

ONE WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

PADDLE THE NILE

SARAH DAVIS



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SARAH DAVIS

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Travelling the length of the Nile is no mean feat; filled with adventure, challenges and dangers. Sarah completed this momentous journey with determination and strength. Paddle the Nile is a gripping and motivating read.

Levison Wood — Author, Photographer, Explorer

Paddle The Nile is an inspirational book about a dream that came alive. Sarah showed so much resilience, strength and spirit in an environment that was unpredictable. This book will motivate you to go and make your dreams come true.

Bruce (Hoppo) Hopkins — Bondi Rescue Lifeguard

Risking what many said is impossible did not sway Sarah from daring to deliver on her dream. Her book is much more than an account of the actual epic journey. Paddle the Nile transported me into the heart and mind of a person who truly lives to challenge the limits of our human potential. Being an adventurer myself, I resonate with what it took to 'put the paddle in the water'. Sarah takes you through the entire two-year journey, from concept to completion. She is a role model for us all.

Jerry Dunn — America's Marathon Man

Sarah's compelling account of her Nile expedition includes encounters with hippos, crocodiles and death-defying rapids. Paddle the Nile takes you to heart of Africa, with all its charm and challenges, beauty and brutality. If you're going on an adventure there's going to be risk, it's how you manage that risk that will be the difference between success and failure.

Luck will take you so far but is overrated when it comes to dealing with locals totting AK-47s and being incarcerated within a dubious judicial system. Having a plan and a cool head when facing adversity requires a special mindset and Sarah's story is full of overcoming adversity in its many forms.

Strap yourself in for a high-octane ride down one of the world's greatest rivers ...

Lloyd Figgins — International Security Advisor and Author of The Travel Survival Guide

This is a remarkable adventure and lesson in following your dreams, however impossible they might seem. What follows is an epic journey filled with drama, fun, cultural insights and endless challenges.

Alastair Humphries — Adventurer, Author and Keynote Speaker

This book is dedicated to two people.

To my mum, Angela Davis, for her endless love and support despite the stress and worry she has endured with all my exploits.

To my great mate Brad Deeth, 23 November 1972 – 3 January 2019.
Rest in peace, my beautiful friend.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The stories in this book reflect my own recollection of events, and are written from my perspective. Where possible the people mentioned in this book have been contacted prior to publication for permission to use their name(s) in this recollection. Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of those depicted. Dialogue has been re-created from memory.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	1
PART 1	3
Chapter One: THE IDEA	4
Chapter Two: PLANNING	8
Chapter Three: REACHING AFRICA	16
PART 2	27
Chapter Four: TO THE SOURCE + DAY 1	28
Chapter Five: DAYS 2-7	41
Chapter Six: DAYS 8-10	52
Chapter Seven: DAYS 10-13	63
Chapter Eight: DAYS 13-19	70
PART 3	85
Chapter Nine: DAYS 19-24	86
Chapter Ten: DAYS 25-43	96
Chapter Eleven: DAYS 44-49	108
Chapter Twelve: DAYS 50-71	116
PART 4	127
Chapter Thirteen: DAYS 72-81	128
Chapter Fourteen: DAYS 81-88	138
Chapter Fifteen: DAYS 89-103	146
Chapter Sixteen: DAYS 103-119	155
Chapter Seventeen: DAYS 120-126	166
Chapter Eighteen: DAYS 127-137	175
PART 5	187
Chapter Nineteen: DAYS 137-150	188
Chapter Twenty: DAYS 150-157	194
Chapter Twenty-One: DAYS 158-169	205
Chapter Twenty-Two: DAYS 170-176	211
Chapter Twenty-Three: DAYS 177-178	217
EPILOGUE	223
THANK YOU!	227
REFERENCES	233
ABOUT SARAH	239

PROLOGUE

“*Don't die without embracing the daring adventure
your life was meant to be.*”

Steve Pavlina

The Nile is Africa's longest river and disputed to be the longest river in the world at 6,693 kilometres in length¹. This mighty river has two tributaries: the White Nile and the Blue Nile. The longer White Nile rises in central Africa, with its most distant source being in either Rwanda or Burundi — the jury is still out on which it is. For my expedition, I chose what many consider to be the Rwandan source.

In a tributary of the Rukarara River, deep in the Nyungwe Forest, the Nile begins to make its way through Rwanda, Tanzania and Uganda, via Lake Victoria. It continues north to South Sudan and then up through Sudan.

