

From the Desk of...

Rob Lilwall

Adventurer & Speaker

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About a year ago I wondered whether it was time for a new expedition. My eyes roved across a map of the Middle Kingdom and settled in the western expanses of Xinjiang, sometimes described as China's Wild West. In particular, there is a big desert there, the second biggest sandy desert in the world, The Taklamakan. It is notorious for swallowing whole caravans of traders without a trace during the Silk Road era. Even to this day, very few people have crossed it. I read a book by the most successful expedition to date, consisting of a team of 15 Brits and Chinese, and 30 camels in the mid-1990s. Whilst in London for a speaking gig, I managed to meet the expedition leader. I asked him about the plausibility of my newly conceived, somewhat crazy plan. Instead of camels, I would try and cross it dragging my supplies in a homemade beach cart. I would plant a series of caches along my route beforehand to pick up and walk between. It would thus be a simple expedition, but demanding. I would probably do it in 2017 as there was much to plan, what did he think? In so many words, he said "Go for it, but if you wait until 2017 you will probably not get round to it - do it this year!"

The whole thing still seemed a little mad, but I have done numerous crazy expeditions before across such wild environments as Siberia's frozen tundra, Papua New Guinea's thick jungles, and Afghanistan's war torn passes. And so I set to work to turn the crazy

idea into a reality, taking one tentative step forwards after the next. I got a cart designed and built. I got fit. I spent endless hours pouring over satellite images to plan a route. Then I flew to Xinjiang, and spent a week with a hired car and a driver dropping off the caches. And suddenly, unbelievably I was setting off, alone and trembling, into the wilderness. It would turn out to be one of the hardest experiences of my life.

The challenges were multiple. For the first week, on the fringes of the desert I walked through maze-like pioneer farming communities, and I had to swim across a fast flowing river 12 times to get all my gear across. I then entered the desert proper. The Taklamakan's huge sand dunes are infamous, some of them rising to over 100 metres high. Over these, I had to drag my cart of gear and supplies, which weighed up to 150kg. The cart worked well on the sand, and could handle going up and down slopes, but what made progress particularly difficult was that the dunes were not simple smooth hills, but rather contorting, twisting, swirling masses of ridge and slope. The temperatures were in the mid 30s, and sometimes my progress slowed to half a kilometre an hour.

Gradually I made progress, and sometimes I was able to pick up speed and make use of the several asphalt roads that now run through the desert, serving the burgeoning oil industry. At other times I faced

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setbacks. Once I had to turn back from my intended route, as I realised I was going so slowly I would run out of water. On other occasions, as I tried to sneak past oasis agricultural communities, I was caught by the local police (it is hard to sneak when you are dragging a heavy cart which leaves tyre marks in the sand) and was forced to reroute onto the old Silk Road on the south side of the desert. The police were concerned that what I was doing was too dangerous.

Eventually, after 71 days of desperate physical, mental and emotional toil, I stumbled out onto the edge of the desert, and

threw myself fully clothed into a shepherds' stream. Finished and satisfied, and glad to be alive.

Like on all adventures, it was an internal journey as much as an external one. On previous expeditions, I have learnt about what I call the "attitudes of adventure" – attitudes which I intuitively developed and which were vital for getting me through, and which I actually find immensely helpful in the rest of life. They include that we can choose to embrace (rather than resent) challenge; the importance of clear goal setting; our amazing ability to grow as problem solvers when we have to; calculated risk-taking; and the importance of small acts of self-discipline.

On this expedition, I also learnt some new lessons.

One was to gain a better understanding of how to face fear. I was often almost paralysed by fear on this expedition. But what I came to realize was that fear is just a feeling. The feeling of fear generates vivid scenarios and thoughts of doom and disaster. But alongside the feeling of fear, we also have a choice to

use our reason to think through the reality of the situation. So for example, sometimes when in the deep desert, my fear inclined me to an internal dialogue of "you are going too slowly, you are running out of water, this is too hard, no-one can rescue you here, you are trapped and alone". But when I applied my reason, it said "yes, I am going slowly, but I expected to. And I am moving forwards at a steady pace. In fact, I know from the map that the dunes will get smaller in a few kilometers, and I have plenty of water to last me to my next cache." So, whilst I did not dismiss the feelings, I allowed my

reason to determine decisions about how to proceed. This kind of cognitive restructuring process was hard work, but it worked well, and showed me that courage is something we can grow in.

Another key lesson was to do with facing setbacks. As mentioned, encounters with local police forced me to significantly change my route from my original vision for about a quarter of the journey. At first, this was a crushing disappointment for me. But the realization which this gave rise to was extremely important. I realized that I had been pushing myself to my very limits and trying my very best when I encountered this setback. This meant that even though I was not getting the exact outcome I originally desired, I could get up with my head held high and keep going with enthusiasm and daring. I just reminded myself that the important thing is to keep trying my best from this point forward, whatever might have passed.

I got back to my home in Hong Kong 3 days ago now. I feel grateful for the adventures past, and excited about applying the lessons I learned to whatever challenges life brings along in the future.

About Rob Lilwall and The Insight Bureau

Rob Lilwall is an adventurer and speaker, and the author of two books. He provides inspiring speeches based on his "Attitudes of Adventure" which provide invaluable lessons for the way we lead ourselves and lead others. He has given motivational talks to more than 50,000 people in over 20 countries around the world.

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www.insightbureau.com +65-6300-2495 engage_us@insightbureau.com

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