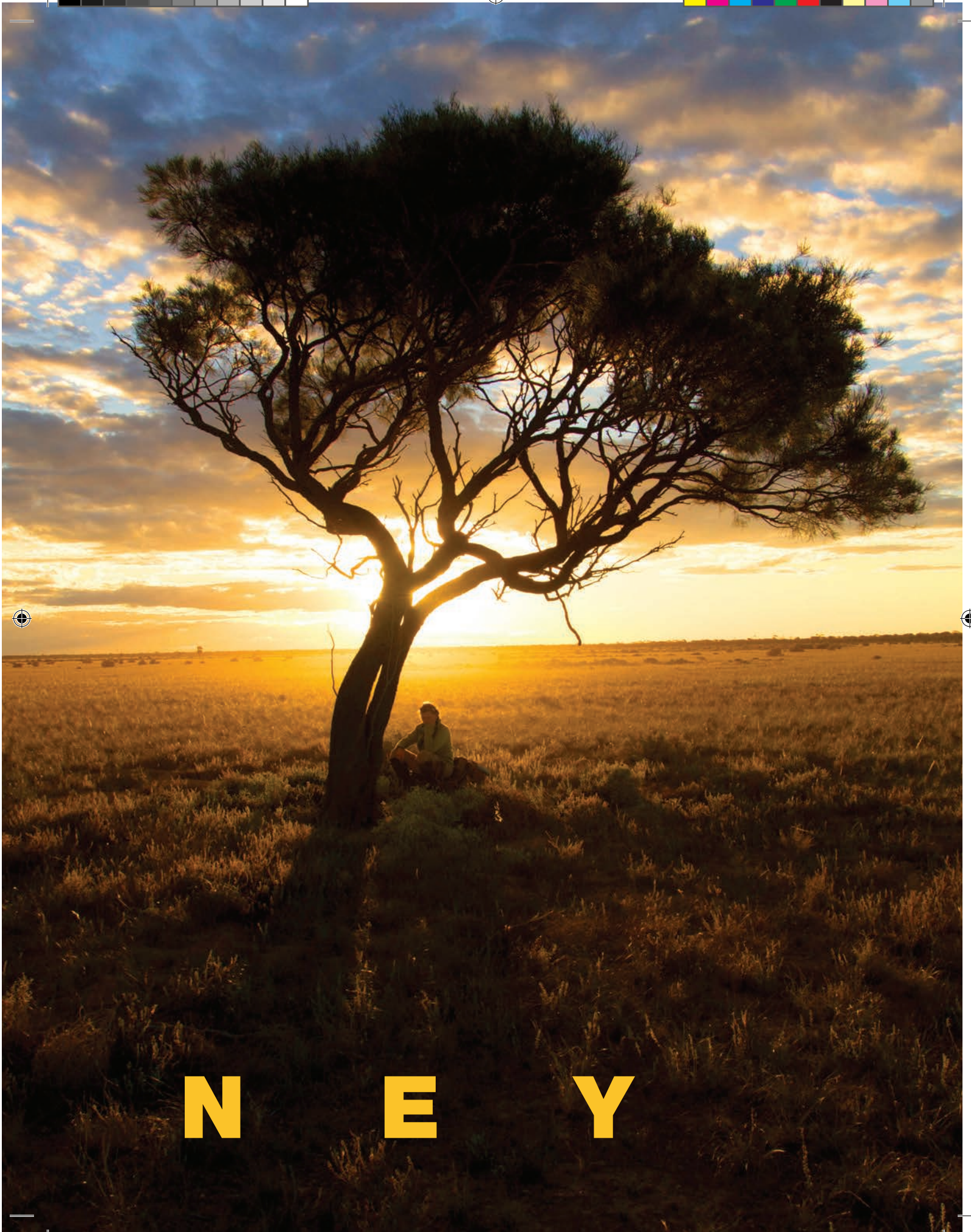


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GEOFF BROKATE TRAVELLED TO CHAMPEX LAC IN THE SWISS ALPS TO TAKE A LEISURELY HIKE WITH SARAH MARQUIS, THE ADVENTURER WHO IN 2010 BEGAN A THREE-YEAR JOURNEY, ON FOOT, THAT WOULD TAKE HER FROM SIBERIA TO AUSTRALIA

Words and images by **Geoff Brokate**

Somewhere in the remote regions of the Sichuan Mountains members of the Lui Tribe are telling their children about the first time they saw a foreigner, while nomadic families carving out a laboured life amid the sand storms of the Mongolian Gobi Desert discuss the miracle of a European woman who once walked across their country. If you were to go further south, to Australia's Nullarbor Plains – a 200,000 square kilometre stretch that is best described as sparse, arid and treeless, where temperatures regularly rise above 40 degrees – there stands a truck stop where drivers stop to refuel and recover from the gruelling three days it takes to cross the plain. If you venture inside you will hear a local yarn about a woman who once walked across this unforgiving land; they say she even hunted her own food.