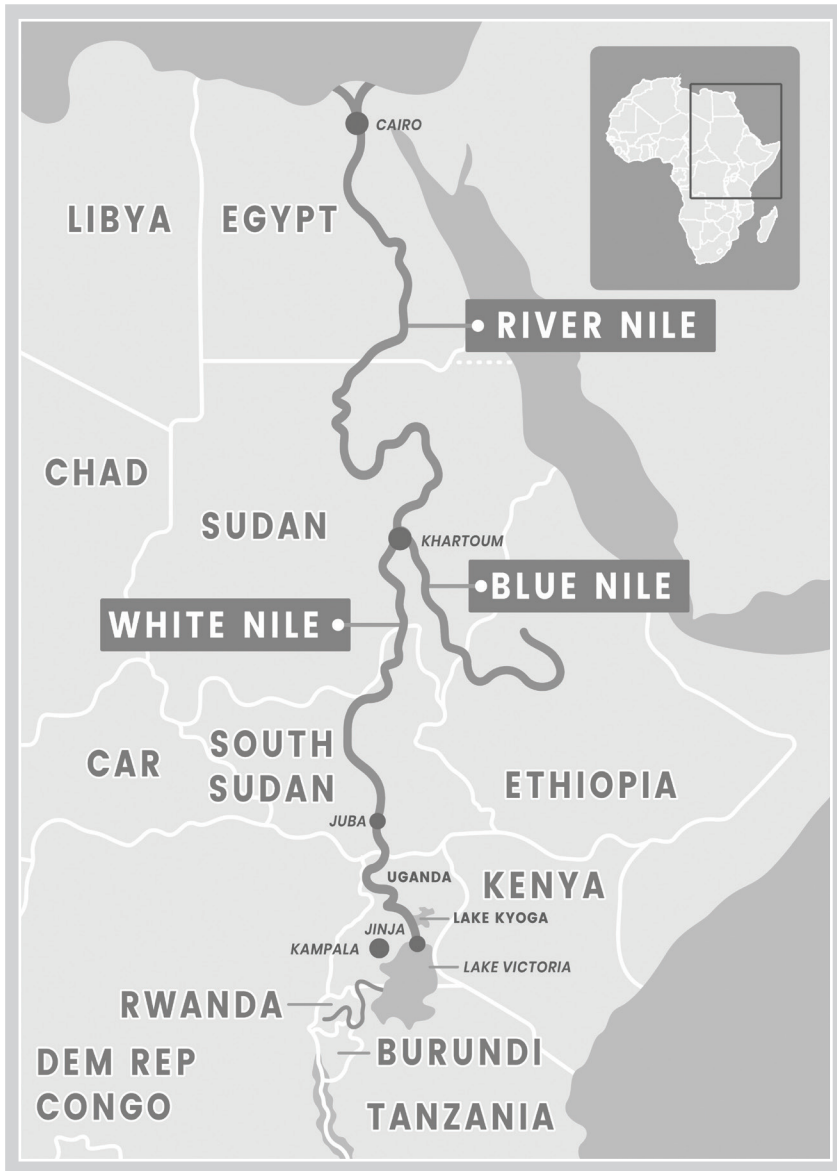
In Khartoum, the capital of Sudan, it is joined by the Blue Nile, which starts some 1,400 kilometres earlier in Lake Tana in the Ethiopian highlands before making its way to this confluence. The joined rivers head up to Egypt. North of Cairo, it becomes two branches, which empty into the Mediterranean Sea, marking the end of this incredible river.

My plan was to complete a source-to-sea human-powered descent of the Nile from Rwanda to Egypt, except for a section through South Sudan that was deemed too risky from a security and political standpoint. That still left me with approximately 5,300 kilometres to cover.

I was going to need people with me. And as much as possible, I wanted them to be local people — for the deeper cultural experience I hoped it would create and compensate for the local knowledge I lacked.

I anticipated that from start to finish, it would take me at least five months, considering rest days and time to plan and prepare each section.

In the military, there is the well-known adage which says that 'no plan survives first contact with the enemy'. Expeditions are no different – no plan survives contact with – well, pretty much anything. It was certainly the case in my expedition. While things didn't always go to plan, what eventuated was an epic, life-changing adventure.



PART 1



January 2016 to October 2018

Before paddles hit the water

CHAPTER ONE

THE IDEA

“If you want to be happy, set a goal that commands your thoughts, liberates your energy and inspires your hopes.

Andrew Carnegie

The enormous, extremely irate hippo charged us again. We frantically tried to paddle our raft to safety, but we weren't fast enough. I felt a tug and glanced behind to see she had sunk her enormous teeth into the back of our raft and had hold of it. She wanted to rip us apart! And this was only day six on the water. Little did I know it was going to be one of many incidents on this incredible adventure.

The path to this terrifying encounter started some two and a half years earlier in far safer surrounds at home in Australia, when I had a distinctly lower heart rate.

It was New Year's Day 2016, and the sun was about to rise at Bondi Beach in Sydney. I watched the pinpoint of light on the horizon grow; the warm hues radiated across the sky. A new day and a new year. The reset button had been pressed.

I reflected on the challenges of the year now behind me. I'd broken off a friendship that had become toxic and pushed me to the edge. Then a romantic relationship had ground to a halt. And the heavy black cloud of depression also visited me once again. It was a year I was glad to bid farewell.

So, while I felt the warmth of the new-day sun on my face, my focus slowly drifted to the good things the year had brought. Even though I was still brushing myself off emotionally and feeling tender, I was happy. I had clawed my way out of the pit of depression and was relieved to watch 'the black dog' fade into the distance. I had a rewarding job, was healthy, and I felt utterly free for the first time in a long while. There was much to be grateful for, and I smiled, savouring this feeling.

I now had a blank canvas to fill, and that excited me, but what I also experienced was a restless, nagging feeling this wasn't 'it'. That there had to be more to my life. Staring down the barrel of twenty-odd years of corporate life, each consisting of 48 weeks of work interspersed with four weeks' leave, filled me with horror. It made me feel trapped and claustrophobic.

