

Features

The Long Walk

In 1998, a young british ex-paratrooper was at the southern tip of Chile when he decided to head home to England-on foot. Thirteen years later, he's still walking. Can anything stop Karl Bushby?

Author Grant Stoddard Photography Holly Wilmeth



KARL BUSHBY IS MELAQUE'S MOST CURIOUS FULL-TIME RESIDENT. This small town on Mexico's Costa Alegre has been the former British paratrooper's base of operations for three years. Every morning he sits in an indoor-outdoor café two blocks from the ocean and nurses an orange juice, making use of a weak wireless signal from somewhere nearby. Karl opens his battered four-year-old Toughbook computer and checks his inbox, hoping to find an email telling him he can get back on track to become the first man to walk around the world with unbroken footsteps. Bushby was in his late 20s when he began this journey. If and when he arrives at his hometown of Hull, in the north of England, he'll be in his late 40s to early 50s.

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"It's quite a long walk," the 41-year-old says mildly. "But I've made it my mission, and, frankly, failure isn't an option."

And yet, failure would seem assured. Look on a map for an overland route from the southernmost tip of South America to the British Isles, and you'll quickly come to the conclusion that there's only one remotely conceivable option. Look a little closer and you'll see that in addition to the incredible distance, geopolitical hurdles, arduous terrain and climatic extremes presented by this path, there are three points that seem to render the journey an abject impossibility. The first is the Darien Gap, a dangerous jungle that connects South and Central America. Then there's the Bering Strait, an angry 58-mile expanse of water separating Alaska from Russia. The third is the English Channel, a choppy, slate-gray 21-mile stretch that also happens to be the one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. "If it were simple or easy," says Bushby, "someone would have done it before."

Bushby took the journey's first step on November 1, 1998, in Punta Arenas, Chile. He had a few hundred dollars in his pocket and a satellite phone, laptop and solar-powered charger donated by the British Army, from which he'd recently been honorably discharged. He bought a used pushcart, which he rigged for rough roads and nicknamed The Beast. His father, a former British Special Forces operative, helped Bushby with logistics, monitoring his progress, sending supplies and logging the photographs and fastidious diary entries Bushby would send home. His mother began a collection for Bushby among her coworkers at a cocoa factory in Hull.

Initially, Bushby set a target pace of 20 miles per day, but the beginning of the trip was beset with problems. The Beast fell apart on the first day, and his toenails popped off in the first week. After a while, he found his stride. Villagers were charmed by his skinny frame, piercing blue eyes, chin-length blond hair and the funny-looking reconstituted cart filled with gear he was pushing. They often stopped and asked if he was Kurt Cobain and, if so, why was he selling ice cream along the Pan-American Highway?

In 2001, Bushby came to the most dangerous part of the journey, in Colombia, when he reached the Darien Gap. A jungle dense with jaguars, snakes and armed revolutionaries, the Darien allows few foreigners to pass through. So Bushby dyed his hair black and disguised himself as a Colombian drifter. At one point, he camouflaged himself under a mat of branches and floated along the crocodile-infested Rio Atrato for four days, boats-some carrying soldiers-passing just feet from his head.

When he got to Mexico, Bushby bought another cart (Beast II) and headed up Mexico's Pacific coast. He made it onto U.S. soil in 2002 and ran into a new set of problems, including the searing 120-degree heat of the Mojave Desert and less-than-amused Arizona state troopers, who ordered him to pull Beast II off the interstate. After Bushby followed the Rockies up to Montana, his cart-carrying all his possessions-was stolen from the parking lot of a bar near the Canadian border during a New Year's Eve celebration. "My gear, my passport, photographs, annotated maps, details of every spot that I'd pitched my tent-all gone," he says. "Not a great way to ring in 2003."

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"Weather conditions and hauling the sled meant that I was only making half my normal distances, sometimes less," he recalls. "And at the end of hundreds of miles of that, I was going to attempt something that everyone said would certainly kill me." Crossing the Bering Strait.

HERE, YOU'D BE FORGIVEN for asking a simple question: Why is Karl Bushby doing this? He left England for Chile when he was nearly 30, secure in the knowledge he wouldn't see his home country's shores for at least 14 years. Most perplexing, he left an eight-year-old son, Adam, behind. "Most of my family and friends were absolutely mystified," he says. "So was I."

Seventeen-thousand miles later, he's got a clearer idea. He'd always wanted to be a career soldier, but after several dreary postings in Belfast, he realized that because of severe dyslexia, he'd never rise above the rank of corporal. Then he went through an acrimonious divorce. Feeling stuck, Bushby figured he needed to exorcise his demons, even if that meant spending many years in the wilderness and jeopardizing his relationship with his young son.

He figured he might die trying to cross the Bering Strait, so he called his mother, who flew to Alaska to meet with him and brought Bushby's son. "It was odd meeting this young man," says Bushby. "He was a baby when I last saw him, and now he was on his way to being a man. It was strained. We didn't really know what to say to one another. But the thinking was that if the worst was to happen, at least we'd have met."

During the last ice age, a land bridge connected Alaska and Siberia. Nowadays the strait is a churning mess of ice floes and inhospitably cold water that hides hungry apex predators such as orcas and polar bears. When Bushby set off, conditions for making the crossing were as good as they'd been in living memory. The skies were clear, the mid-March temperatures cold but not excessively so.

