

GREAT WALK OF CHINA

Earlier this year **Tarka L'Herpinere** and **Katie-Jane Cooper** completed an epic 167-day trek along the entire length of the Great Wall of China.

Tarka and Katie could not have come from more different backgrounds. Tarka grew up in the French Alps and in 1997, at the age of 16, he and a friend completed an 1,100-mile unsupported journey from Cheltenham to the South of France riding two bicycles they had found in a skip. After many more small expeditions, Tarka founded his business Primal Journeys and has since mounted expeditions to the North Pole and Everest.

On this most recent expedition - to trek the Great Wall of China from west to east covering a distance of more than 100 consecutive marathons - Tarka had his greatest test to date, his partner Katie-Jane. Katie had previously worked as a model and was swapping her high heels for walking boots and leaving all the comforts of a glamorous life behind.

"After declining Tarka's invitation to join him on an expedition to the North Pole, it played on my mind why I had refused," she says now. "I believed you had to be made of something quite unique, with a physical and mental strength well beyond mine." In the end she decided to start with something 'easier': the Great Wall of China.

"I wanted to prove to everyone, including myself, that I could do it. I wanted to show that I was made of more than just make-up and false nails," Katie says.

The team began their journey inauspiciously early in October, 2006. The taxi driver at the start line, Yumenguan in Gansu province, refused to abandon them deep in the desert, protesting it was too dangerous. When they did finally make it, the vast expanses of sand of the Gobi desert stretched out on every compass bearing.

Then a contaminated water supply led to a disastrous chain of events that almost put an end to the expedition before it ever got going. Katie became very weak and dehydration began to

overwhelm her. Two days later, her condition reached a critical level. Her level of hydration became dangerously low in the 35°C midday heat. After Tarka had made her comfortable in some makeshift shade, he left her with only a phone and some water and after taking a GPS of her location headed off to get help.

Flagging down a bus, Tarka managed to divert it into the desert and with Katie on board, the bus careered back onto the road towards Dunghuang hospital. A drip was set up and after four days rest and recovery, the team were able to taxi back out to the desolate spot from where they had been picked up.

Food options caused many problems. The team's culinary vocabulary, being a little on the thin side, led to some controversial dining. After a first dish of pig's ears, trotters and intestines, Tarka deemed ignorance the best solution, only giving Katie the full recipe on completion of each meal.

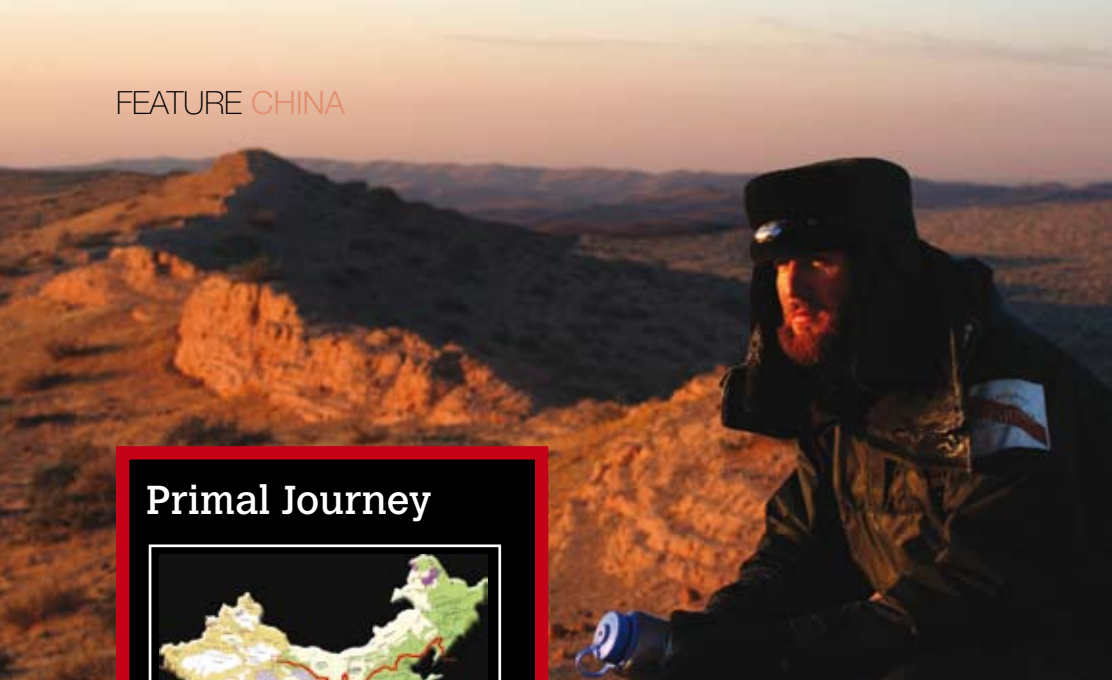
Deep in the desert they also faced a devastating sand storm. The winds knocked them off their feet and they were forced to erect a tent behind a

neighbouring sand dune. With the sand too fine to use tent pegs, they resorted to burying the tent a foot deep in sand. Laid out across the ground, with the roof being blown flat across them, they covered their faces in silk thermals in an attempt to breathe against the barrage of sand.