Stories of lone adventurers trekking through the landscape entice our senses, spark the imagination and return us to the wild. The Lui Tribe's story is not a fantasy, it is true, and the foreigner in question, the heroine of the tale, is Sarah Marquis, who at 42 years old has been using her feet to traverse the planet for just a little more than half her life. Her most recent achievement was a three-year exploration, which spanned the frozen north to the desert south. Marquis walked from Siberia to southern Australia in a remarkable show of endurance and courage, earning her a nomination for *National Geographic's* Adventurer Of The Year 2014.

Marquis lives in Champex Lac, a small village situated on a lake surrounded by the Swiss Alps. The ski season has ended and there is silence in the empty streets. The water is perfectly still and the mountains are mirrored back to me as I wait for Marquis by

the side of the lake. From a distance I notice a woman confidently striding towards me. Her long, dark hair is wild. As she introduces herself I observe how her fringe shields a pair of dark, piercing eyes. She speaks with a heavy French accent, which carries a sound of sweet innocence supported by her generous smile and the youthful spring in her movements.

I suggest that we could do the interview at her house. No is the reply. Short and direct. It is clear that I have already overstepped the mark. It turns out that Marquis doesn't let anyone into her home. An essential skill to surviving in the wild is marking out and protecting your territory, a habit Marquis finds hard to curb. She doesn't even let her publicist go to her house. What about boyfriends I ask? "It's complicated."

It isn't surprising that relationships are complicated. Marquis has spent most of her adult life either planning for or completing expeditions across some of the world's harshest terrain. In 2000 she walked from the Canadian border to the Mexican border, taking four months to cross the US. In 2002 she spent 17 months wandering through remote Australian outback with one question in mind: "As a Western woman could I actually survive by hunting for my own food?" During 2006 Marquis spent eight months in South America. It was one of her hardest expeditions. She trekked through the Andes, surviving freezing temperatures and debilitating altitude sickness. These achievements seem insignificant when compared to the three years she spent walking through Asia to the parched land of Australia.

Instead of conducting the interview indoors Marquis offers to walk me through the mountains. The path winds through pine-

TIME OUT /
Marquis takes a rest on a track near her home in Champex Lac, Switzerland







covered slopes. She knows these tracks intimately; last month she was walking them with snowshoes. Her phone rings and she discusses her up-and-coming book tour, which begins in Paris, with her French publisher, Michel Lafon. It's hard to imagine this woman, who appears so adapted to modern life, walking herself to exhaustion for 12 hours a day, close to starvation, unwashed and untamed. She puts her phone away and answers my question as though I had been thinking aloud. "I'm quite happy in my tent, every morning I'm gifted a new landscape. But you could easily see me in a five-star hotel." Marquis is not afraid of being feminine; she is aware of her beauty, but it's not her looks that define her, rather it is her strength and a confidence that comes from having pitted herself against nature's harsh extremities and survived.

I'm full of questions, and Marquis senses my impatience. She sits on a boulder with a

view of the vast valley below and mountains that reach out to the skyline. But before I can speak, she jumps in. "I don't want to talk about kilometres. People annoy me with 'how many kilometres?' questions. What I do is a philosophical journey; it has nothing to do with how many kilometres. You don't last three years thinking that way. I'm not one of those people who want to be the first person to go up that high or the first person to go down that low. I don't go to break records; this is not what it is about. It's all about the journey not the end goal."

Rather than referring to distances travelled Marquis prefers to call it her "1,000 nights and 1,000 days from Siberia to Australia", a title that further evokes the aura of a living myth. Her epic adventure began on the June 20, 2010, at Lake Baikal in the southern region of Siberia, Russia. She walked south to Mongolia, which was the most difficult country: cold temper-

**MARQUIS
PREFERS TO
CALL IT HER
"1,000 NIGHTS
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AUSTRALIA"**

WILD TIMES /
Marquis' campsite in Mongolia's Gobi Desert, where night time temperatures can drop to well below zero





atures, a lack of food and, at times, hostile people. Next was China, where she walked the mountains of the Sichuan and Yunnan provinces. As she wasn't allowed to carry a GPS, Marquis was forced to use Chinese language maps and a compass. She continued on through the jungles of Laos and the forests of Thailand, before taking a cargo boat to Australia, where she walked for another year. Finally, on May 17, 2013, she reached her destination, a tree. It was a tree she had met and fallen in love with during her first Australian expedition, and she had vowed then that she would return one day.

