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Around the world on foot

Serge Roetheli has completed an epic journey. The Swiss has just spent five years running around the world, covering a distance of 40,912 kilometers accompanied by his wife on a motorcycle. The aim behind this modern Don Quixote's feat was to raise awareness of children's rights. By Alain Wey



In the course of the past five years he has run across five continents, logging up a distance of around 8,000 kilometers on foot per year. A native of the Canton of Valais, Serge Roetheli completed his run for children in need on 7 May this year in Saillon/VS. Such a feat demonstrates attests to not only an outstanding sense of adventure but also a physical effort that literally takes the breath away. Using nothing but leg power, he completed the equivalent of three to four marathons per week, accompanied only by his wife Nicole on a motorcycle. The tour began on 13 February, 2000, starting in Africa, then moving on to the Middle East, Asia, Oceania and South and North America. At the beginning of this year the two adventurers returned to Europe and crossed Portugal, Spain and France before reaching their final destination. For most of us the sheer scale of the distance covered – no less than 40,912 kilometers between start and finish – is unimaginable. Serge Roetheli is 50 years old and has spent the last twelve years “running around the world”.

Within the last twelve years the Roethelis have undertaken three huge voyages on foot, first crossing Europe (a 9-month odyssey), then crossing South and North America (3 years) and finally their run round the world (5 years): a total distance of more than 75,000 kilometers covering 66 countries on five continents. “Running is not an end in itself. It's a way of life and a way of interacting with others. It represents a specific phase, perhaps the finest and most intensive of our lives. On 7 May this year one chap-

ter came to an end: a phase of life that lasted twelve years.”

Serge Rötheli, mountain guide and former boxer, has got to be a little crazy. When in 1995 he crossed the Americas from South to North, i.e. from Tierra del Fuego to Alaska, a distance of 24,115 kilometers, he was dubbed “Forrest Gump” after the film character. He is akin to a modern Don Quixote, accompanied by a female Sancho Panza on motorcycle. “If you can do something for your own well-being and happiness and at the same time give something back by tackling crazy challenges like running around the world to help children in need, then I want to remain crazy and Utopian till my last breath.”

Powerful emotions

For Roetheli and his wife, Europe was the continent that triggered the strongest emotions and sense of belonging, both at the start of the tour and at the end. “As soon as our feet touched European soil in Lisbon, we felt as if we were home.” Serge and Nicole were overwhelmed by the welcome they received at the Eiffel Tower in Paris from 200 children aged between five

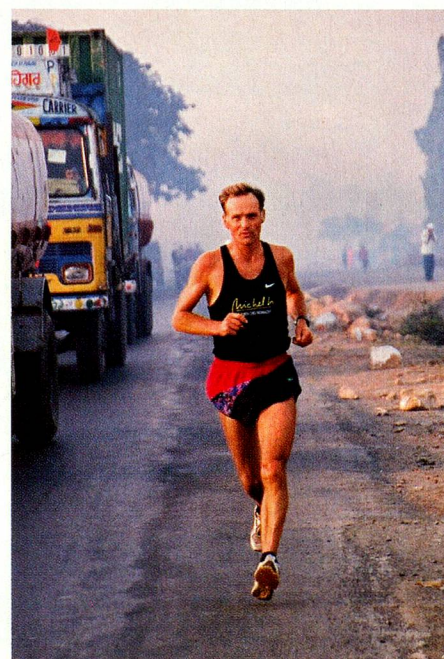
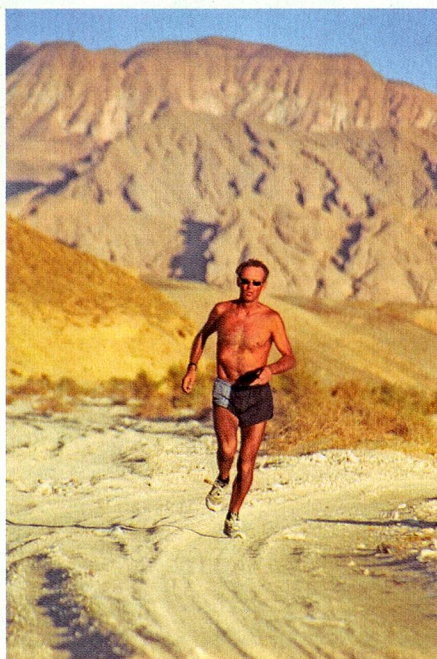
and ten. In Geneva the adventurers were greeted by 400 children waving flags representing all the countries of the world. “From Paris onwards, we were accompanied virtually every day by Swiss running alongside or following us on bicycle, even if it was only for a symbolic stretch of one kilometer.”

