

FOOTSTEPS IN THE SAND

Paula Constant left her job as a schoolteacher to set out on the journey of a lifetime, a walk from London to Africa and across the Sahara. Battling snow, desert heat and private heartache to complete the first leg of her journey, Paula found that her life and outlook had changed dramatically along the way. And she's still walking...

TEXT MADELEINE COLLINS

JUST TWO YEARS AGO, Paula Constant was a schoolteacher with an exceptional dream: to walk across the Sahara Desert. It was an ambition Australian-born Paula conceived while living and teaching in London. "In a typical class of 34 children, I'd have 18 different languages," she recalls. "It was challenging and incredibly rewarding, but I knew teaching wasn't what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I was heading towards something else."

That unique "something else" was her burning desire to combine her passion for writing with a life-changing adventure across the most treacherous desert in the world.

"I've always been inspired by explorers who really immerse themselves in a culture rather than just observing it through a car window," Paula explains. "And I wanted the experience of being completely out of my own element and comfort zone."

Luckily, her husband Gary was also up for the challenge, but their previous travel experiences had been limited to backpacking in Europe, so the preparations seemed overwhelming.

"We had to sell our house to pay for the trip, ship our belongings back to Australia, work out our route," Paula recalls. "We literally walked out of our life with just a backpack."



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"This walk has changed my life," says Paula. Dove's sponsorship will help purchase camels and supplies for the final leg of her journey.

As for physical training, "I drank like a fish and talked and thought about it a lot!" she laughs. "My theory was, and I wasn't far wrong, how do you train for walking 25km per day except by doing it?"

Setting off from Trafalgar Square in August 2004, Paula and Gary trekked 5000km across Europe to southern Morocco, which took almost a year. As they prepared to enter the desert, Paula was faced with two enormous challenges that could have ended her journey there. First, the marriage had broken down en route. "It was a mutual decision and we're still good friends," Paula says. "But all of a sudden I had to decide, could I do this on my own?"

On the same day she and Gary decided to end their marriage, Paula found out via email that her mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer. Paula was understandably upset and thought about going home, yet her mother insisted that she carry on with the trek.

So Paula set out for the toughest six months of her life. Knowing that every step took her closer towards achieving her dream kept her strong while she struggled in hazardous conditions. "Every time I finished a day's walking, I'd achieved something I valued," she declares. "It was fascinating and exciting, and I always looked forward to writing about it."

With two Arabic guides and two camels for company, Paula trekked on. She donned local dress to blend in with the desert nomads, but being immersed in another culture proved overwhelming at her most emotional times. "When I got to a village, I would stay with family of a guide," she says. "The hospitality was so heartwarming and generous, but it could become quite oppressive when you're desperate to shut a door and cry. I knew that if I could get through that, I could get through anything. The physical aspect definitely isn't the hard part!"

Surviving endless days of trekking on a diet of vegetable stew, nuts, dates and bread, Paula saw the weight dropping from her frame, normally a healthy size 14, at an alarming rate, but nothing could break her spirit. And every step of the way, she jotted down detailed impressions for her forthcoming book, *Slow Journey South*.

Paula returned to Australia on April 2006 after crossing the western Sahara and completing the first leg of her adventure. Having self-funded the first trip, she knew she would need corporate sponsorship to complete the second leg. The Dove Real Beauty campaign had just been launched in London when she first left and Paula saw her chance to form a perfect partnership.

"Everything the campaign represents corresponds with what I believe," she explains. "To me, Dove is about celebrating strong women, with the emphasis on achieving your potential and believing in yourself. I feel my journey shows how ordinary people can achieve something extraordinary. Plus, you really need skincare in the desert!"

While at home, allowing her body to recover and prepare for the next leg was critical, but most importantly, Paula got to spend time with her mother. "Mum always says that when someone is doing what they want to do, it really shines through. And she can see that I'm a lot more calm and content than I've ever been."

After headlining the Dove Pink Star Walk in support of the National Breast Cancer Foundation through Sydney in October, Paula set out to complete her journey and raise money for breast cancer research. She is set to walk more than 5000km on a crossing never before achieved, through Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Libya and into Egypt. Despite the potentially life-threatening conditions, she's "cautiously optimistic" about completing it in six months.

For any doubters who question why Paula does what she does, she has this to say... "People lose their sense of wonder sometimes. But in the desert that sense of wonderment never stops. Some nights I'd walk out of the tent and would look up to see a carpet of stars. There would be a glow from the fire and I'd look back to see silhouettes of the camels and date palms, and it was like something out of *The Arabian Nights*. It's mystical and magical. How can you not be inspired by that?" 🕊

For diary entries, images and maps of Paula's desert journey, go to her website at www.constanttrek.com. You can choose to be an independent sponsor of her trek, or donate money directly to help breast cancer research at www.nbcf.org.au

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