It was during that first expedition through Australia, in 2002, that Marquis decided that she wanted to discover if she could survive by hunting her own food. She trekked along the Canning Stock Route, an area that has rarely been visited by humans, including indigenous people. The trail is a distance of 1,850km, and passes through three deserts in the mid-western region of Western Australia. It was two months before Marquis saw another soul. "Hunting my own food was a big thing for me. I hadn't eaten an animal since I was 11 years old. I was hunting Goanna (nat-

ive lizards) and eating witchetty grubs (the large white larvae of a moth), eating duck and Galahs (a pink feathered native bird). I was eating anything possible, because I was starving. I only had a blow gun and a sling shot, and I taught myself the whole way." While Marquis doesn't endorse the killing of animals, she understands better than anyone else the power of the survival instinct. "I came to know about hunger, and that changed me forever. It was a big deal for me to kill any of those animals, but after starving for two weeks, you just kill it. Your instincts kick in and you have to eat. But I haven't eaten one piece of meat since that trip."

When it comes to food, Marquis approaches each trip differently. During her South American adventure her brother went ahead months in advance and buried food at specific GPS locations. But on her last jour-

SWEET HOME /

A Ger is a traditional nomadic home for those living on the Mongolian steppes

MARQUIS DECIDED THAT SHE WANTED TO DISCOVER IF SHE COULD SURVIVE BY HUNTING HER OWN FOOD



ney she had decided to leave it to fate. “On this trip I survived on whatever I found. In Mongolia it was difficult, because they only eat meat. I ate boortsog (a kind of biscuit), buckwheat and in some places I found rice.” Marquis found it easier travelling through Laos, Thailand and Australia, where vegetable supplies among the villages and towns enabled her to fill her specially designed cart with supplies.

Some of Marquis’ most dramatic moments came when she was walking through the jungle in Laos. “I had dengue fever for three days. I had stopped next to a river and I was getting worse. I couldn’t move. I needed to stay there, so I attached myself to a tree with a rope. I was starting to feel delirious from the fever, so I thought, ‘If I attach myself at least I won’t go into the water and drown.’ Three days later I was still alive.”

Afraid for her life Marquis contacted her expedition chief, Gregory Barbezat, back in Switzerland via her satellite phone, but there was nothing he could do. She was in such a remote location that no one could reach her in time. Surprisingly, the thing that came to her rescue was her camera. “I

decided to make a video every hour to not lose touch with reality. So I have a video of all those three days. I’m like, ‘I’ve got a really bad headache, but I’m fine.’ By the end I couldn’t talk really. I’m just staring at

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the camera like this,” she stares into my eyes with a blank zombie expression, then laughs it off as though the experience was hardly worth mentioning.

I decided to ask her the obvious question: what about being a female travelling alone?

“A lot of woman’s magazines come to me and ask if I can talk about that,” she replies. “They ask me if I recommend young women to go to these areas. I have been doing this for 23 years, and most of the time I disguise myself as a man, it’s a big process. I am like a secret

TEA TIME / Marquis’ kettle boiling for the final time before she concluded her three year adventure





agent out there.” Avoiding the threat of violence and unwanted attention from men is an essential survival skill for Marquis. In the Australian bush she would tie a tree branch to her waist, which dragged along behind her sweeping away any footprints she made. In Mongolia she had to walk during the night because groups of drunken men would invade her campsite while she was sleeping. In China she was locked in a house in an old village while a local man ran to get the police.

But nothing compares to the nightmare she faced, once again, during her time in the jungle in Laos. She had only just recovered from dengue fever and was asleep in her tent after a long day. “In the middle of the night, in the middle of the jungle, there were about 15 strange men in my camp with machine guns.” Having learnt how to assert herself against possible danger, Marquis decided that directing anger towards them would scare them away. “I stood up and started yelling at them. What a nightmare. They started to get agitated, they didn’t feel threatened whatsoever,” she says, mocking her own efforts. “The guy took his gun and started to shoot it in the air. I was like, ‘Oh, Sarah, this is not good. This is not good at all. I need to do something right now.’ I had this little tiny guidebook about language in that area and I took it, hopefully thinking that’s the language they are using. And I started to read this phrase ‘I’m a tourist. I’m from Switzerland. Do you understand me?’ And I started to repeat this for three hours like a mantra. Over and over. I didn’t stop. And finally after three hours they were sick of me and let me go.”