I was never particularly motivated by promotions. Sure, my ego liked the idea of important-sounding titles, and the pay rise would have been welcomed, but there wasn't enough intrinsic motivation to chase it. I wanted to create a life that made me feel truly *alive*, one that brought a mix of purpose, excitement and challenge. I was still trying to find my place in this world. To not feel like the square peg being rammed into the round hole, and to stop twisting myself into a shape that fitted in.

It had always been my life outside of work that brought satisfaction and joy. It was where I challenged myself, set goals and pursued them fervently.

These goals were mostly in sport — surf lifesaving competitions, triathlons, ocean swimming, half-marathons, marathons, and ocean surf ski paddling.

It also fed my highly competitive nature and gave me a sense of achievement and direction. Beyond that, I lived for travel. I craved getting off the beaten track, away from the masses, backpacking and going on adventures.

The need for change was clear. The answer, however, to the question as to what I was going to do, was not so obvious. It's hard to be what you can't see. And nothing I'd seen had jumped out at me or given me something to aspire to.

During the first few months of 2016, I began to gain clarity and focus, and I came across some people who had achieved ‘firsts’. They weren’t your classic explorers or adventurers. You know, those ex-military Bear Grylls-types, or people who’d been scaling mountains since they could walk.

One was a woman who had completed a kayaking expedition down the Amazon, yet she didn’t have a background in kayaking or expeditions, just a willingness to leap into the unknown and give it her absolute best, backed up with some fierce determination.

This triggered something in me — that’s what I wanted to do! To go on an expedition not done before. Suddenly I could see it; I could see what I wanted to do and be. I’d always read books by explorers and adventures, but it never occurred to me that I could be the ‘explorer’. These people made me realise that it was something I might be able to do. They were ordinary, everyday people with big, audacious dreams. It felt like I was finally paying attention to a voice that had been whispering to me all along.

Butterflies of excitement bubbled up just thinking about going on a monumental adventure. I’m not proud to admit it, but my ego also relished the idea of achieving a ‘first’.

The next question was, what was I to do?

It had to involve paddling, as this was my main sport. I had started paddling after becoming a volunteer surf lifesaver at North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club. Since then, as well as surf ski paddling (using a form of kayak for paddling through the surf), I’d also been lucky to compete in ocean ski races around the world, and it had evolved into a sport I loved.

With that decided, it was time to do some research. At first, I tried to find somewhere close to home that I could paddle. *Kayaking around Australia?* A few people, including a woman, Freya Hoffmeister, had beaten me to it. She had also made her way around South America. That was impressive!

The Amazon? Also done.

With my geography failing me, I decided to look up what the world’s longest river was ... The Nile.

Could this be it?

What made my heart beat faster was that my first search failed to find any woman who had gone from the Nile’s source to the sea, self-powered. A knot of excitement started to build, and I got goose bumps. This combined two things I loved – kayaking and travelling. And the icing on the cake was that it would be through Africa, a continent I adored.

This was it. I was going to paddle the Nile!

I couldn’t remember any other big decision giving me a sense of such unquestionable certainty.

I’d normally be looking at the pros and cons, deliberating, looking at the facts and making sure it was the right decision. And this decision had every reason to put me in the ‘barking mad’ category, with a list of cons longer than my arm. But it felt right, for reasons I couldn’t explain. Despite the inherent risks and uncertainty, along with the fact that I had no idea how I was going to pull it off, I felt comforted and confident in my decision.

Now I had my cunning idea, next was working out how the hell I was going to do it. There’s no book or internet site for anything like this. No simple ‘Ten steps to organising an expedition in Africa’. As I would discover, it required tons of research, finding experts in the field, reading and working it out for myself.

Ahead of me were times of near crippling self-doubt and feeling that I had bitten off way more than I could chew — but I was ready to give it my best shot.

CHAPTER TWO

PLANNING

“As you start to walk on the way, the way appears.”

Rumi

An early win was talking to Pete Meredith, who was mentioned in two insightful books I read. One was *Living the Best Day Ever* by Hendri Coetzee about the *Settle the Nile* expedition that went from Lake Victoria to the Mediterranean Sea. The other was *Walking the Nile* by Levison Wood, about his incredible expedition walking the length of the Nile. Both books gave me valuable insights and increased my excitement for the trip, thanks to their descriptions of the countries, the people, the challenges and the environment.

Pete was an integral member of the expedition with Hendri and had provided advice to Levison. He is renowned for his rafting and kayaking expertise, having been involved with, and led, countless expeditions. Without him and his advice, I wouldn't have had a clue where to start. This was a significant turning point in organising this trip.

He told me what was involved, how long it would take, the river conditions, the weather, some of the equipment required, the authorities to engage with, challenges to expect, and costs en route. These conversations with Pete, and many others after, along with more research, helped me gradually develop the plan.

The plan was broken into bite-sized chunks, with each one taking me one step closer to my goal. The process of planning, organising and slowly creating something from nothing was rewarding, and I loved it.

By now a few months had passed since my epiphany, and it was May 2016. While this was all wildly exciting, I forced myself to pause and contemplate what was involved. And it seemed like a good idea to do a reconnaissance trip before fully committing to this crazy idea.

I already had a ten-day trip planned in August to go horseriding across the desert in Namibia, so I decided to spend a week in Uganda, trying white water kayaking, checking out what the Nile was like and talking to the local people.

