

Dream walker

Norwegian fulfills life's mission to traverse the Great Wall. Erik Nilsson reports.

As one of the first few persons to walk the entire Ming Dynasty (1368-1644) Great Wall, Norwegian Robert Loken knows that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step but in his case it was a sojourn of 6,000 km. On Dec 2, 601 days after departing from the Wall's westernmost terminus, Gansu province's Jiayuguan, the 42-year-old stomped over the final brick of the final eastern watchtower, Liaoning province's Hushan.

"I had converted a 21-year-old dream into living moments, moments in life," Loken says.

"It's not about being the first, or walking the farthest or the fastest. It's about the experience of following my dream."

Fulfilling his life's goal required surmounting the treacherous distance of about 140 marathons before reaching the final pass, at the border of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. On one of the final days, he walked more than 40 km "without sitting down," he says.

While about a dozen foreigners and even more Chinese have followed the Ming Wall from Jiayuguan to the end of the existing bulwark in Hebei province's Shanhaiguan, Loken was the first to continue on to retrace the Ming-era maps' original route — the stone of which centuries have mostly ground away — to Hushan. He conquered those final 1,370 km through Liaoning in 41 days, pushing to finish before his visa expired on Dec 5, he says.

"When I reached (Hushan), I could finally let my shoulders down and relax for the first time in a year and a half," Loken says.

The adventurer had spent nearly two years dealing with snakes, scorpions and wild dogs. He ran out of water in the Gobi Desert and nearly passed out in a blizzard in Central China. He broke his left big toe in Shanxi.

Loken was happy to return to his parents' home in Oslo, after an airline strike canceled his homecoming flight, postponing his return by a day.

"We were relieved and joyful at having him safely back home after 20 months," says his father, Tor Loken.

His mother, Jean Loken, adds: "So much could have gone wrong, but it went much better than we could have hoped for ... It's an incredible achievement for Robert, and we are very proud of him."

Loken says what he has done has not yet "sunk in," and he is looking forward to "processing" it while recuperating in his homeland.

"Physically, I'm at the peak of my life. But I'm tired in the top floor," he says, tapping his index finger against his temple.

"I'm tired of all the experiences, tired of being on the move for such a long time. It's not the uncertainty of life, but rather, it's the ever-changing. I wake up in the morning, and I don't know who I'm going to meet, what I'm going to see or experience and where I'm going to sleep that night."

But the quest has been every bit the glory he had envisioned, as chronicled on his blog, www.thegreatwalker.com.

Loken says keeping the blog helped him grapple with solitude and provided "inspiration."

In addition to spending long stretches of time alone, he never saw the same person more than once on the Wall — that is, except for one woman in Hebei province's Panjiakou, whom he had met when he and his brother were hiking along the Wall 12 years earlier.

"I remembered where she lived and knocked on her door, and this fantastic woman opened the door," Loken says.

"She took my hands and led me in, and showed me a picture of my brother and I with her and her husband she'd put on her wall."

It was an intensely emotional moment, he says.

"I'd been going for a year and a half without being recognized by anyone I met, and that does something to you mentally ... I was always moving on. I'd say, 'hello' to someone in the evening and 'goodbye' the next morning."

Having kayaked the entire coast of Norway and hiked Hadrian's Wall in the UK, Loken is no stranger to solitary living.

He realized he had to get into his sleeping bag by about 4 pm every day to make it through the winters in North China, after a close call when he nearly passed out repeatedly during a mountainside blizzard in Shanxi. He only survived because he retained the wherewithal to faint with his head between his knees, causing blood to rush to his brain. That revived him for long enough to pitch his tent and insert himself into his sleeping bags, he recalls.

He passed the majority of the season, when most hours of a day in the Inner Mongolia autonomous region are monopolized by the bite of blasting Arctic winds, cocooned in his sleeping bags in his tent, writing and listening to audio books about Genghis Khan.

"Being completely alone is something I could handle. I'd only be lonely around other people," Loken says. "Because of the language barrier and culture ... it was hard."

He started the trip equipped with two months of Mandarin lessons — taken more than 12 years before.

