

Her 'caravan of hope'

| By Dulce Castillo-Morales, Staff Reporter | 30/06/2004 | [Print this page](#)

Lilianne Donders set out on a momentous journey, and came away whole again!

She is 49 years old; wife of Shell bigwig Robert Weener; mother of two grown-up sons — Jasper, 24 and Sander, 21; a breast cancer survivor; and yes, she is Dutch.

Meet Lilianne Donders, fondly known in the Arab world as Sheikha Leila (the name given to her as an 'honorary' daughter of a Bedouin tribe in Oman), 'camel rider', or simply as the 'camel lady'. More than all of these names and descriptions of her, Lilianne is popular in this part of the world, thanks to the impressive and noble feat she performed not so long ago for the Arabs, their women in particular.

In April 2000, Lilianne embarked on a nomadic journey that transformed her life and 'brought her home'. Battling with breast cancer, she did not let the illness sidetrack her from her dream of walking the traditional routes that traders used to trek the Arab deserts in olden days. She decided to walk thousands of kilometres from Damascus, Syria, to Tehran, Iran! Lilianne also had a noble reason to pursue her long-cherished dream — to set up a mobile clinic in Syria, where women could have themselves checked for breast cancer and other general health problems.

Sending a message

More than anything else, she also wanted to send a message across to people around the world that the Arab world is a safe place, despite what, she believes, others are unfairly depicting it to be. "I wanted to tell the world that this region is safe. I was asking myself 'why are journalists and people from other countries so negative about the Middle East?' They don't know the people here, their warmth and hospitality," says Lilianne.

Thus, two weeks after her last chemotherapy treatment, she started walking to Iran. "Walking became my therapy; even my doctors could not believe how the trip did wonders to my health," she reminisces.

The walk lasted around four months. Lilianne and her group — four camels (Zubaida, Sheba, Zunubia and Zahara), a truck driver, a few friends and her family — arrived in Tehran from Damascus in August 2000. Lilianne raised \$25,000 from the trip, which was referred to as the 'caravan of hope'. The mobile clinic was set up in Palmyra, Syria, which Lilianne visits every three months. It is equipped with a mammography machine (courtesy, a cancer society in Holland) and a vehicle, donated by the European Commission, which goes around the desert city. There are doctors, midwives and nurses to attend to patients free of charge.

Damascus to Tehran was just the first leg of Lilianne's 'caravan of hope'; and the mobile clinic in Palmyra just the first fruit of her mission. Later, Lilianne and her 'caravan of hope', walked from Iran to Oman and eventually, to the UAE. The trip entailed walking 4,000 kilometres! "We started in August 2003, and arrived in Dubai in February. We walked up to Naim, beyond which we were not allowed to continue, as the police authorities were scared for our safety. We took a boat to Ras Al Khaimah, where we were warmly received by people who adopted us as a family," says Lilianne.

From Ras Al Khaimah, Lilianne walked to Dubai, then to Al Ain and off to Oman. With the second

leg of her mission, she raised \$100,000, which is being used to set up a hospital for Palestinians.

Lilianne had always been fascinated by the Arab world for reasons she cannot explain. While in Oman, where she spent eight years, she spent most of her time in the desert, interacting with the local people. So much so, a Bedouin tribe in Oman 'officially adopted' her in a ceremony!

"The Arabian world is something that I relate to, I don't know why exactly; maybe because one of my forefathers had been an Arab! I really feel at home here. For me, this is home. The entire experience is like a homecoming to me," she says. Lilianne has now found a 'home' in Dubai for her 'family' — her husband, two sons and four camels. In between taking care of them, she is also busy with charity.

And yes, she is planning another trip. Lilianne is planning to retrace the footsteps of late Sir Wilfred Thesiger a.k.a. Mubarak bin London who walked across the Rub 'al Khali or the famous 'empty quarter' in the 1940s.

She says, "My dream was always to travel and live among the local people and make a difference in their lives. I don't want to come into this society as an outsider. I try to become an insider. My message to the Dutch and to people from other nationalities is that they should come here and see things for themselves."