

Samantha Dobson took up the latest Gulf for Good challenge and trekked through the mountains of Ethiopia raising money to educate children in Addis Ababa. She shares her story.

DIARY OF A CHARITY TREK



You could say I have unfinished business in Africa. Years ago I worked as a journalist in East Africa and I have been witness to the horror of famine and war. My Dubai life of luxury has at times felt somewhat unjust in comparison. It took little persuasion, then, for me to sign up to Gulf for Good's Trek Ethiopia, a challenge that involved walking 120km over six days at high altitude through the Simien Mountains, summiting Africa's fourth highest peak, Ras Dashen, 4,620m high. By completing the trek I'd raise enough money to transform a small community project in Addis Ababa.

THE CHALLENGE BEGINS
One of the two things needed to prepare for the challenge was physical fitness. As an avid runner and self-confessed gym junkie, that was the easy part. Gulf for Good graded the trek 'demanding' on their difficulty scale - meaning it required

excellent fitness levels. To support challengers, Gulf for Good hosted two weekly training sessions in which I got to meet fellow trekkers and increase my fitness levels. The sessions were a combination of hotel stair-climbing, long treks and beach circuit training.

Coming up with the required Dh18,000 in sponsorship was the hard part. I figured that something to benefit kids should involve kids, so in February, my son's rugby team ran the 72km relay race through Wadi Bih near Dibba. Never attempted before by a team so young, the nine- and ten-year old boys finished the race in six hours and 50 minutes, and raised a whopping Dh20,000 for the children of Ethiopia.



Day one

DUBAI - ADDIS ABABA
Leaving my husband and two children felt like leaving an arm behind. But with their support and encouragement, I joined the rest of the 19 members of the Gulf for Good team. We were a group of mostly strangers with three things in common - a sense of adventure, a sense of social responsibility and a sense of humour. Representing ten different countries, for many this challenge was immense. Some had never slept in a tent; some had never trekked before. For others, the veterans we all looked up to, this was the third, fifth, or even ninth Gulf for Good challenge. When we boarded the plane for Addis Ababa, as strangers we were slightly guarded, polite and

civil to one another. After ten intense days together the connections we made and shared were beyond friendship, equal instead to that of close family members. Mother to us all was Gulf for Good leader, Patricia, who guided and reassured each one of us through the gruelling week that we faced.

Once in Addis I was assigned my tent partner, a former model turned yoga guru from California. Jenny and I bonded instantly, her giggles, crucial stretches and essential oils from that moment earned her best friend status. We enjoyed our last night of comfort, tucked between crunchy-clean hotel sheets, trying to snooze away the gnawing feeling of trepidation.

Day two

ADDIS-GONDAR-DEBARK-SANKABAR (3,230M)

From Addis we flew 750km north to Gondar, the country's once splendid capital. Nicknamed the Camelot of Africa, Gondar's now derelict castles (and the odd burnt out tank) bear the scars of Ethiopia's civil war. We boarded a bus and began the 120km journey to Debark, entrance to the Unesco-protected Simien National Park.

The tarmac stopped about when the rain started. We bumped and jiggled our way over collapsed roads and splashed through yawning potholes. The harder the rain fell, the more the dust turned to mud and the more our bus skidded and squelched up the track. Inevitably we got completely stuck. We were

towed to safety by a handy bulldozer and a handful of sniggering road-workers. We reckoned one of them was no more than eight years old. It had taken us two hours to travel 14km.

Sankabar – six jarring, eternal hours later – was a bleak misty field inside the national park. We slurped what was to become our nightly staple – soup followed by rice or pasta with a spicy tomato sauce. To get warm, Jenny and I curled into our small cocoon tents that slept two snugly. On a thin foam mattress with a rock in my back and my bones still rattling I fell into a restless sleep.



