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We went, we drove, we conquered!

Shareem Amry

STARING out the window of the four-wheel-drive as it sped through the open plains of Ethiopia, Leo Loh could barely keep himself awake.

Loh, the expedition's official photographer and documentary producer, was feeling the effects of days' little sleep and long hours on the road, and the temptation to drift off was almost unbearable.

But as the sun began to drift below the horizon and a dying, golden light spilled across the landscape, Loh snapped his eyes open. "I can't afford to sleep," he thought. "I don't want to miss a moment like this."

For the 55 men and women in Silverstone's ambitious TransAfrica 4x4 expedition, the 33-day journey through 12 African countries was very often filled with such moments when they came face to face with the beauty of the continent.

The journey, which kicked off on December 1, took the team through South Africa, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and finally Egypt, which they reached on January 2.

Team members were mindful of the obstacles they would face. Besides the gruelling heat and largely unfriendly terrain, the trip would also take them across some politically tense territory.

"Up until then, anyone could drive on a tarmac road from South Africa to Kenya," said expedition leader Thomas Foo. "But after that, it was considered impassable. Some of the people in Africa were skeptical we would make it."

Besides blazing a new trail, the expedition had a higher purpose - to spread the message of peace, goodwill and harmony and to promote relations between Africa and Malaysia.

With Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as its patron, the expedition's nationalistic undertone was unmistakable and weighed heavily on the team members' thoughts.

"In terms of the physical conditions of the road and the weather, we got more than we bargained for," said Foo. "But the prevailing thought among everybody was that this mission could not fail."

To keep their spirits up, team members greeted each day on the road with a lustily-sung rendition of the national anthem and punctuated each triumph with a chorus of "Malaysia Boleh!"

Stamping Malaysia's presence in Africa was accomplished in many ways, big and small. Operations manager Carol Wong, who undertook the massive task of untying the bureaucratic red tape of the different countries they were to pass through, said many officials spoke well of Malaysia.

Citizens however, especially those who lived in remote villages or high up in mountain ranges, were not always so sure where their guests had come from.

"We stopped for a break somewhere along the mountains in Ethiopia one day when an old shepherd came up to our convoy to take a closer look," Wong recalled. "He pointed to the Malaysian flag on the car and said, 'American!'"

"I said 'No, Malaysian!'" she laughed.

The monosyllabic discussion continued back and forth until the truth finally dawned on the old man. Wong left, feeling satisfied at getting her message across.

Daphne Foo, who accompanied her husband Thomas, said team members were

mesmerised by the continent's many faces, from the tribal dancers who greeted them at many of their stops, to the landscape, which transformed and re-invented itself with every segment of their journey.

"The people we met were very warm and hospitable. They were very curious and would come up to us to ask us where we were from.

"They usually didn't know where Malaysia was, so we would haul out a map to show them. 'Oh!' they would say. 'You have come from so far away!'"

The convoy was on the move an average of 14 hours a day, and the rough terrain, the pressure of meeting their schedule, lack of sleep and eating on the run sometimes frazzled their nerves.

Temperatures would soar as high as 52 Celsius during the day, only to plunge as low as -5 Celsius at night. Dust crept into the equipment, knocking out two of the five laptops they had brought with them.

The breathtaking vistas they saw along the way however, such as the Victoria Falls and the pyramids at Giza, helped to mitigate some of the pressure. So did their animal sightings, but some of the group's encounters with the wildlife were not so soothing.

A pack of baboons plagued them one night after they had made camp, and the wily animals persistently ripped into trash bags and outfoxed all efforts to chase them away.

Another time, a bull elephant ambled directly onto the convoy's path, then stopped to stare at the intruders for a few moments before calmly shuffling off.

The most unnerving encounter however, was with a hippopotamus who decided to take up residence next to the camp one night, startling everybody with an occasional loud snort but otherwise leaving all alone.

"He was about the size of two of the cars put together," Wong said, shaking her head at the memory. "One guy went off into the bushes to ease himself and got the fright of his life when he found the hippo just a few metres away.

For Loh, who always had one eye peeled for picture and filming opportunities, the unpredictable pace of their journey sometimes meant missing some of the best chances at capturing their journey on film.

"Filming was an uphill task since we had to do it on the run," he said. "You had to wait for the right opportunity to present itself, but sometimes when that moment came the circumstances wouldn't be right.

"Unavoidable delays, for example, would mean it would be too dark by the time we arrived to do any filming."

Despite the handicap, Loh and his seven-member film crew managed to capture some of the best highlights, some comical, others moving, during their epic trek.

Guests at a recent Silverstone function were treated to a half-hour long video of some of the footage that was filmed, and were captivated by the images they saw.

These included dancers in full tribal regalia during welcoming ceremonies, a team member gamely jumping into mid-dance and doing his best to keep up, giraffes undulating across the dusty green plains of the Moreni Games Reserve and a group of African men shouting "Malaysia Boleh" in welcome.

By the time the convoy reached its final destination at the steps of the ancient pyramids and Sphinx at Giza in Egypt, the team had covered 17,000km of gruelling terrain.

"Everyone lost an average of five kilogrammes. Our skin was parched from the sun and we looked like lizards," Thomas said, adding that at least one of them had emerged from the journey looking like a weather-beaten construction worker.

With the end in sight, emotions spilled over. "My heart cried. We just

grabbed each other and hugged and threw water around. It felt tremendous," said Daphne. "It was just knowing that we had made it through something no one had ever done before.

Loh said he "felt dazed" and incredulous that it was all over. "I wanted to say, `Hey! Let's just keep on going!."

(END)