After all of the years of risk and adventure Marquis was faced with a situation like no other. “That was the only time in more than 20 years that I was ready to push the red button on my tracking system. If anything happened at least my family would know where to look for a body. It was so close to a disaster.”

Australia is where Marquis’ heart lies, and she found it a comfort to arrive on its shores via a cargo boat from Thailand. “I never look ahead thinking, ‘Well, I’ve got three years to go.’ I would go crazy. So I was taking one step at a time, keeping my focus on the present. But when I got to Australia it was a big thing. I realised that Asia was behind me and I was still alive.” Walking through the Australian desert offers its own challenges, but none that Marquis hadn’t faced before. “I still had one year to go, but this was Australia, and I was familiar with every noise, every plant and animal. I knew it would be hard but I was happy to be there.”

The obvious challenge when tackling a desert is finding water, and Marquis has found a novel approach



SICK DAY / A campsite in the Laos jungle where Marquis suffered from severe dengue fever

NATURE IS PRETTY ROUGH. IT’S A LIFE OR DEATH SITUATION.

to the task. “Nature is pretty rough, it’s a life and death situation. I have spent many hours watching Australian Brahman cattle. They go to the water at a certain time of the day and in the afternoon they come back. So by looking at their hoof prints on the ground I knew if I followed this trail, in less than five kilometres I would find water – and it worked every time.” The difficulty Marquis then faced was how to approach a thousand head of cattle crowded around a water bore. If she frightened them there would be a stampede. “So I started singing,” Marquis says, before starting to hum a graceful, lilting tune. “I keep the same volume and rhythm five kilometres before. I never stop and I never change my walking rhythm. They hear me from really far away so I become a part of the landscape. I go really slowly and zigzag through the cows and they never become afraid of me. They know who I am, I am this song.”





WE ARE SCARED OF THE UNKNOWN. WE DON'T WANT TO LEAVE OUR COMFORT ZONE



MANNING UP / Marquis on a trail in Mongolia, where she tried to dress in such a way that from a distance she looked like a man

Almost 1,000 days and nights had passed, and Marquis was finally starting to contemplate arriving at her destination. "It's really hard to finish a trip, I'm happy but I'm also sad. It's a mixture between a sense of achievement and the pain of saying goodbye to the bush."

With 400 kilometres to go, one of the handles on her cart broke. This seemingly minor incident became a major emotional and physical challenge. "I had to

use new muscles, it was not the position I had been used to for three years. So that put a lot of pressure and stress on my body. I had a really rough last week. But the good thing about pain is, when it finishes it feels like I'm reborn. Pain is a mental approach; you need to be friends with your pain. If you hate pain it's never going to go away. Just go with it."

As Marquis took the final steps towards her tree, it was approaching sunset, and she sat down and made herself one last cup of tea. "I took a picture of that tea. It's like my little bubble, the process of making a tea." As she arrived she was greeted by an entourage of journalists, TV crews and photographers, all arriving by helicopter. Exhausted and relieved she gave interviews and smiled her way through the local media attention, but it was the tree she had come to see. "My tree was still there, which was good news," she says, laughing at the idea that she could have walked all that way only to discover the tree was gone. "It's just a tree in the middle of nowhere, but set against the sunset it was perfect."

Marquis suddenly stops and looks out beyond the Swiss Alps; her eyes have a glint that suggests that another adventure is never too far away. She is a thoughtful, philosophical woman who has had plenty of time to contemplate life and her own mortality. "Death is a part of life in every way. Look at the sunrise and the sunset. Look at nature and how the birds survive and how the insects struggle. Death is all around. We humans are the stupid ones who think we are going to last forever. We are scared of the unknown. We don't want to leave our comfort zone. We fill up our lives with entertainment to escape, but if you leave your comfort zone you will see how entertaining your life actually is."

The sun is starting to move behind the pristine mountains and we start the walk back to Champex Lac. After spending time with this mythical woman I start to feel a stirring inside, my mind is filled with adventure and danger. A mythical story offers insight into the nature of things and how we can best live our lives. Marquis believes that it is her ability to cross the divide between civilisation and nature that best portrays her purpose. "My mission is to build a little bridge between humans and nature. We have gone in a direction where we have forgotten about nature. We don't understand the impact we have on our environment. We can't just stand on this side of the bridge and pretend that it doesn't exist, because we came from there. If we don't realise that we are connected to nature and not computers then it will be too late." She pulls out her iPhone – the latest model – and, with an ebullient chuckle, illustrates the complicated contradictions of modern life. "It's about balance", she says with a smirk.