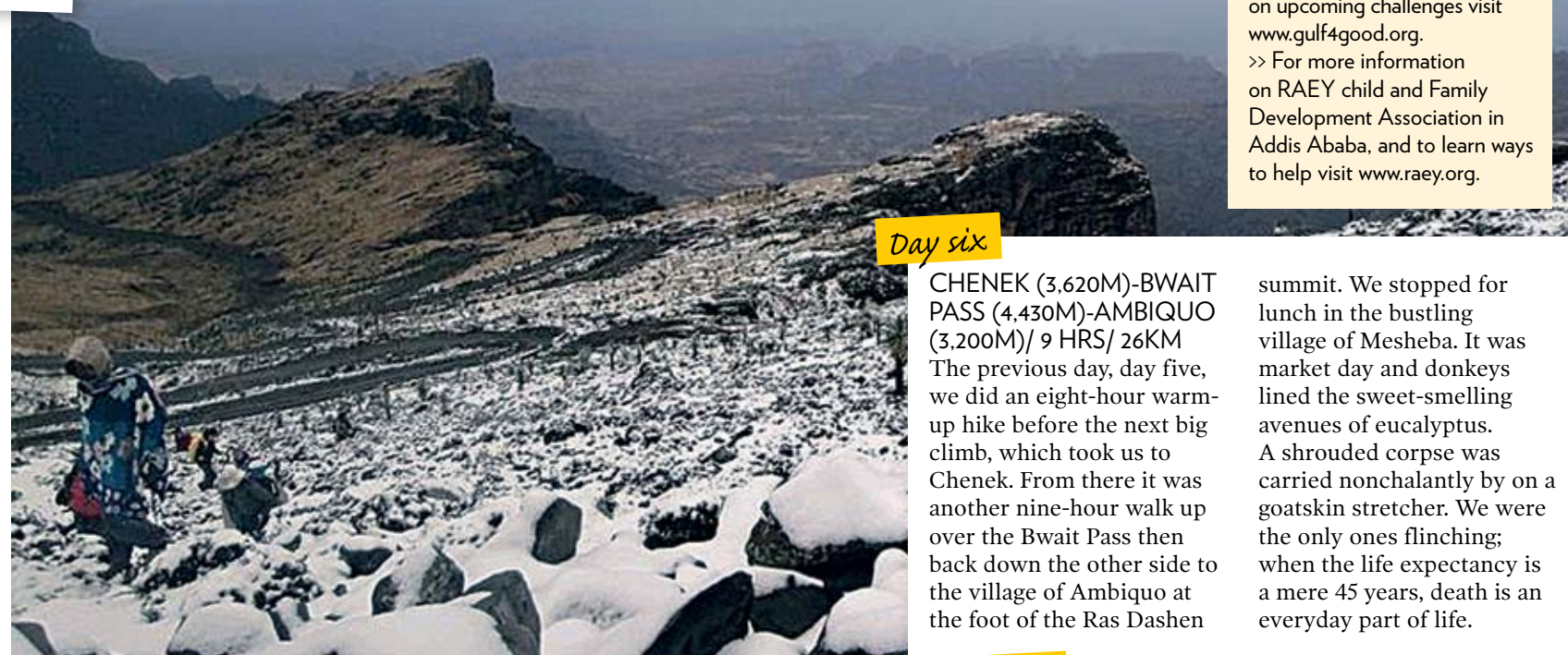
Day three

SANKABAR (3,230M)-GEECH (3,580M)/5 HRS/ 15KM

Our campsite, one of the lower points of the Simien Mountain range, sat at a lung-screaming height of 3,230m above sea level. The country uses the ancient Coptic calendar, which means that although it was March 12, 2011 in the rest of the world, it was actually only March 3, 2003 in Ethiopia. The time we were woken was 6am, the Ethiopian equivalent of midnight. After our standard steaming oatmeal breakfast, the rain eased and through the clearing mist we were

treated to glimpses of green hills rolling into cavernous, bottomless drops, and narrow waterfalls that collapsed thousands of metres below us. It was tough, but satisfying walking and the landscape slowly changed from lush green shrubbery to parched, cracked yellow tussock. Following our local guide – under the protection of three armed guards – we carried all we needed for the day. An army of donkeys followed loaded up with our food, tents and increasingly sodden mattresses.

As evening fell, we staggered up through the clouds to the village of Geech. The hills were a misty blue. The sound of dogs barking, roosters crowing and children yelling, carried on for miles through the cold mountain air. The cook, with a live chicken flung over his shoulder, disappeared unceremoniously clutching a knife. That was dinner.



Day six

CHENEK (3,620M)-BWAIT PASS (4,430M)-AMBIQUO (3,200M)/ 9 HRS/ 26KM

The previous day, day five, we did an eight-hour warm-up hike before the next big climb, which took us to Chenek. From there it was another nine-hour walk up over the Bwait Pass then back down the other side to the village of Ambiquo at the foot of the Ras Dashen

>> Gulf for Good is a non-profit charity that organises exciting adventure challenges around the world. Participants raise funds to be donated to hand-picked charities in the region. For more on upcoming challenges visit www.gulf4good.org. >> For more information on RAEY child and Family Development Association in Addis Ababa, and to learn ways to help visit www.raey.org.

summit. We stopped for lunch in the bustling village of Mesheba. It was market day and donkeys lined the sweet-smelling avenues of eucalyptus. A shrouded corpse was carried nonchalantly by on a goatskin stretcher. We were the only ones flinching; when the life expectancy is a mere 45 years, death is an everyday part of life.