This trip confirmed my overwhelming desire to undertake this expedition. The thought of spending months in Africa, making my way down the mighty river filled me with excitement.

It also scared the shit out of me. Having seen the monster rapids — one called the *Dead Dutchman* (you don't have to be Sherlock Holmes to deduce why) — and hearing numerous stories of crocodile and hippo attacks, I was terrified. To reduce the risk of fear stopping me, I decided to create some 'community accountability' — by telling everyone my plan I'd be less likely to back out of it.

Before doing that, I decided to brand the expedition. I wanted to be taken seriously and differentiate myself to hopefully attract a following and much needed sponsorship.

Naming my adventure *Paddle the Nile* seemed to be the obvious choice. I drafted a logo and had it professionally created, registered my domain (www.paddlethenile.com) and created my website. I invested in a promotional video, created social media accounts to share my endeavour, and hoodies and T-shirts were printed in readiness.

There was another key decision to be made.

I was about to go on a jolly through some developing countries dealing with – among many challenges – extreme poverty. I had to give back somehow. This was too big an undertaking not to do some good and fundraise. After much deliberating and investigation, I picked CARE Australia as the charity I would support. They are part

of the global humanitarian aid organisation, CARE International, which is focused on ending world poverty.

I chose them not just because of the incredible life-changing work they do, but because they put women and children at the centre of all their initiatives and operate in the countries I was set to travel to. I also began engaging with foreign officials, sending letters to the various bureaucrats for each country. These were the people I needed to approve my expedition or provide support. Being a dual national, both the British and Australian Embassies in the countries I was set to visit were notified of my intent.

By early 2017, I was also making progress on other elements of the plan. This included working out which time of year to go, what equipment to take, which courses I needed to do, such as Remote First Aid, searching for sponsorship and applying for grants. When I wasn't planning, I was working full-time and doing intense ocean ski training ahead of a big 53-kilometre race in Hawaii in May.

As the middle of 2017 approached, I was ready to share my dream. The thought of telling everyone, publicly committing to it, felt like a pivotal yet daunting moment. I was putting myself out there with absolutely no guarantees I could even make it to the start line, let alone finish this expedition. The odds were stacked against me, having never been on — let alone organised — anything like this, and it was going to take me into an environment filled with all manner of potentially lethal situations.

Yet at the same time, the thought of not at least trying to get this trip off the ground felt wrong. I knew I had to give it a shot or regret it forever.

In June 2017, having spent hours procrastinating, with my finger hovering over the 'Post' button, I finally shared my dream with Facebook and all my friends. It was official. I was going to attempt to paddle the length of the Nile. *Go me!*

The response I received was fantastic. Everyone was excited to hear of my plans and looking forward to following my journey. One person responded, 'I will keenly follow how you intend to avoid crocs and hippos.' *Yeah, you and me both.*

Mum wasn't exactly thrilled at first — a few unsupervised internet searches threw up horror stories of crocodile attacks, hostile situations and more. Once I explained the precautions I was taking, along with why this trip was important to me, she supported me 100 per cent. I'll be forever grateful to her because I know it wasn't easy watching me carry out this goal.

In July 2017, I went on a two-week reconnaissance trip to Sudan and Egypt. I wasn't sure what, if any, support I was going to get. However, there was no need for concern, as everyone I spoke with was excited and incredibly supportive of my plans.

I met with the British and Australian embassy delegates. There were also meetings with government officials as well as CARE representatives to find out about the work they were doing and see if there might be an opportunity to visit some of their projects. Finally, I met with local paddlers, who I hoped would join me on my journey or help find paddlers to join the trip.

Back home, my attentions turned to fundraising. Raising money for charity turned out to be easier than finding sponsors for the expedition. The latter proved to be an exercise about as fruitful as banging my head against the proverbial brick wall. I kept sending out emails, having meetings, hitting up everyone in my network and beyond ... with limited success.

I did manage to secure my primary sponsor, Shaw and Partners Financial Services, who generously came on board as soon as I announced my plans. I knew the co-CEO, Earl Evans, who was a fellow paddler and supporter of North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club. Having Shaw and Partners as my main sponsor was a huge win, but what meant so much to me was the belief they showed in what I was doing. Additionally, Nurmi Accountants and Mayo Hardware came on as financial sponsors.

What really blew me away were my friends who donated money and equipment (even my dentist and gastroenterologist donated). Having never been married, but seeing this as my 'big day' (or big six months), I decided to set up a gift registry as a way of getting some of the equipment. It allowed people to see what their money went towards. The fact that my friends were willing to put their hands in their pockets was humbling — it reduced me to tears.

There was a selection of equipment suppliers as well: Big Water Rescue Equipment, Kathmandu, Braca-Sport, Bennett Paddles, Canoe Innovation, Vaikobi, Borika Mounts and NuZest.

Nile River Explorers were going to loan me the rafting equipment and assist with accommodation in Uganda, and Peak Dynamics offered to do some psychological testing to monitor how I dealt with the stress during the trip. Getting these sponsors helped build my confidence.

There were countless trips to doctors and specialists. We didn't need the wheels falling off in the middle of nowhere during this expedition. I became a human pin cushion with all the vaccinations I needed, and was given an impressive selection of prescriptions for the medications to take with me. Most were standard meds, such as antibiotics, but it also included PrEP to prevent HIV in a worst-case situation of rape in countries where HIV is prevalent.

