

# In the Company of Camels

Lilianne Donders Arrives in Muscat at the End of a Walk of 2,500 kms!!

By *Dr Patricia Groves*



**There** There is a dusty track behind the green Royal Guard Mosque near Al Khoud. It is at the end of Lilianne Donders and her caravan have set up camp after a month trek over the 2,500 kilometres from Tehran to Cairo. They have the money to build a hospital for Palestinian refugees.

On approaching the camp, our first sight is of four camels — two are creamy white; and two are chocolate brown in their winter coats. One of the white camels, Zubeida, has an old bell which sounds

lightly. There is a huge supply truck in the background; and, out in the open, is a fully kitted communications desk — still, the scene seems out of the Nineteenth Century. From the circle of people gathered around the coffee pot, a boyish figure comes forward moving with the natural grace of a desert Arab. And this is Lilianne Donders. She is lean and weathered, blending into the same colours in which she is clad. Her Bedouin-style tasselled headdress seems as if made for her — the massar managing not to catch the female gown or the pretty silver Omani qilqal shining in a brightly embroidered band at the tip of her dress, for she is wearing Omani woman's trousers.

This easy androgynous appearance suits perfectly a woman explorer leading an expedition through harsh terrain. Quietly charming, Lilianne welcomes us to her camp. The unmistakable impression is of a strong person, secure and happy in her world. By her imagination she has made her realm extraordinary. As Lilianne talks, it is apparent that hers is a parallel world, superimposed on the ordinary one in which most of us live, and to which we are naturally attracted. It speaks of adventure, commitment and noble

When Lilianne's travelling party approaches a settlement there is great excitement, as if the great days of camel caravans have returned. Everyone wants to have coffee and dates with Lilianne, to talk with her, to live a while in her realm, which represents thousands and thousands of years old that vanished abruptly with the arrival in the desert of the automobile not long ago. In her journey, Lilianne found her way intuitively to the ancient caravan routes. She explains that the greatest difficulty in travelling in a traditional caravan, apart from the rigours of extreme physical exertion, is to work around the maze of modern roads which have taken the wilderness without any consideration for the ancient foot paths and camel tracks.

As she travels through remote settlements, Lilianne gives local women workshops on breast cancer awareness. Born with the skills and trained as a nurse, wherever she goes Lilianne leaves behind a trail of good will and good works. She knows from her own experience the enormous challenge involved in defeating breast cancer. Well organised and thorough, Lilianne understands it is not enough to raise funds for hospitals — one must follow through to ensure the funds are well and properly used so that the institution serves effectively and efficiently. Those who run the clinic Lilianne set up in Syria know, that from time to time, she will appear unexpectedly to check up on their activities and to encourage the operation.

How did a child from a conventional background and with a strict upbringing in Holland arrive at this point in the deserts of the Middle East? Always a free spirit, Lilianne was attracted to the foreign children at school and to poor children whom she sought out in her environment. She found the foreign and poor children to be more interesting and happier than her "normal" friends. Lilianne took these waifs from the outside and they affected her cultural and spiritual development.

Lilianne, who says she has always been "pretty much a Bedu", at an early age read the great travel adventure books. She was inspired by the famous early 20th Century woman explorer Freya Stark (*The Southern Gates of Arabia*); to 'Lawrence of Arabia' (TE Lawrence's *Pillars of Wisdom*); and, of course, to *Arabian Sands* by Wifred Thesiger, who was the first non-Arab to cross the Rub al Khali, the formidable Empty Quarter. Of Thesiger, she says: "I knew and liked him very much. He had a rough time. He lived on less than the crossings of the Rub Al Khali, Thesiger rode his camels, but he walked too. He did not have the benefit of modern equipment. One he would admire. I saw him in recent years and he wished he could still travel the desert as I do. He died while I was on my trip; and I thought about him a lot. Every day he was with me."

Unlike many of the adventurers of old, Lilianne is married and has a family. Surprisingly, her family is not neglected and does

conflict in her nomadic life. Her two sons, Jasper and Sander, are with her on this trip; and her husband, Robert Weener, a high executive, once a petroleum engineer with PDO, and now CEO and Country Chairman for Shell in Iran, joins Lilianne as often. Her broad smile brightens her deeply tanned face as she laughs and says her husband brings a mobile office with him. With pure love and a great deal of affection, she speaks of her husband as: “an incredible person, wonderfully supportive”. Robert finds peace with the desert and the rejuvenation essential for continued success in his highly demanding corporate career.