Day four

GEECH (3,580M)-SUMMIT IMET GOGO (3,986M)-GEECH/ 5 HRS/ 12KM

Night brought with it perishing cold. I slept fitfully, my head pounding and my heart racing to the point of nausea. Recognising these as the symptoms of altitude sickness, I resigned myself to taking medication. Of our group of 20, over half were by now suffering the same. By the end of the next day, three had to abandon the challenge and go back to Addis.

Today's trek took us through barren alpine tussock with families of indigenous Gelada baboons rummaging in the grass in front of us. A scramble at the end had us up Imet Gogo where the ground dropped away into a dramatic vista of depth and wonder. Sculpted by 40 million years of eruptions and erosion, the Simiens are fondly dubbed the 'chess pieces of the gods'. What lay

below us was a haunting mix of sheer escarpments, jagged cliffs, deep gorges, and stone columns. No wonder Ethiopians claim this as the roof of the world.

On the trek back down to camp, the clouds once again darkened. Torrential rain turned to hail with stones the size of the frozen goat droppings we crunched across. We sheltered in a nearby mud and grass farmhouse, picking our way between goats and chickens to huddle, steaming, around the smoky fire. We were invited for home-made coffee, a thick, deliciously bitter drink. We were also offered Ethiopia's staple *injera*, a spongy pancake with the consistency of cold, moist foam rubber, topped with a fiery chilli sauce.

Walking back to our tent, we were followed by grinning barefoot children. My feet burned with privilege in my climbing boots.

Day seven

SUMMIT DAY: AMBIQUO-RAS DASHEN (4,620M)-AMBIQUO/13 HRS/20KM

4am, our intended time of departure, we woke to torrential rain. By the time we set off, daylight shone weakly through the easing rain. What followed was a long, hard slog uphill through snow and ice. The higher we went, the more light-headed I became and the more my chest felt like exploding for lack of air. Over 4,200m, walking becomes difficult, making the seven-hour trek up more of a shuffle. A break to attempt a few bites of trail mix and a lung-full of oxygen left me frozen within minutes. There was nothing for it but to soldier on, the great grey peak looming ever closer.

The last 200m, we abandoned packs and started the final climb, clinging on to icy rocks with our fingernails, giddy on

thin air and adrenaline. For anyone with a heartbeat, the view atop that panoramic precipice overlooking the Abyssinian abyss is enough to take your breath away.

The biting wind had us down before the euphoria could sink in. We were faced with the hobble back down the mountain for five long hours in the deafening silence of falling snow and contemplation.

By now our backs, feet and legs were singing with fatigue. Turning the corner to reach camp – 13 hours and an eternity since we began – we heard singing. The entire village had come out to welcome us back from the peak. As I was presented with cheers, smiles and a bunch of wild flowers, the enormity of our achievement finally hit.

Tears of exhaustion, relief and the overwhelming sense of accomplishment fell uncontrollably.

Day eight

AMBIQUO (3,200M)-BWAIT PASS (4,430M)-CHENEK (3,620M)/9 HRS/ 26KM

The 'sting in the tail' day, this tested even the most determined among us. The summit was over, our bodies

ached, but we still had a nine-hour trek with a kilometre of snow-challenged climbing back over Bwait Mountain. Teeth gritted, the smell of home, the promise of a shower and our camaraderie got us all back safely.

Day ten

ADDIS ABABA - RAEY CHILD AND FAMILY DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

Day nine involved a gruelling nine-hour bus ride and one flight later, we arrived back in Addis.

As a group we had raised \$60,000 for RAEY, a community development centre in Addis Ababa that offers education, health, nutrition and nurturing to children aged three to nine years who've been affected by HIV/Aids, and their

families. The school has 112 students with over 7,000 on a waiting list. Only the most destitute are admitted. Many have lost one or both parents to HIV/Aids and all live with disease and extreme poverty. We spent our last day with them, fitting their new shoes, distributing pencils, feeding them lunch, and bathing in their gratitude. It was humbling how, with relatively little effort, we had literally transformed the lives of not just the children but also their guardian families.



BACK HOME

Now, back in Dubai, I have blistered lips, two black toenails, 21 fleabites and still-aching muscles. I've never felt more radiant. Trek Ethiopia was the ultimate challenge; the discovery of a land forgotten by time, connections with

new life-long friends and a personal journey that pushed my physical and mental limits.

The greatest satisfaction lies in knowing that I have single-handedly done something to help educate more than 100 Ethiopian children. What a week!

TEXT: CONTRIBUTOR SAMANTHA DOBSON / PHOTOGRAPHS: SAMANTHA DOBSON