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Round-the-world trekker parks sled for summer

A Seattle adventurer is taking the summer off but will continue his quest to conquer the world all by human power.

By Susan Gilmore Seattle Times staff reporter

It's hard to imagine that anyone would rave about encounters with bears in remote Russia or about hauling a 300-pound sled in temperatures that reached 30 degrees below zero.

But Dimitri Kieffer is no ordinary traveler. He hopes to circumnavigate the globe, using only human power. The Seattle adventurer is taking the summer off after a three-month, 370-mile wintertime trek through Russia, but in August he expects to park his sled and turn to his bicycle as he continues his mission to complete 27,000 miles, back to his starting point at Knik Lake near Anchorage.

If he completes his dream, he will be one of a handful of men to circle the world by human power.

Kieffer, 45, a native of France who came to Washington as an exchange student, said he is in no hurry to complete his trek and figures it may take him until 2016 biking, hiking, pulling a sled, rowing across the Atlantic Ocean and even kayaking.

"I'm the happiest I've ever been in my life," Kieffer said in Seattle after finishing the Russia segment, which included hauling a 300-pound sled through deep snow. The weather, he said, was pleasant; the coldest it got was 30 degrees below freezing.



enlarge ALAN BERNER / THE SEATTLE TIMES Dimitri Kieffer dons a cotton-covered caribou garment given to him by people he met on his trek through Russia.

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Since his start in Alaska in February 2005, Kieffer has traveled about 3,250 miles over 291 days.

Kieffer could travel only in the winter and spring because he needed the snow to haul his sled. Using a snow machine, or even dogs, would have violated his pledge to make the trip all under human power.

He has missed just one year, in 2009, when he fell off the roof of his house and broke his back.

In August, he will return to where he left his gear in Russia and resume his trip by bike.

He has paid for his adventure with money saved from his work at Microsoft. Kieffer worked for Microsoft for 14 years as a globalization manager, in the East Asian/Middle East group.

He also has picked up sponsors for his so-called Nexus Expedition who provide him with his gear and food.

His travels with Microsoft propelled him to tackle the world, by foot, he said.

"I traveled a lot with Microsoft and met people, but I could never dwell in the country or learn the language," said Kieffer, who is learning to speak Russian in his travels. "I now have a better understanding of the world and see cultures in a way I couldn't do before."

Crossing borders, bears

Along the way he has spoken to schoolchildren in Russia, skirted bears and even been apprehended at the Russian border in 2006 and detained for 54 days for visa violations.

His toughest year was in 2008, when he crossed a frozen lake that started melting and he ended up in a river in his sled, running into logjams. The sled went under, sucking him under the ice. He didn't know whether he'd survive.

In April, Kieffer finished his trek from Kamchatka to the Magadanskaya Oblast region of Russia by pulling a sled along the Siberian coast and river beds. As the spring advanced and the snow started to melt rapidly, Kieffer had to walk part of the last hundred miles with a backpack, pulling the sled. He also used the sled as a boat while going downriver.

When he starts biking, he plans to complete 2,400 miles in Russia. Then, he will head through Mongolia en route to Senegal in western Africa. After that, he plans to row across the Atlantic Ocean to French Guiana, located north of Brazil, which could take as much as three months. Or he may travel from the Canary Islands off Africa to Barbados.

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A longing for people

Kieffer said he has never been frightened on his journey, even during the encounters with bears. He carries no guns, though he does have pepper spray. He lost two tents and once when his shoe broke he ended up in a village with a cobbler. He dreamed of eating barbecue, subsisting on dried food yet craving sugar.

The hardest thing, he said, was being away from his family and friends, and he didn't know about the major Japanese earthquake in March until he started receiving panicky text messages from friends making sure he was safe.

"I had this longing for being with people," he said, "but I made friends along the way. When I'd arrive in a village they'd offer me anything. In three months I went to three villages and spent no money, and in most places I was a welcome guest."

He knew no Russian, except what he remembered from his Russian grandmother, but has picked up the language on his trek.

When Kieffer crossed the Bering Sea into Russia, accompanied by a British adventurer, Karl Busby, he and Busby leapt icebergs to make the crossing. The pair became the first people in modern times to go from Alaska into Russia by foot.

While the crossing was only 58 miles, the pair went more than 150 miles because of the shifting ice and they had to swim part of the way.


Listening to silence

Kieffer said while he missed his friends and family, he was never lonely, listening to old radio broadcasts, music and audiobooks. "It was a good time to disconnect from life," he said, "and listen to the silence."


And even if he doesn't finish his worldwide trek, he's still accomplished something that makes him proud. "The journey is more rewarding than the destination," Kieffer said. "I'm focusing on what I've learned and telling my story."

As for his future, Kieffer said he'd like to work with refugees and teach computer classes. "I can use what I learned from Microsoft and work with refugees. It's time for me to give, rather than receive."

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