Jasper and Sander are tanned and tall, brimming with health, energy and excitement, moving about and tending to tasks synchronously and unconsciously interconnected with their mother in the rhythm of the camp. When I asked Lilianne what they talk about during walking, she said: “The well being of our companions and their future... Camel food and more camel food... What happened goes to your heart. We talked for days about Bam and shared so much about this. We know each other so well that you say or do and everyone understands your feelings. “

One would wonder if it is not monotonous walking for months on end through the wilderness, but Lilianne is passionate about it, “still fully in love with it”. She loves the people of the desert, a particular yellow flower blooming there, the colouring of the changing terrain. As Thesiger notes, on a slow journey through endless stretches of desert, there is fascination in “...the track of a bird’s nest, the shape and colour of ripples in the sand, the bloom of tiny seedlings pushing through the soil.” The very slowness vanquishes any thought of monotony, as there is time to observe the tiny details of nature’s manifold expression, as well as to appreciate the infinite greatness in the silent cathedrals of sand.

The camels are of paramount importance to Lilianne. They were entwined in her conversation as if they were members of her family; in fact, they are... Lilianne credits her camels as “pulling her through” the terrible bout of cancer. “My husband could not accompany me, and when I was on my own between treatments, I was always with my camels. Sheba and Zubeida gave me a lot of love; when I was alone and they looked after me.” In this unrelenting love for her camels and in her intimate connection with them like the Bedu, who surprised Thesiger by how considerate they were of their camels: “The Bedu were always ready to suffer themselves in order to spare their camels”. (Arabian Sands, p 56)

Lilianne’s dream for ‘later in life’ is to come to Oman and get involved in camel milk production, which she feels is very close to her heart and helps to fight disease including diabetes, MS, and cancer. She has tried the old Bedouin recipe of mixing 1/3 camel fat with camel milk as a medicine and cleansing agent. Lilianne remarks that the mixture is very bitter; and that, like bitter things, has the effect of purification. She felt wonderful after her regime on this traditional Bedouin cleansing cure. Our camel-herding nomad, photographer and artist. Lilianne designs jewellery and paints watercolours of architecture and people in this part of the world. Her favourite is an unfinished painting of a Bedouin family. “I look at this painting of the Bedouin family often in its unfinished state and will leave it as it is. It is now part of my life; and it will not be finished. If I finished it, I would have to sell it.”

Lilianne Donders is very clear about her overriding objectives. The messages she wishes to convey are:

1. This Region is safe: Everywhere Lilianne has travelled she has encountered only a warm hearth and utterly generous hospitality. The only exception was an incident with police in a remote part of Iran. The police had every good intention, but did not understand her and would not allow her to pass. In a world preoccupied with terrorism, Lilianne feels that it is important to get the message through that it is safe here in the Gulf.
2. Breast Cancer Awareness: Many women in the remote parts of this Region do not know about the danger of breast cancer and do not know how to conduct a self-examination.
3. The Continuing Plight of the Palestinians: “They still need help and support. We must do all we can. With the prominence of Afghanistan, we must not forget the Palestinians”. The funds raised in Lilianne’s current Caravan of Hope will be used to build a hospital in Jordan near the Palestinian border to help refugees. We had said our farewells, but as I was leaving, Lilianne called me and gave me a final message; and this was:
4. The need for Human Warmth: “Especially in times of War, it is important to show human warmth and to express all that is left of human life”.

Since this meeting, as must have been true for her many other visitors, I have carried with me something of that warmth — as I saw seeing Sheikha Leila’s bright smile and the white tassels on her orange-chequered massar bobbing along, as she walks through the hope of making the world a happier place.

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**Letters To The Editor**

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## Greater integration will benefit GCC states

**T**aving had the benefit of visiting GCC states and noting, first-hand, the remarkable progress made by them in commerce, education, health and social welfare, I feel that further integration, of these states, will help to augment and surpass advancements that they have made. Using the EU and other well-established country groupings, as suitable examples, the GCC can become a formidable power-block within the region and beyond.

A common language, religion and culture are favourable aspects that can help lead to further prospects for Gulf countries and the entire region. The differences between the GCC states are very minor and the similarities can help bind these states into a political and economic powerhouse. Already plans are under way to integrate power-grids and communication highways and standardisation of import taxes and levies. Also, high on the agenda, is the quest for the unification of GCC currencies into one currency.

The GCC combined and unified is set to make further progress and become the standard bearers of economic prosperity, social and educational advancement. An added advantage is that coordinated action and interaction will help avoid unnecessary duplication. With all of these advancements set in place, it is imperative that communal and cultural ideals and practices are not. They should not be tarnished or set aside for the sake of progress.

— *Abu Nawas, Ruwi*

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