Poverty in Africa

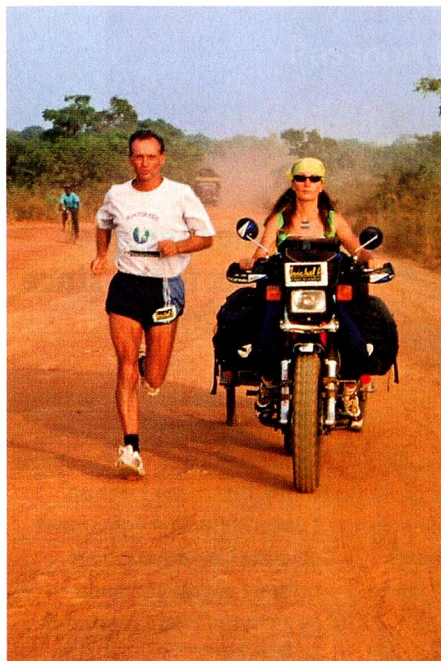
The couple had to contend with serious threats to their health in Africa. “We suffered from severe attacks of malaria. In Madagascar Nicole was in a coma. When we were in Togo I had a temperature of 41.6°. Due to illness and an unbalanced diet, Africa was the most difficult continent in terms of sheer effort, progress and heat. And the confrontation with poverty is hard to take for people like us who have had the luck to be born in an affluent country. Often children who spotted us came out of school and ran fifty meters alongside us. These were truly inspiring moments. We never tried to explain to people what we were doing, either in Africa, Asia or Latin America. We were simply there to share the moment with them.”

Hospitality in the Middle East

The couple crossed the Middle East in the space of four months. “They are the most hospitable people in the world for anyone travelling on foot. We were offered meals without being asked for anything in return. Drinking tea with them – a true ritual lasting three hours – we discussed the world's problems and tried to solve them. The people treated Nicole with great respect and tolerance. Unfortunately our stay in the Middle East was overshadowed by anxiety, because we arrived in Cairo on 15 September,



Serge Roetheli's World Run: "I'll gladly remain crazy and Utopian ...



2001: four days after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. No-one could predict how people in the Middle East would react to the event. Ninety percent of the people we spoke to were very unhappy about the events in New York, and they were afraid. Armed soldiers and tanks were everywhere in Egypt, Jordan and Syria. Because we were constantly on our guard and a little tense, we were unable to fully enjoy our stay there."

Fatalism in Asia

The heat and humidity was a huge challenge in Asia, with temperatures well above 32 degrees and 100% humidity. "I had to reduce my average daily distance from 28 to 35 kilometers and

could only run 2 kilometers at a stretch. We were constantly seeking shade. Also, there are so many people in Asia – particularly in India and Bangladesh. We were surrounded by huge throngs of people wherever we went, making our progress even more difficult. And the poverty there is endemic. Hundreds of thousands live on the street. Their fatalism and acceptance of their fate is simply incredible. They are extremely inventive and somehow manage to survive." Serge Roetheli was run over by a car on the route from New Delhi to Nepal. "500 people stood around me, I was sweating and had pain everywhere, and no-one came to my aid. I would rather have fled the scene and hid somewhere to bandage my wounds. The main problem was the enormous hordes of people." After a five-day rest, Serge and Nicole continued on their journey.

