

DONDERS PONDERES ON THE EMPTY QUARTER

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Lillian Donders, the wife of Robert Weener, Shell's Country Chairman for Iran is now in Dubai after trekking 4,000 kilometres in seven odd months. A breast cancer survivor, Lillian started her charity walk in Teheran in August 2003 for Oman and eventually to UAE reaching Dubai ...

in February 2004. Her companions in this long journey on rugged terrains and mountains, beautiful wadis, vast stretches of barren land in rain cold and heat were her four camels — Zenobia, Zahra, Zubeida and Sheba, her two dogs, her two sons and some helpers.

This was Lillian's second charity walk — her first trek was in 2000 from Damascus to Iran to raise funds for the welfare of Arab women — a cause which is close to her heart. Having been a victim of breast cancer herself, it was Lillian's dream to set a breast cancer clinic where Bedouin women could check themselves for this disease and other illnesses. Not wanting to waste anytime, Lillian set on her nomadic journey two weeks after her chemotherapy and surprisingly, walking became her therapy and even the doctors could not believe her quick recovery.



The walk (which is referred to as the Caravan of Hope) lasted for four months and she was able to raise \$25,000 from the trip and got a mammography machine donated by a cancer society in Holland, and a vehicle donated by the EU (European Commission) which goes into the desert with clinic staff creating awareness amongst Bedouin women about cancer.

The clinic is now running successfully in Palmyra and offering treatment with the help of charity organization Hilal — i — Ahmar and after every three months Lillian visits the place to see if everything is functioning smoothly or not. Previously, the clinic was set up in a pre-fabricated house and now it is shifted to a proper building. "The Bedouin women are very enthusiastic — the mobile clinic goes into the desert with a doctor, a midwife and a nurse distributing posters and teaching/lecturing women aged 15 and above about breast cancer and its symptoms, women are checked and if anyone is detected with the disease she is taken by ambulance to the city for treatment. Everything is free of charge." quips Lillian proudly.

Lillian has also taken a section of the clinic in Afghanistan run by the Swedish Afghan Community and has set up a Maternity Clinic. Located in Khanabad near Mazar e Sharif this clinic provides prenatal and post natal care to the poor Afghani women. Lillian plans a third one for the displaced Palestinian women but due to certain political problems it will be based in Jordan near the border so that the Palestinian women can cross the border into Jordan for treatment. In fact, Lillian's charity walk from Teheran to Oman last year was to raise money for this aim in mind and she was successful in raising US\$ 100,000. "But more money is needed because I want to set up a well-equipped hospital here instead of a small clinic", remarked Lillian.

Lillian Donders is so fascinated by the Arab world and especially her association with the Bedouins that she is lovingly referred to as Shaikha Leela — the title she got from an Omani Bedouin tribe. "Each day at the caravan the locals would come with meals — not one day did we cook — it was one amazing thing to the next amazing thing. I have made so many Arab friends that I feel more Arab than a Dutch!"

In Dubai since February this year, Lillian has decided to make Dubai her second home and will spend her time shuttling between Syria and Jordan to continue working on her mission. In this interview to City Times, she gives us some more details about her trip, her cause...

How did you get the idea of trekking for such long distances with your camels and why?

It was for a cause — as a little girl I liked helping people. I shopped and entertained the elderly from the age five to bring a smile on their faces. Besides, lots of people in this world are underprivileged and it is the duty the privileged ones to look after them. I was always fascinated by the Arab people and their way of life. I love the Bedouin people and when you reach the hearts of people, there is not much difference, they become friends — the Syrians, Omanis, Emiratis, Iranis are all wonderful people, so warm, so hospitable. It was my immense love for these people that I wanted to do something for them and when somebody in Syria asked if I could volunteer for raising awareness about breast cancer among the Bedouin women I decided I would. That's how it all started. Since I had breast cancer myself I knew very well how shattered and helpless a woman gets with the disease. This thought coupled with my own situation made me more determined to offer help in whatever way I could to the people I so dearly love and feel at home.

Could you tell us who your sponsors have been in this great cause?

My biggest sponsor has been a lady in Switzerland who had breast cancer herself. Shell, Bustan, Oman Ministry of Tourism, Thuraya, Al Zawawi Trading and a number of private persons who would not like to be named have been the other generous donors.

Will you be undertaking more charity walks in the near future?

I have plans to trek on the same route as Sir Wilfred Thesiger across the Rub al Khali or the famous Empty Quarter which he did in the 1940s. But for this I have to wait for my husband to retire because it requires a lot of organisation and planning and sponsorships.

While I was trekking, I heard the news that Thesiger had passed away. In Ras al Khaimah, I had the opportunity to stay with a Sheikh whose father had played host to Thesiger or 'Mubarak bin London' as he was popularly known, on a similar walk.

What message do you have for people suffering from breast or any other form of cancer?

Those women who suffer from breast cancer or any other kind of cancer should learn to fight the disease and do not be negative about it. My advice is to have a positive thinking and do things you really like to make your life agreeable and fun!

Whenever after undergoing chemotherapy, I felt awful I would go to a coffee shop, sit there and relax. I did this everyday to clean myself and exercised to get my muscles working again. On some days, I walked 25 kilometers after a chemo-session.

Secondly, I have great faith in camel milk. I drink two litres of camel milk everyday — its close to mother's milk and it can keep people away from a lot of illnesses. It doesn't have cholesterol or any fat and makes your immune system stronger — it also brings about improvement in allergic reactions. In cancer, it gives you lots of strength — that's what I have experienced.

Why were you invited on CNN?

I was given seven minutes on CNN's Country Report on Oman and it was a great opportunity to express my feelings about the Arabs. I had three objectives to highlight in the programme viz: that the Middle East is a strategic region, that the people of this region are fantastic and that the hospitality is enormous. Not many people in Europe know about the Arab culture and the people here. I wish they would understand the Arabs more.