In November 2017, I competed in the World Surf Ski Championships. This was a 22.5-kilometre race in Hong Kong that proved to be the pinnacle of my sporting career. I represented Australia and took out top spot on the podium for my category. After this race, I scaled back my time on the water.

I focused on building muscle rather than working on my paddling fitness, knowing the latter would build during the expedition, besides, I already had a good base. I didn't want to risk developing overuse injuries from paddling before I even started. Instead, I hit the gym to get my 'Popeye' on and bulk up. This would help prevent injuries and ensure I had plenty of muscle reserves.

By now I had dropped to four days a week at work, as it wasn't possible to train, plan and work full-time. I also needed to develop a risk management plan for the trip. Finally, we were in my area of expertise, having spent close to 20 years in the field of risk management. It did cause a chuckle when people found out what I did. There is a certain irony that someone who manages risk professionally would take on an expedition filled with many deadly dangers.

There was also 'life admin' to be done. Cheery things like getting a will in place and setting up a power of attorney. Then sorting out direct debits, cancelling memberships, putting stops to health insurance, and advising banks that I'd be smashing my credit cards overseas.

Among all of this, I needed to set a date for this adventure to begin. And I eventually did. I announced, with some trepidation, that, on 18 October 2018 paddles were going to hit the water. It sounded good; however, I wasn't sure how I'd make this target, given all I still needed to prepare. Setting a date created a sense of urgency that cranked up my preparation and planning.

I managed to get some media coverage. It started with an article in the local paper. This led to a TV interview with the ABC (Australia Broadcasting Corporation) News filmed with me and the interviewer on kayaks on Sydney Harbour, which was fun! Then there were articles in some adventure magazines, along with a couple of podcast interviews.

The purpose of getting media exposure was to attract sponsors and donations to CARE, as well as increase my social media following. The impact, however, was limited, and getting sponsorship proved near impossible. So instead, I had to start digging into my savings to buy equipment and pay for the trip.

I hosted a fundraising event at the local sailing club. A few friends got involved, but my mate Brad Deeth was instrumental. Brad and I worked together, so our daily proximity meant he heard first-hand all the highs and lows of organising this expedition. He was an absolute gem and always knew the right thing to say when I despaired about the problems I was facing. He got what I was doing and was behind it 100 per cent, even putting on a fundraiser at work. I was so thankful for his support, as well as his friendship.

Shaw and Partners put a considerable chunk into the donation pot. They kindly named CARE Australia the charity for their annual client event. It was an event with over 1,000 guests at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, in Sydney. Earl invited me to share a little of my journey and about CARE Australia. Speaking in front of such a large crowd was slightly nerve-wracking, but well worth it. Shaw and Partners matched the funds raised on the night, taking the total to A\$16,115 (Australian dollars). Earl presented me with one of those enormous novelty cheques – I'd always wanted one!

My biggest coup was Australian actor Hugh Jackman being snapped in one of my *Paddle the Nile* hoodies. That was pretty cool. He's a member at North Bondi Surf Life Saving Club, and one of his

close friends who I know, forwarded the details of my trip to him. Hugh was happy to have a chat and hear more about my plans. He, and his wife Deborra-Lee Furness, donated to CARE Australia, and I gave him a hoodie in return.

Despite the progress, there were still key action items to be ticked off, such as getting the in-country teams in place. These were the people who would be joining me on the water. For the rafting section from the source in Rwanda through to the final rapids in South Sudan, I needed three experienced rafters. This was critical. Some people had approached me, but they lacked the experience.

I had advertised on adventure websites, and even contacted the Australian Army, who were potentially keen but couldn't commit because I wasn't able to categorically say when it would start or how long it would take. Other 'minor' issues, such as having the required approvals, were no closer to being resolved. It got to a point where trying to do all this remotely from Australia was proving tricky. Progress was grinding to a halt while the planned start date drew ever closer.

So, I decided to chance it and go to Africa, hoping everything could be sorted on the ground there. With much apprehension, I booked my one-way ticket to Uganda and handed in my notice at work. It was time to get packing and head to Africa for one last push to turn this seemingly impossible dream into a reality.

About a month before leaving, I received an official letter from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Tourism asking me to reconsider my plans. Having been engaging with them for over a year, during which they had been nothing but supportive, even arranging meetings for me in Cairo, this came as a big surprise.

It was a jolt to open the letter and read their request, making my stomach flip and forcing me to question myself and my plans. I'm naturally fairly compliant, and to go against a government directive felt wrong. I could have really done without this!

The last thing I wanted to be seen as was that reckless fool ignoring advice, getting into trouble, and causing the government substantial costs to send in the cavalry.

However, they didn't know the level of preparation that was going into this and the detailed risk management plans I'd developed. I looked at it from their perspective and guessed it was primarily some arse-covering, so if anything did go wrong, they could say they had

warned me. I had to back myself and my preparation. Their lack of support, however, meant the assistance I had been promised in getting the approvals for Egypt was no longer available. *Bollocks*. I uneasily ignored their letter, ate some chocolate and got on with things.

Come 26 September 2018, I was at the airport. My life in Sydney was packed up, I was gainfully unemployed and had nowhere to live. My excessive 57 kilograms of luggage was checked in. And as I was handed my boarding pass, I heard a familiar, 'Hello there!'