Recovery in Australia

After weeks of unbalanced diets and having to cope with Asia's huge throngs, the Australian leg of the tour was a welcome opportunity for R&R. The world travellers crossed the natural paradise of Tasmania during the winter, when it rains six out of seven days. In their year in Oceania the couple enjoyed a freedom and sense of space on a scale that is now inconceivable in Europe. "Oceania is Europe without the stress! But we always had to keep an eye out for dangerous animals like poisonous snakes on the road, crocodiles in the rivers, and jellyfish in the sea in spring."

The Americas

"We were delighted to return to Latin America, because this continent is very close to our hearts.

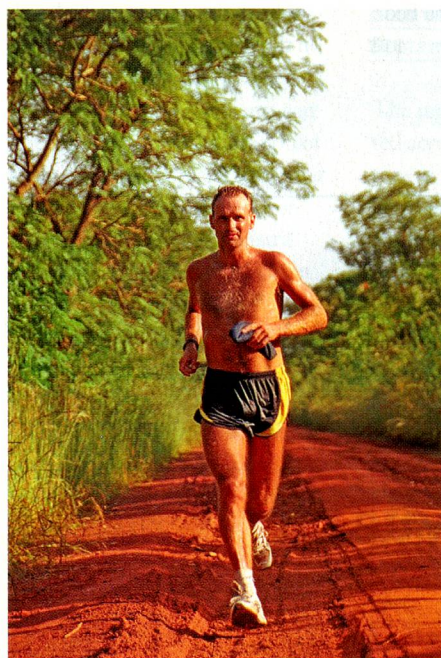
SERGE ROETHELI'S RUN ROUND THE WORLD IN STATISTICS:

- 970 marathon distances,
- 37 countries and a total distance of 40,912 km,
- 64 pairs of running shoes,
- CHF 320,000 donations for three projects for the "Run for kids" organisation: Aid for street children in Colombia, a food programme for infants in Africa, and the "International Vision Quest" project initiated by the Roethelis and an Alaskan eye surgeon to perform eye operations on people who cannot afford treatment
- Extreme temperatures: 48° in the shade in Mauritania, -29° near Montreal, -45° on the summit of Aconcagua
- 2 or 3 fondues and raclettes, the favourite national dishes, in five years. "We ate raclette with a Swiss from the Valais who runs a small bistro in Madagascar."
- www.serge-roetheli.ch

With their ebullient nature, Latin Americans are our kindred spirits." Serge Roetheli climbed the Aconcagua, at 6959 meters the highest mountain in Latin America. What impressed the couple most about North America was the enthusiasm and generosity of the people, who organised spontaneous appeals for their cause. "We thought we'd have it easy there, but we had to tackle four tornados in Florida (July–September 2004). It rained really hard and then a cold spell set in. America was almost the most difficult continent as far as climatic conditions is concerned." Two moments that stand out were the reception organised for the couple on 5th Avenue in New York, and the overwhelming welcome in Montreal.

Now the time has come for Nicole and Serge to share their experiences with others through lectures, a book and a film to keep their memories alive. "We undertook this world tour for three reasons: to be free, to share a marvellous adventure, and last but not least, to collect money for children in need." Serge Roetheli sums up his philosophy of life thus: "I have a feeling that it's less important to do great things than to do little things well. Arranged side by side throughout a person's life, these will perhaps amount to great things. Like a world tour on foot."

Account for donations: Association International Vision Quest, Banque cantonale vaudoise, 1001 Lausanne, Suisse, Empfänger S 5103.92.77, ccp: 10-725-4
Book: "La Terre à en perdre la boule", by Nicole and Serge Roetheli, September 2005, Editions La Sarine.



... to my last breath if it will help children in need".