



Walking the globe, collecting stories

A seasoned journalist follows early human's migration paths and gets to know locals along the way. ZACHARY JOHN shares his story.



A camel train in Ethiopia.
[Photo: LEFNAKE]

Humans love exploring. Scientists are even planning manned missions to Mars. About 80,000 years ago, however, the world was a mystery to our forefathers.

Historians believe that the first humans lived in Africa. Over generations, they walked from Africa to every part of the world we know today, discovering new plants, animals, homes, and ways of life. It must have been an amazing journey for these early travellers, seeing things that nobody had told them about.

Since 2013, Paul Salopek has been trying to recapture that experience by retracing the steps of our forefathers. The American writer is walking from Ethiopia to Chile, passing through Europe, Africa, and North America along the way. This ancient walking route spans more than 38,000km, and includes 36 countries. Eight years into his journey, Mr Salopek finds himself in Myanmar, **en route** to China.

Mr Salopek, 59, spent most of his career in journalism as a war **correspondent**. Pulitzer Prizes are given to the best journalists in the world every year, and Mr Salopek has won two. In 2001, he won his second Pulitzer for his reports from the civil war in Congo. In order to find stories in the depths of war, he had to travel by canoe through rebel-controlled regions. He had to rely on locals for information, guidance, and shelter to survive war and jungle.

While his walk around the world today might be far less dangerous than his reporting from war zones, his methods have not changed. Instead of maps or itineraries, Mr Salopek uses history, archaeology, and local walking-guides to uncover stories — new and old — about people all over the world.

Slow storytelling

From his travels, he writes stories, conducts workshops, takes pictures, and shares videos. His mission is titled the Out of Eden Walk Project. It is supported by National Geographic and a team of 17 volunteer journalists and researchers. Together, the team is on course to reach one million words in content — almost as many as the entire Harry Potter series put together.

Mr Salopek calls this “slow storytelling”. Not just slow because he walks from story to story, but because he takes time to really get to know people and understand their stories.

Along his journey, locals are recruited to help Mr Salopek traverse unknown landscapes and to provide translation for interviews. These local walking partners have become a key aspect of the project.

“Without them, I would learn much less, be able to share much less with readers, and in general have a diminished experience of the journey,” he said. He has walked with people from all walks of life, including scientists, retired army officers, and camel farmers.

With one walking partner and two donkeys, Mr Salopek walked along the Silk Road, in a remote part of Uzbekistan. The Silk Routes are a network of ancient trade routes connecting East and West. First used more than 2,000 years ago, the first horses, honey, and glassware from Europe were brought to Asia by merchants travelling along the Silk Routes. Tea, spices, and porcelain were sent the other way. The remote wilderness that covers most of what’s left of the route has not been travelled by humans on foot for hundreds of years.

Some paths easier

Mr Salopek is not only walking through untouched areas, however. Over 16 months, he walked across 4,000km of India, exploring the quiet villages carved into riverbanks as well as bustling cities.

Mr Salopek told the BBC that India was one of the easiest places to walk, largely due to the fact that millions of Indians still use their feet as their primary mode of transportation.

“Farmers leave clay water pots at roadsides for pedestrians to drink, and

some communities still have pilgrim guest houses. The boom of Indian traffic still echoes in my ears,” he said.

The epic journey through history has not been without modern-day struggles. For example, he failed to receive visas to walk through Iran and Turkmenistan. Instead of writing to embassies or submitting appeals, however, Mr Salopek simply walked around them.

Currently in Myanmar, there is no way around the fact that the border with China is closed due to COVID-19. Once it is opened, though, he will spend 18 months walking across China.



Paul Salopek

[Photo: SUBHASHISH PANIGRAHI]

Looking ahead

Mr Salopek said his eight-year-long walk has **reaffirmed** one of his beliefs — that no matter how different people from far-away places may seem, most people go through similar day-to-day struggles. “You soon learn that people everywhere are concerned by 95 percent of the same things. Love or its absence. The fates of our children. Hate the boss,” he said to the BBC.

He told the BBC that while walking might be his chosen way to travel, his journey is mostly about listening. By listening to people from all over the world, Mr Salopek has realised even the most remote corners of the Earth can feel like home. Asked what he planned to do after his journey, Mr Salopek said that he had no idea — because walking had taught him to have fewer expectations in life.

He hopes that his project will have a meaningful legacy. “Nothing would make me happier than to leave a multicultural community of thoughtful storytellers in my wake,” he said.

VOCAB BUILDER

en route (say “on **rut**”; adverb) = on the way.

correspondent (say “ko-res-**pon**-dent”; noun) = a reporter for a newspaper or news channel.

reaffirmed (say “ree-afirm’d”; verb) = confirmed again.

© *News For Kids*, September 2021

This article is not to be republished or sold separately. For any clarification, please email editors@whatsup.sg.

Thank you. — News For Kids, 5 April 2022