He recruited French adventurer Dimitri Kieffer, figuring the company might make the difference between life and death. After a few hours of walking on relatively flat ice anchored to the shore, they came across the fast-moving conveyor belt of sea ice and swam a short distance to get on board. "Some of these chunks of ice were the size and shape of trucks and houses," he explains. "We were swimming across spans of water in immersion suits, then having to climb up sheer ten-foot walls of ice, hauling a four-hundred-pound sled behind us."

Increasingly erratic currents took the adventurers north of the Arctic Circle, then east, south and west before depositing them within sight of the small Russian village of Uelen, in the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug 13 days later. "I called my dad from the satellite phone to tell him that we'd spotted land," he recalls. "Father doesn't like to count his chickens, so he told me to call him back when I had dirt in my hands. The next day I rang and said two words: 'Terra firma.' This was the hardest part of the journey, and we'd done it. I was headed west and going home."

The euphoria lasted only a few hours. Bushby was quickly apprehended by the authorities and detained for 58 days before being released. He narrowly avoided a ban from Russia, which would have killed the expedition.

When Bushby finally resumed his trip in the Russian far north, he was hampered by visa problems. "I can be in the country for ninety days, then I have to leave for ninety days," he explains. "That's inconvenient enough, but traveling in Chukotka is temperature-dependent. I can only walk in the winter months. For the first two-thousand miles there's no road. In the spring, everything melts and turns to swamp and rivers."

After three attempts inside Russia, Bushby was nearly out of money. He scraped together what he had left and caught a flight to Mexico, where he will stay until he secures an extended visa. "I was looking for somewhere cheap where I could lie low. When I got here to Melaque, I remembered passing through six years earlier, so I stopped."

With little money for even local travel, Bushby's world has been reduced from a 36,000-mile path encompassing four continents, 25 countries, a frozen sea, six deserts and seven mountain ranges to the four blocks between this little café and the messy, dimly lit, stiflingly hot apartment he's currently looking after. One morning, he gets an email from a producer in Hollywood who offers to fly him to Los Angeles to discuss the possibility of buying the rights for a documentary or perhaps a feature. "If this works out, I could be back in Russia in January," he says excitedly.

He didn't make it. En route, he was detained at the airport in Mexico City and held for several hours, until his connecting flight to Los Angeles had departed. "Oh, well," he writes, philosophically. "Such is the game." Bushby arrived in L.A. 10 hours behind schedule, yet he managed to have some "interesting chats" in the time he was there. The fate of the expedition remains unclear, but after four years of maddening difficulties, there's a glimmer of hope. For Karl Bushby, a glimmer is all that's needed.

GRANT STODDARD wrote "Finder's Keepers," about the search for lost silver in New York Harbor, in the October 2009 issue of *Hemispheres*.

THE ROUTE

Bushby set out from Punta Arenas and crossed the deadly Bering Strait before stopping. Total distance: 36,000 miles.



8 Responses to "The Long Walk"

Nathan Says:

November 13th, 2010 at 6:19 pm

I hung out for a few days with Karl in Ecuador in 2000. Great guy. Surprised to see how far he's made it, sorry to hear he's having problems going forward. Good luck!

Linda Bello-Ruiz Says:

November 17th, 2010 at 5:06 pm

Wow! How interesting! I live in Barra de Navidad, next to Melaque and would love to meet him and hear his stories! Linda

Kyla Poirier Says:

November 28th, 2010 at 10:23 pm

GRANT!!!! KARLS LEAVING!!! He has done it! continues on the 1st of Dec. Karl we are all going to miss you here. You have made friends along your travels but here you made family. Good luck! Grant great article!

Joyce Pittman Says:

November 29th, 2010 at 4:01 pm

We have had the privilege of meeting and finding a wonderful friend in Karl...who I affectionately call my MARCO POLO...what an awesome young man. Also just had the pleasure of meeting his mom and son just now in Melaque..We will miss your gentle ways..be safe Luv Joyce and Gary

PATY SOTO Says:

November 29th, 2010 at 6:27 pm

GREAT ARTICLE!!!!!! COME BACK TO MELAQUE!!!!!! WE'RE GOING TO MISS YOU ALOT!!!!!! MY BEST WISHES!!!!!!

Ruth Hazlewood Says:

November 30th, 2010 at 10:55 am

Good luck Karl!
You will be missed, but we wish you the best of luck on the rest of your expedition!
Saludosssssss!!!
Ruth

John C Deal Says:

March 31st, 2011 at 4:21 pm

To: Grant Stoddard
Grant,
Its been a long time. Great article in Hemispheres – you captured the essence of what drives Karl Bushby. There are a number of Karls in this world being driven by past experiences to accomplish great feats. I hope all their stories are captured as eloquently as you did for Karl Bushby. Good luck to a great adventurer....R, John

Ruth Says:

April 11th, 2011 at 8:44 pm

How could you leave your son? I hope he does not become a lost run away like you.

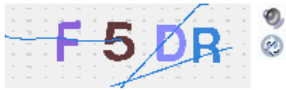
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