To my surprise, four friends were there to see me off, all wearing *Paddle the Nile* t-shirts. I couldn't believe my eyes. Tears rolled down my cheeks through a big, appreciative smile. We had a coffee together, final group photos, and then it was time to really say goodbye and head to departures.

I felt like a base jumper doing their first jump, having never strapped a parachute to their back – ill prepared and taking a total leap of faith with potentially dire consequences.

When I'd initially come up with this dream, I was excited. As the departure date had loomed, everyone kept asking me, 'Are you excited? 'Excited?' Are you kidding me? Stressed? Too right. Overwhelmed and daunted? Now you're talking ...

In the run-up to leaving, I repeatedly said to myself, 'Sarah, next time you feel the need for fulfillment, give yourself a good talking to, go back to bed and wait for it to pass.' I felt I'd conned myself into something I couldn't get out of.

Naturally, people thought I'd be itching to get going. Here I was, about to set off on an incredible journey following my big, bold dream. It was just that the reality of my dream was sinking in, and I was scared shitless.

I was so far out of my comfort zone I couldn't see it. There was still so much to arrange. *What have I been doing for the last two years? What was I thinking even coming up with this harebrained idea?*

There was nothing to do but suck it up and get on with it. Worst case, I reasoned, if I couldn't make it happen, I would have a holiday in Africa for a couple of months. For now, it was time to sit back and enjoy the flight, as much as I could.

CHAPTER THREE

REACHING AFRICA

“Of the gladdest moment in human life, methinks,
is the departure upon a distant journey into
unknown lands.

Sir Richard Burton

Two stops and 30-something hours later, I touched down in Uganda. Despite my apprehensions, it was wonderful to be there. I went straight to Jinja, about 125 kilometres and a three-hour drive from the airport, and to Nile River Explorers (NRE). This was where I'd stayed on my first reconnaissance trip, and the familiarity gave me comfort. It was from here I hoped to find my team for the rafting sections and complete the final preparations. It felt like a massive step forward, trusting that now I'd get the momentum going again and have paddles finally hitting the water.

My plan had been to camp here in my own tent. However, after a lengthy journey, I was keen for a little more luxury. I also wasn't entirely convinced all my gear would fit in my small tent. Today didn't feel like the day to give it a shot. Luckily at the campsite they had safari tents that were big enough to stand up in, with twin beds, so I happily booked one.

I slept like a log that night and enjoyed the treat of waking up naturally — no alarm. After a shower, I made my way to the deck of the restaurant at NRE and sat with a coffee in hand overlooking the mighty Nile. I heard the monkeys chattering and watched them jumping from tree to tree. A couple of tropical birds glided through the air in graceful circles. I sat there quietly, watching the Nile meander past, listening to the wildlife, and soaking it all in. It was a view I could never tire of. It was like taking a big breath, slowly letting it out, shoulders dropping and the tension evaporating.

It began to sink in that I was actually here. Here in Africa.

After the frantic lead up, I felt relieved and utterly free. It was a liberating feeling. The pace of life had instantly slowed, and the constant distractions and buzz were gone. I cut myself some slack and had a couple of days of downtime before buckling back down to organising.

Jon Dahl, the owner of NRE, and one of the head rafting guides, Davey O'Hara (both of whom I'd spoken to before coming out) came to have a chat. With his relaxed manner, Jon gave me the much-needed confidence that I was going to be able to pull this off and he was willing to do whatever he could to help. This included giving me the accommodation at NRE for free, which was very kind. He and Davey were a wealth of knowledge and experience. Meeting them made me more at ease — even if Davey did share stories of ferocious crocodiles that made me shudder. There were other familiar faces from my last trip that made me feel at home.

After a couple of days, I met Paulo Babi, who Jon had told me was interested in being the lead rafting guide. We met at NRE, and as he approached, I was struck by his broad, warm smile. He was in his late thirties and stood about five foot nine. We sat at one of the tables overlooking the Nile. Paulo was quietly spoken but had an enthusiastic and positive disposition. We chatted, but I didn't want to press him too hard about joining the trip, so we sat and enjoyed a juice until I broached the subject.

'So, Paulo, Jon mentioned that you might be interested in joining the trip. Are you keen?' I held my breath.

'Yes, it would be good,' he replied, to my enormous relief.

Now I had my lead guide, and not just any guide — Paulo had been a rafting guide on the Nile for over two decades. He had been Uganda's top freestyle kayaker and represented his country at two world championship events.

He took part in the first descent of the Akagera River from its source in Rwanda (a section we'd be covering), led by Pete Meredith. Having someone with all this experience was reassuring. His nickname was *Mbati*, which means *duck*, coming from his ease and ability on the water. He was always eager to help and had an endless stack of 'dad jokes' ready to use as entertainment.

It was so valuable to have his first-hand experience. He even agreed to ask his fellow rafters and kayakers if there was anyone interested in joining us. I needed two more, including one to double as our safety kayaker.

While Paulo was seeking some fellow adventurers, I cracked on with getting official approvals and other tasks. There were days it went well, but plenty with no progress, even steps backwards that had me feeling like throwing in the towel (but, instead, reaching for chocolate once again). It was frustrating and stressful. I continually repeated my mantra 'control the controllables'. There was no point focusing on things outside of my control or influence — easier said than done!