Throughout the first half of the journey, the actual presence of the Great Wall was very sporadic. Built from little more than sand and mud, the onslaught of the winds over the centuries has eroded the magnificent structure to little more than piles of fine sand and rubble running along the desert.

After 500km they arrived at Jiayuguan to see their first real glimpse of the wall in all its former glory. From here on the wall maintains much of its original splendour and steadily became





Primal Journey



Tarka and Katie's trek of 4,300 kms was the longest-ever continual trek along the Great Wall of China. Terrain ranged from the barren Gobi desert to snow-capped mountain passes and the temperature ranged from 30°C to -30°C with wind chill reducing this further.

The trek took 167 days with only three rest days. It was the equivalent of 102 consecutive marathons and the couple took approx. 12 million steps between them. They covered an average of 32km per day and a maximum daily distance of 43km. Their average daily budget was the equivalent of £1.30.

Tarka and Katie were raising money for their chosen charity, Make-A-Wish Foundation® UK, which grants the wishes of children and young people living with life-threatening illnesses.

More information or to make a donation: www.primaljourney.com

more impressive as they traveled east. But it was only when they reached the great mountain ranges 2500km from their start point that the wall emerged in all its glory. The sandstone construction they had seen for so many months gave way to the towering stone construction that is known the world over, snaking its way over the mountains.

Once into the mountains, and winter being well and truly under way, the team endured

“ I wanted to prove to everyone, including myself, that I could do it. I wanted to show that I was made of more than just make-up and false nails.”

temperatures as low as -35°C. For Tarka these temperatures were something he was accustomed to from all his polar experiences. Katie on the other hand had never seen anything below -10°C, and that was getting the peas out of the freezer at home. After nights spent shivering uncontrollably in their sleeping bags, they would rise to find the tent and equipment covered in ice, their boots ridged with frost and their eyelashes frozen together.

After 105 days walking Katie suffered a major back injury that almost prematurely terminated the expedition. With a fever of 38°C, she was rushed to hospital for a second time. With only four rest days left available, due to visa restrictions, the decision had to be made whether to call it a day or push on at the risk of possibly causing further damage to her back.

On the fourth and final rest day the decision was made to post home any kit that was not absolutely crucial to give Katie the best chance of making it. Everything bar the absolute necessities went, even the cooker. All that remained was to walk the 57 straight days without a day off to the finish line.

The second great storm came in the final week. A freak front had moved down from Siberia, bringing with it the worst blizzard that Northern China had seen in half a century. Overnight two metres of snow fell in some places. Vehicles were abandoned, buildings lay in ruins and people barricaded themselves into their homes. And with one set of clothes and only a couple of real showers for the entire six months, hygiene issues became critical.

“It's so difficult to explain how my emotions

rose and fell over the six months,” says Katie now. “I often wished it all to end right there and then and I would ask myself what on earth I was doing. It was then that the hospitality of a rural farmer welcoming us into his house and feeding us by a warm fire would give me renewed strength to see it through to the end. I don't believe experiences like the ones we encountered along the journey can be gained without the hardships that we suffered.”

Due to China's doors being closed to outsiders for so long, it is still a world of its own. Deep in the deserts and mountains, they stepped into a world which Westerners rarely, if ever, see. A place where hospitality and generosity aren't obscured by greed and wealth and where friendship is the key to life. “Experiencing such warmth, hospitality and generosity when not even a word has been spoken, just a shared smile, is something that will stay with us for life,” Tarka recalls.

On the 18th of March 2007, the couple finished their epic journey at Hushan on the Chinese and North Korean border. Having accomplished over 12 million footsteps between them, the last few were very emotional, made more so by the arrival of Katie's parents who were waiting at the finish line tremendously proud of what their daughter had achieved despite everyone's pre-expedition doubts as to her capability.

“Above all, I have learnt that expeditioners are not that different from everyone else. Tarka and I have both hurt and longed for home just as much as each other. Ordinary people can do extraordinary things,” says Katie looking back. 