

pagethree

Next stop the Empty Quarter ...

The Swedish explorer Mikael Strandberg is in training for another arduous expedition – to cross the two hottest places on Earth by camel. Starting from the Gulf's coast, he plans to trek from the UAE into Egypt, then across the Sahara to the Atlantic. **Jonathan Lessware reports**

Towering dunes, sandstorms, searing heat, water shortages and poisonous snakes: these are just a handful of the obstacles that a veteran Swedish explorer and two Omanis aim to overcome in their bid to become the first people to cross the two hottest places on the Earth by camel.

The explorer, Mikael Strandberg, said the two-year, 12,500km journey will begin on the coast of the Arabian Gulf, proceed across the Arabian Peninsula and North Africa and end on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean. The goal of Mr Strandberg and his Bedu companions, Nasr al Kabi and Salim al Wahaibi, is to complete a journey "through the heart of the Arab world", crossing the Arabian and Sahara deserts by their southern and most arid routes without outside support.

But overcoming the daunting physical obstacles is just one of the expedition's aims. The journey, scheduled to begin in October, hopes to deepen understanding between the Arab world and the West, and break down cultural barriers and prejudice, the 47-year-old Mr Strandberg said.

"The situation between the East and West is getting worse every single day so more than ever it's important to try to get a dialogue," said Mr Strandberg, who last year spent 11 weeks in Yemen learning Arabic and has already made seven trips to Oman in preparation for the journey. "Our expedition will travel and meet a lot of people to show that it's pretty much the same all over the world, that no matter what we look like and what lives we have, most people along the road are extremely good and they are peaceful."

"In Europe and in the Arab world, if you walk and you stop anyone there is a lot of prejudice about the West or the East and amazingly enough it can simply be killed by education and information."

"To be able to get people to listen I just have to do something that nobody on paper has ever done before."

While the journey will be fraught with dangers, just getting such an expedition off the ground is proving to be a daunting challenge. Bureaucratic and political hurdles have already caused months of delays.

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Mikael Strandberg

Mr Strandberg is trying to raise the €650,000 (Dh3.4 million) needed for the undertaking, which he hopes in keeping with the journey's cross-cultural aim will be funded in equal parts from the US and the Middle East.

Securing permission to cross borders is also proving difficult. Mr Strandberg had proposed a route that would have taken them through Yemen but the deteriorating security situation there and increasing al Qa'eda presence are making what was already a dangerous country for travellers in even more treacherous.

"Yemen is a fantastic country, and I really want to pass through but since the situation is continually deteriorating, it looks very bleak," Mr Strandberg said, speaking about the journey during a fund-raising trip to the US. His alternative could involve starting in Abu Dhabi and crossing the Empty Quarter, or Rub al Khali.

After passing through Saudi Arabia the expedition plans to either go through Jordan or cross the Red Sea into Egypt and then on through Libya and Algeria before either taking a route up through Morocco or across Mali and Mauritania to the Atlantic.

The explorer says he has managed to get permission to enter Saudi, which usually only allows business visitors and those on organised guided tours, but still wants the backing of an organisation there. Algeria and Libya are also proving to be problematic. He said the fact that two of the expedition's members are Arab will hopefully ease their passage through the countries.

While the poisonous snakes and scorpions may pose their own dangers, it is the heat and the possibility of running out of water and food that Mr Strandberg is most concerned about. Their route has been chosen to tackle some of the toughest tracts of desert, far from civilisation.

The explorer, whose last expedition across 3,500km of north-eastern Siberia represented the most sustained exposure to subzero temperatures in the history of exploration, said the key to the success is timing the start of the journey so the people and camels can acclimatise through winter and spring before they hit the summer temperatures in the Sahara.

Another concern is kidnapping – a risk he describes as "enormous" on paper. "I have passed through countries as dangerous before and nothing has happened and the people you meet are brilliant," Mr Strandberg said. "You just have to be on your toes a bit to see how things are going."

While he acknowledges the team will have technological advantages over the great desert travellers of the past such as Wilfred Thesiger and Ibn Battuta, he said there are challenges today they did not face. "There is actually less water today, fewer wells, more wars and even more instability in the Arab world as a whole," he said.

Another big challenge is trying to secure the five camels needed for the journey. The expedition needs five



Mikael Strandberg could start his expedition from Abu Dhabi and cross the Empty Quarter. Above, he enjoys the weather in Minnesota. Allen Brisson-Smith for The National

of the animals trained for carrying loads and aged between three and four years, the prime age for undertaking such a journey. But Mr Strandberg said such camels in the Gulf are wildly overpriced at about US\$10,000 (Dh36,700) compared to \$2,000 in Egypt. When he gets them, he plans to spend two months training with the camels before they leave.

Mr Strandberg and his companions aim to cover 25km each day, often walking with their camels to avoid injuring the animals. He will adopt the traditional Bedouin clothes and travel barefoot.

But the explorer said his team

plans to use the latest technology to keep people updated on the trip through regular internet broadcasts and use their website to encourage people to engage in debate and dialogue to "break down cultural barriers and bridge cultural misunderstandings". He also hopes to film a documentary about the trip.

Such communication he hopes will come from his Bedu teammates – Mr al Kabi, 25, one of Sultan Qaboos bin Said's special guards, and Mr al Wahaibi, 31, a farmer who has been handling camels all his life.

"The perspective of exploration today is mainly through a white man

with a beard and it's time to change that," Mr Strandberg said. "My main idea is that the expedition will be through the eyes of the two Bedu who will come with me."

His plans have already caught the attention of Omran, Oman's tourism development and investment arm, which said it is backing the expedition.

"The objective of the journey is to shed a different light on the Arab world and help bridge this growing gulf between east and west," said Wael al Lawati, Omran's CEO. "By showing the different parts of the Arab world, he will also dispel this stereotypical view of the Arab world being a single entity with no local distinctions." He added that the Omanis' contributions will highlight the richness of Bedouin lifestyle in the Arab world.

Barry Moss, chairman of the British chapter of The Explorers Club, said the scale of the expedition matched the previous exploits of the most famous desert explorers but warned that many of Mr Strandberg's journeys had led to brushes with death.

"Strandberg's camel trek is planned to cross cultures as much as deserts," he said. "It is as much a pilgrimage as a feat of exploration. He recognises that there are misunderstandings between peoples that are reconcilable."

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the trips

1986-1987 Travelled from Chile to Alaska on a bicycle, a distance of 27,500km including a crossing of the El Darién Jungle between Panama and Colombia.

1989-1992 Cycled from Norway to South Africa, a distance of 33,000km, passing through the Sahara.

1994-1996 Another bike journey, from New Zealand to Cairo traversing Asia, a distance of 90,000km.

1997-1998 Horse journey through Patagonia covering 3,000km.

2000 Walked through Maasailand in eastern Africa, exploring all clans of the Maasai people.

2004 Explored the unknown Kolyma River in north-eastern Siberia travelling 3,500km by canoe and by skis. An expedition globally hailed as one of the coldest in the history of exploration.

Adventurer's proposed route



Source: Mikael Strandberg

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