I knew a hefty goal like this was never going to come easy. If it was, there'd be no sense of achievement. Things happened when they were meant to, and until then, it was a dance between *making* and *letting* it happen. One morning, on opening my email, I received a boost. Some months before leaving for Africa, I was honoured to meet with Dick Smith AC, after writing to him. He is a well-loved Australian, record-breaking adventurer, generous philanthropist, political activist and highly successful entrepreneur.

He was going to donate to the expedition. I was incredibly thankful to have this donation as it was much needed and it created a greater belief in my mission.

Even though I had more people 'in my corner', I still felt like an outsider on my one-woman crusade, but this was a familiar feeling. As an only child, and one who had been single a long time, doing things solo was my *modus operandi*. My only child status created some supportive traits and some less so. I think it helped me be self-motivated, independent and self-reliant, traits that were beneficial in pulling off this expedition.

The downside of growing up without siblings includes me being pretty selfish, shocking at compromising, and not reacting well when things don't go my way. Plus, things like going out for a tapas meal is my idea of hell. Sharing. *What? No, no I don't do that.*

I'm not always the most enthusiastic team player and generally feel comfortable taking responsibility and getting on with things, which is in part due to the way I was brought up. That was the example my mother and grandmother set. They were both very independent, single parents after less than friendly divorces, and got on with what needed to be done. So that's what I was doing here, getting on with it. However, it was times like this when a co-driver would have been appreciated.

While I may have been without a co-driver, I had plenty of support. Jon Dahl generously lent me all the rafting equipment on top of the gratis accommodation. There was Natalie Lonsdale, who was part of Hendri Coetzee's *Settle the Nile* expedition. She had become the first woman to complete a descent of the Nile from Lake Victoria.

A special showing of the film documenting the *Settle the Nile* expedition was put on at Jinja Basecamp. This was the meet and greet location for NRE rafting trips and provided great backpacker accommodation. Everyone who came along provided valuable advice. It was a fabulous evening, and I was so appreciative of the warm reception and all the support given. I felt reinvigorated by it.

After the event, someone gifted me a bunch of energy bars and gels. Nicci and Paul, the owners of Jinja Basecamp, gave me some vacuum-packed fatty meat and assisted me with some of the logistics.

Back at NRE, I met a chap called Rob Davies, a Brit who owned a shop in Jinja. His mum was visiting from the United Kingdom and staying at NRE. At the height of my angst and stress, they took me to a local restaurant for dinner. To be out with them, sharing stories and chatting about everything that wasn't *Paddle the Nile* was a lovely distraction, while enjoying a delicious rack of ribs and chips.

Gradually, things started falling into place. The next substantial step was getting my team together – the 'Dream Team'. Paulo had finally recruited two of his fellow rafting guides to join our expedition. The first I met was Koa. I was struck by his beautiful wide smile and good looks. He was athletically built and radiated confidence. Koa was a former kayaking student of Paulo's and a competitive white water kayaker, as well as rafting guide. He would be our safety kayaker when needed.

Then there was Peter, Paulo's half-brother. Peter was an international rafting guide and another very handy kayaker. He was known as 'Little Peter', as he was only about five foot four and could get away with being a teenager despite being in his thirties. This was matched by a crazy sense of humour that was set to have me in stitches regularly. What I didn't know then was how calm and extremely capable he would be in the life-threatening situations ahead of us.

Having the team complete was an enormous relief and allowed me to sleep a little better. Things were looking up!

Before setting off, I decided to get some rafting practice in. Jinja is known as Uganda's adventure capital and was the perfect spot for it. I'd had a few cracks at rafting over the years, but I thought getting a fresh feel for it would be sensible.

I'd done several courses before arriving in Africa, including the Swift Water Rescue Technician course, which involved learning how to perform rescues in white water individually and in teams, as well as understanding the dangers and risks of fast-moving water. Basically, it was three days of having water forced into every orifice. I wanted to make sure if there was an issue in the rapids, I wouldn't be completely clueless. It was a valuable course but brought home just how dangerous rapids can be.

So, it was time to get out there on the white water and hope I enjoyed it, otherwise large sections of this expedition were going to be deeply unpleasant. I was nervous at the thought of facing one of my fears: these massive rapids.

Years back, I'd had a near-drowning experience competing in powerful surf at the Australian Surf Life Saving titles upon the Gold Coast in Queensland. It was the swim race, and while trying to get out through surf, I was pummelled by a set of waves and took what I thought was going to be my last breath as a colossal wave loomed over me. I managed to finish the race, hyperventilating, but the experience had a lasting impact; I really struggle to hold my breath underwater. You potentially need this skill in the rapids if you come out of the raft, because you can get pinned underwater by the powerful currents and turbulence.

I'd also researched how to stay calm in pressure situations and to not panic. I discovered that, physiologically and mentally, we react differently depending on whether we view a situation as either a threat or challenge. If you see it as a threat, you're on the back foot, you don't want to be there, blood leaves the periphery, reducing anaerobic power; your thinking gets fuzzy, and your decision-making skills take a dive.

When you look at something as a challenge, the blood pumps to your muscles, you're on the attack, you're focused and in a positive emotional state. It facilitates better decision-making and effective cognitive functioning. You believe you can meet the demands of the situation.

