

Their wedding hurdle: Africa

Century apart, walking the continent

By Stephen Jermanok
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

If thou remember'st not the slightest folly, That ever love did make thee run into, Thou hast not loved," wrote William Shakespeare in "As You Like It" long before Ewart Scott Grogan came on the scene. That's a shame, because Grogan would have been a fitting protagonist for a Shakespeare play, one that didn't end in tragedy.

In 1897, fresh off a stint as a soldier in the southern African territory named Rhodesia (now modern Zimbabwe) helping to fend off a native uprising, Grogan was in dire need of R&R. When his friend Eddie Watt suggested they take a long jaunt from the United Kingdom to New Zealand to visit his family, Grogan quickly accepted. Within days of arriving at the Watt estate, Grogan, 23, was smitten with Eddie's sister Gertrude, and asked for her hand in marriage. But her aristocratic stepfather refused to allow it, because Grogan had no wealth.

Determined not to be denied, Grogan came up with a proposal that could have led to fame and perhaps fortune, or to untimely death: "If I cross the entirety of Africa, from south to north, will you then let me have Gertrude's hand in marriage?" In the late 19th century, traveling in Africa was the equivalent of climbing Everest. Surely, thought Gertrude's stepfather, Grogan would perish at the hands of a hostile tribe, be eaten by lions, or catch deadly malaria. So he agreed.

Grogan would spend the next two years traversing the entire 4,500-mile span of the continent. He would fend off cannibalistic natives, charging elephants, swarms of mosquitoes and their toxic trail of illnesses, and cross terrain so terrible that it's no wonder explorers preferred seaworthy routes. In tatters, he

made it to Cairo. Soon he married Gertrude, wrote a best-selling book about the adventure, ("From the Cape to Cairo: The First Traverse of Africa From South to North"), became the youngest member of the Royal Geographic Society, had two butterflies named after him, dined with Queen Victoria, and a century later was forgotten.

That is, until Julian Smith came across his writings and decided to retrace Grogan's route. The result is "Crossing the Heart of Africa: An Odyssey of Love and Adventure," an insightful and often uproarious romp through primarily God-forsaken countries more likely to make the front pages because of genocide and disease than to make the travel pages. Smith, who had been to the continent twice before, writes of places like Malawi, which lacks a travel infrastructure, where he had to ride on the back of a bicycle to get to his next destination.

"I'm slowly readjusting to African public transportation, which mostly consists of learning to wait. Peace of mind is proportional to giving up control; things happen when they happen, or don't, often for no discernible reason," Smith writes in the early pages.

Smith wanted to do as much of Grogan's route in two months and get back home in one piece to marry his sweetheart. But Grogan was forced to do something heroic to be given Gertrude's hand, while Smith is simply overcoming his commitment-phobic ways. This part of the book feels contrived; I would rather read about the suffering of both Smith and Grogan on their expeditions.

Mishaps often lead to the most memorable parts of a journey and Smith has plenty, thanks to choosing a route that even in this modern age of planes, trains, and automobiles has an explor-



Ewart S. Grogan, the first person to walk the length of Africa, did so to win the hand of a New Zealand woman. Author Julian Smith retraced his route to overcome his fear of marriage.

BOOK REVIEW

CROSSING THE HEART OF AFRICA: An Odyssey of Love and Adventure
By Julian Smith
HarperPerennial, 328 pp., paperback, \$14.99

atory nature. If he wants to catch the Liemba, a ferry that heads north on Tanzania's Lake Tanganyika only once every two weeks, he must endure a bruising six-hour bus ride.

"I'm stuffed in the last row of a long bus. Big mistake. I feel like a test pilot in a disintegrating plane. The deeper potholes launch me completely off the seat. My head has hit the ceiling twice already," writes Smith. He does catch his ferry the next day, but not before a child vomits in his lap.

Smith eventually reaches Bujumbura, the capital of Burundi, where the past 50 years of ethnic conflict led to thousands of deaths and a crumbling economy. "Cranes and huge piles of

dirt are everywhere, but I can't see a single traffic signal or streetlight. In a bank, cashing travelers' checks, I can see liquor bottles on a half-dozen desks," he notes.

Grogan's trek was much more treacherous, especially in the Congolese section of Mushari, where cannibals led a "Heart of Darkness" existence and he saw body parts strewn everywhere. Even worse was traveling across the swamp-infested lagoons of southern Sudan. Grogan had to fight off clouds of mosquitoes at night and the tall Dinka tribe during the day. He eventually reached the source of the Nile in Khartoum and sailed to safety. Smith wisely aborted his trip after visiting the Wild West-like town of Juba in the globe's newest country, Southern Sudan, where all he "can think is: get me the hell out of here."

Fortunately, he made it back home to his impending nuptials, and to shed light on Grogan's monumental feat, which is worthy of a revisit.

Steve Jermanok can be reached at www.activetravels.com.

Currents

JetBlue adds nonstop Boston-Portland, Ore.

JetBlue launches nonstop flights between Boston and Portland, Ore., beginning May 26 aboard its Airbus A320 planes. Daily flights will depart Boston's Logan Airport at 7:37 p.m. and arrive at Portland International Airport at 10:47 p.m. Pacific time. The daily return flight departs Portland at 11:37 p.m. and touches down in Boston at 8:02 a.m. Eastern time. Special one-way rates start at \$159 through June 15 (regular fare will be \$219), and check your first bag for free. Later this year, the airline plans to add direct, nonstop service between Boston and Martha's Vineyard, Turks and Caicos Islands in the Caribbean, and Anchorage. 800-538-2583, www.jetblue.com

Harbor Islands map

National Geographic has released a Trails Illustrated map for the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area. Waterproof and tear-resistant, it covers downtown Boston and the area's 34 islands and shoreline parks. One side shows topographic details, ferry terminals and routes, boat ramps, beacons, historic sites, campgrounds, and trails. The flip side displays satellite imagery of the terrain and historic structures like Fort Andrews on Peddocks Island. The map sells for \$11.95 at local book, marine, and sporting goods stores, the new Boston Harbor Islands Pavilion at the

Rose F. Kennedy Greenway, and the visitors center on Georges Island, or through National Geographic. 800-437-5521, www.shopng.com

Win Cape and Islands trip

Enter Hostelling International USA's Bike the Cape contest and you and a friend or two may win a trip to explore the Cape and Islands by bike. Winners receive one free overnight stay at each of the region's five hostels June 17-24, a \$300 food stipend per group, and ferry vouchers. Hostels are located in Hyannis, Eastham, Truro, West Tisbury (Martha's Vineyard), and near Surfside Beach (Nantucket). Submit an application by June 1 with a brief video explaining why you want to bike the region and the route you plan to take. You must provide your own bike and gear. 617-718-7990, ext. 15, www.capecodhostels.org/whatsnew.php

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