"I didn't know words like 'return,' 'yesterday,' 'tomorrow' or the days of the week ... The words I know now are like 'desert,' 'mountain' ... 'tent,' 'sleeping bag' and 'snake.' But these aren't so useful in town," he explains, laughing.



PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

Robert Loken sold his house, quit his IT job and spent almost two years hiking 6,000 km of the Great Wall of China.



Loken cheers on finishing his journey at Hushan, Liaoning province.

He carried a card with his mission printed on the back in Chinese to hand to curious people along the way.

"Along 80 percent of the Wall, I was perhaps the first foreigner they'd ever seen," Loken says. "Sometimes, women would run into their houses and come out holding up their kids to see the *waiguoren* (foreigner)."

One of the more amusing misunderstandings occurred when he asked villagers where he could find a *xiaomaibu* (convenience store) and they instead tried to bring him to a

Xiao *meipo* (a village matchmaker surnamed Xiao).

Loken plans to take Chinese-language courses in Norway, so his next potential adventure in China — he's considering "something" involving the Yellow River — "will be more interesting."

Having sold his house and quit his job as an information technology consultant before his Great Wall expedition, he says he plans to initially support himself through lectures and photo exhibitions about China, its culture and his experiences.

Despite his loneliness, Loken says some of his happiest experiences were engaging local people, especially bus station workers and drivers.

"They'd find me the warmest seat on the bus, and during their breaks, they'd take me for meals," Loken says.

"I'll remember them for a very long time. I'd been traveling alone in China for so long. Their friendships were very special."

China Great Wall Society Vice-President Dong Yaohui, who spent 508 days on the Wall starting in 1984, says Loken's trip was "monumental."

"People need to come to the Wall to understand its importance," he says.

"Robert's trip serves as a great example, and we welcome people from around the world to undertake similar treks."

Loken says he learned so much about the Wall and China from his journey, but one personal lesson stands above the rest.

"Dreams define who we are," he says. "If you have a dream, follow it."

Plug into Chinese version of 'God's laws'

By YANG GUANG
CHINA DAILY

With his white beard and red cheeks American Kevin Kelly looks as sturdy as Santa Claus. Nicknamed KK, the 58-year-old former executive editor of *Wired* magazine outran most of his juniors, when climbing the Great Wall during his recent China tour — a packed four-day affair.

Sixteen years after the publication of his prophetic best-seller *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World*, KK is sure its newly released Chinese translation will find a large audience in China.

The book, with the central theme of how a decentralized social system can be a great power in the world, foresees the advent of new technologies such as cloud computing and the Internet of things.

"I wrote the book because I am interested in looking at organisms and have found something in common among all complicated things," KK says.

He closes the book with nine laws that he thinks will facilitate our understanding of the world.

Interestingly, the Chinese translation of the book corroborates the legitimacy of his top two laws: "distribute being" (everything is distributed over a multitude of smaller units) and "control from the bottom up" (overall governance must arise from the most humble interdependent acts).

Zhao Jiamin, proofreader of the book, started looking for a translator almost three years ago. The actual translation started in May 2008. With one translator working alone, only a quarter of the book was covered by the end of the year, falling far behind Zhao's expectations.

Zhao decided to recruit more translators online. Eight qualified ones were chosen and the work was thus distributed among nine translators.

The assignment was completed in a month and a half, with all the translators interacting in the virtual community, exchanging ideas on how some terminologies should be handled.

The "control" of the book was then transmitted from the nine grass-roots translators up to Zhao, who finally unified the manuscript's tone and style.

"The whole translation process is a perfect example of how KK's two laws can function," Zhao says.

KK has just finished his new book *What Technology Wants*. During his visit, he gave lectures on his understanding of the future, the Web and new technologies, and had talks with Chinese IT engineers, university students as well as lay readers.

It was an Asia tour in 1971 that made the university dropout believe that real change was possible. The access to the Internet in 1981 changed his thinking about technology and he remains optimistic about constant changes. He even makes "change changes themselves" his ninth law.



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Kevin Kelly at the Badaling section of the Great Wall in Beijing.