and Tanzania up to Lake Malawi and "Livingstone's last journey", which saw the early explorer's body carried from Lake Bangweulu in northern Zambia to Bagamoyo on the coast opposite Zanzibar.

While it is fairly obvious that the journeys Holgate has undertaken have shaped the man, he has in turn changed the shape of his expeditions by adding a humanitarian element, and is giving back to the land that has helped make him who he is.

When he finally stops adventuring, Holgate says, "I would be happy with a simple pile of stones and the words: 'Siyabonga - Thank you Mama Africa'."

- This article by Sharon Davis appeared as the lead cover story in the June 2009 edition of Leadership magazine.