



One woman's amazing feat

| By Jyoti Kalsi | 09/12/2003 | [Print this page](#)

*Dutch national Lilianne Donders loves the desert and its inhabitants. Accompanied by her beloved camels, she is trekking 3,000 kilometres from Tehran to Oman to raise money for a clinic in Jordan. She spoke to **Jyoti Kalsi** during a stopover in Dubai*

She was wearing a traditional Arabic dara'a (long dress) and sirwal (trousers). Tiny gold camels dangled from her ears and her head was covered with a headscarf. She squatted in the sand near the Nad Al Sheba Camel Souq, sipping kahwah and talking to her camels and dogs in colloquial Arabic. She looked completely at home. Lilianne Donders is Dutch, but she has chosen to live the life of a Bedouin.



"It was always my dream to retrace the camel caravan trade routes that connected the Arabian Peninsula with the ancient court of Tehran. That wish has been fulfilled with this trip," says Lilianne Donders. ©Gulf News

She is currently camping in Dubai, which is one of the stops on her Caravan of Hope, a 3000-kilometre trek through deserts and mountains, from Tehran to Oman. The aim of this walk is to highlight the plight of Palestinian refugees and to raise money to build a Mother and Child clinic in Jordan near the Palestinian territories.

"I also want to clear Western misconceptions about this part of the world and create an understanding and appreciation of the warmth, hospitality and culture of the Arabs," said Lilianne. "The Middle East is being portrayed by the international press as a centre of war and insecurity. I want to demonstrate to the world that a woman walking through the desert is absolutely safe here."

Lilianne's romance with the Gulf region began in 1980, when her husband, Robert Weener, was posted as Shell's Country Chairman for Oman. She felt an immediate bond with the desert and its people and set out to make friends with them.

"Shaikha Laila", as her Bedouin friends call her, was adopted by Al Jenaba tribe. During her eight-year stay in Oman, she helped the tribal women to sell their beautiful handicrafts in Muscat and abroad. Since then she has lived in Syria and Iran, where her husband is currently posted. "I have been accepted into so many tribes that practically everyone I meet on my travels is related to me by tribal bonds," she said.

Lilianne loves the desert and its people; she loves to walk and she loves animals. She has combined all these passions in her mission to help people. In 2001, she walked from Damascus to Tehran with her camels Zubeida, Zahra, Zenobia and Sheba.

Her Caravan for Cancer raised over \$35,000 from sponsors, for a Well-Woman clinic in Palmyra, Syria. "The clinic provides medical support to nomadic women in the Syrian desert, using mobile clinics to serve communities living deep in the desert," said Lilianne. Her feat seems even more remarkable when one realises that she undertook this challenging trek just two weeks after her last chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer.

This time, her sons Jasper and Sander have also joined Lilianne, the camels and her dogs, Farah and

Zanzibar. Her old travelling companions from Syria, Ghassan Saleh and Taha Muraweh insisted on coming too.

Her husband joins her whenever he can. "He is my main pillar of support. He has always stood by me and is always there when I need him, whether it is for financial or logistical support," said Lilianne. "I also appreciate the support I have had from Shell and other sponsors. We have raised over \$130,000 already," she added.

The Caravan of Hope started from Tehran in mid-August. The group walked across the length of Iran to Bandar Abbas and took a boat to Ras Al Khaimah, where they camped for two months. They came to Dubai via Sharjah and will stop in Al Ain before visiting various areas in Oman and returning to the UAE.

"I have always been fascinated by tales of travellers to the Middle East such as Richard Burton and Jane Digby. In Syria, Robert and I retraced several of these journeys. But it was always my dream to retrace the camel caravan trade routes that connected the Arabian Peninsula with the ancient court of Tehran. That wish has been fulfilled with this trip," said Lilianne.

Planning for the trek began three years ago. Lilianne and her husband drove extensively through sandy, mountainous areas to study and map every inch of the route. Sponsors were found and visas organised. Lilianne had to train her Syrian camels to negotiate the steep Iranian mountains and handle the soft sand of the Emirates and Oman.

The logistics are simple. Taha and Jasper travel in the truck that carries all their supplies and travels along tarred roads wherever possible, while Lilianne and Ghassan walk through the desert with the animals. The truck is fitted with a kitchenette, a refrigerator and a water tank. Like traditional Middle Eastern homes, this mobile home too is protected by an evil eye charm.

"We carry enough supplies for three days and stop for water at mosques and buy what provisions we can along the way," said Lilianne. In areas inaccessible by truck, a car driven by Jasper joins the caravan. Most of their expenses have been borne by Robert and they raise some funds through sale of commemorative T-shirts.

Their day begins at 5am. After a light breakfast comprising mostly fruits, they start walking. They usually have dates and camel milk for lunch. "Dates have all the nutrients we need and camel milk is the most energising drink you can have. It also has amazing curative powers," said Lilianne.

The caravan covers 25 to 40 kilometres every day and they settle down for the night in the open desert. Ghassan cooks a simple, traditional Arabic meal. The camels are fed a special power mix of grains formulated by Lilianne. "We like to sleep under the stars and do not bother with tents," said Lilianne.

In most places, the local tribesmen come over to Lilianne's open air majlis to enquire about them and to chat with them. "People are so friendly and helpful. They get us homemade food and tell us about their culture and traditions," said Lilianne.

"This trip has been fun. I have learnt falconry and hunted houbara bustards and I have learnt to recognise tracks of different desert animals," added Jasper, who recently finished his master's in computer science.

Lilianne usually visits the homes of the desert tribes to talk to the women about health, giving them pamphlets on self-examination for breast cancer. In return, they teach her traditional cooking and

handicraft making. In Ras Al Khaimah she gave several talks about various aspects of her trek and the lessons of life that she has learnt in the desert.

"We always insist on living out in the desert," she said. "People often invite us to their homes, but I request them to come and meet us at our camp because I feel responsible for my camels and do not like to leave them.

Lilianne is often asked why she opted to walk rather than use a car or ride the camels. "I love walking because you meet more people and you develop a deeper understanding of the place. Every dune presents amazing views and every day brings new experiences," she said.

And how does she handle the fatigue? "A cup of sweet tea and some dates are all we need to revive us," she said.

The group has not had any major medical problems so far, but they are well equipped with medicines and emergency surgical equipment. "I rely mainly on homeopathy, particularly Arnica. I also carry a specially-formulated dose of Arnica for my camels," said Lilianne.

Their only bad experience has been in Na'in, where the Iranian police detained them for two weeks. "The best part of the trek is the fantastic people we have met. The world can learn about trust and hospitality from the Arabs. I want to live in this region for the rest of my life," said Lilianne. "We have had a lot of support from the people of the UAE. I hope they will help us to raise more money for this good cause," she added.

For more information, log on to caravanofhope@btopenworld.com.