Now was my chance to try and put it into practice.

Heading into this rafting trip, I reframed the situation from 'threat' to 'challenge'. I kept thinking about how it was going to be fun. I was *choosing* to be here and *choosing* to enjoy it.

After an on-land safety briefing, followed by a short trip to the 'put-in', we got on the water. Paulo was our guide, and we began with a few drills on the 'flatwater'. Then we were straight into it. The first was a Grade V* rapid with an eight-foot drop. After Paulo's instruction, 'Get down!' we sat inside the bottom of the raft and hung on. We dropped down and rodeoed our way through the rapids. *This is awesome!*

There were lulls and flatwater in between the sections of white water where we drifted along, caught our breath and let the adrenaline levels drop. Paulo entertained us with his repertoire of jokes while we meandered, taking in the lush scenery, watching the river birds and catching sight of the odd monkey. A couple of times we jumped in for a swim before psyching ourselves up for the next section.

After plenty of immense rapids, it was time to get out and enjoy a well-earned BBQ. I smiled *all* the way down and loved every minute. It had been a day of exhilarating adrenaline-fuelled fun! I was relieved that I had enjoyed it, and the approach of treating it as a challenge worked. It was a good confidence boost, and when my head hit the pillow that night, I was exhausted and went to sleep smiling.

*Rapids are rated depending on their difficulty and danger from Class I (the easiest) to Class VI (the most dangerous and difficult).

This was nice because I was stressing about everything else.

A big-ticket item still to sort out was getting approvals to complete my trip. For some countries such as Uganda, it was as simple as getting a tourist visa, which I already had. For others, it required specific government-backed letters of support, which were difficult to obtain. It was an undocumented process that required endless researching, emailing and phone calls.

For Rwanda, the tourism section of the Rwandan Development Board (RDB) needed to give me the permissions. For Tanzania, a trip to the Tanzanian Embassy in Kampala, Uganda's bustling capital, confirmed my tourist visa was adequate. While in Kampala, I went to the South Sudanese Embassy and got the visa application form to begin securing the required approvals.

The RDB initially had been super responsive to my emails, but as I got closer, all I heard was crickets. So, I just adopted the African way of assuming that it would all come together. *Keep going until someone tells me I can't.* This 'wing it' mentality was foreign to me and added to the tension.

A week before heading to Rwanda, I received a reply from the RDB to my emails asking me to arrange a 'fixer' in Rwanda. A fixer is someone who knows the local lay of the land, has contacts to arrange logistics, is someone the authorities are familiar with, and can deal with any issues that come up. A good fixer is worth their weight in gold. They recommended a wonderful English woman, Joanna Nicholas, from Rwandan Adventures, who specialise in adventure holidays in Rwanda.

She was a tour operator who'd lived there for years, so she was able to help with the logistics to get us to the start. She also arranged medivac insurance for the guys and me. I already had multiple insurance policies, but this gave me additional peace of mind. It was fantastic to have Joanna on board, but I really didn't expect to need her much once we were on our way. Oh, how wrong I was! Another vital part of the planning was food. This first section was going to take us to some remote areas with limited food resupply points. Having enough sustenance was crucial. Otherwise, I was likely to have a mutiny on my hands.

There had to be enough food for four people for three weeks. It needed to be food that wouldn't go off, didn't take up much space or require much cooking, as well as providing adequate daily calories and nutrition. And it needed to be available in Uganda. This was unexpectedly hard. Using a trusty spreadsheet and the website *Calorie King*, I worked out the supplies we needed. This included oats, Nutella, peanut butter, pasta, rice, couscous, raisins, protein powder (now that was challenging to find, but I managed to discover some in Kampala), a few tins of beans, biscuits, noodles, oil, tea, coffee, Coffee Mate (coffee whitener), tins of corned beef, energy bars, cup-of-soups, sugar, plus washing up liquid and sponges.

I moved from a tent to one of the larger rooms, which quickly started to resemble a supermarket. We also needed plastic bowls to eat out of and basic cutlery to eat with. I gathered my team together for a couple of meetings, and prior to going food shopping, I asked the guys if they had any dietary restrictions. No, they were all good. Paulo assured me my food choices were fine. But, even with my spreadsheet predicting we were going to need about 80 kilograms of food, I was still concerned as to whether we had the right food and enough of it.

At another team meeting, I asked the guys about their medical backgrounds. 'I was dropped on my head as a kid,' Peter said, smiling.

'Any lasting issues?' I asked, not sure whether he was being serious.

He chuckled and said, 'No!'

I checked if they had passports or the necessary travel documents. We were going to need to get a travel document for Koa, who had never left Uganda. I then asked if there was anything else they might need or concerns they had. Silence.

Did they have any contacts with cars I could hire to get us to the start? Did they know anyone with a tent we could borrow for them, as I had not been able to find one in Kampala to buy? Possibly.

I had to gently prod them to get replies, which they seemed slightly reluctant to share. Frank and direct discussions weren't their way. Rather than push them too much, I suggested they think about it and come back to me. This included agreeing to how much I was going to pay them. Koa seemed to be their spokesperson, and when we reconvened, he shared their answers to my questions and raised any concerns. It meant things took a little longer to get organised, but we got there.

Before heading off, I needed to fully test all my shiny new equipment. I was Miss 'All the Gear and No Idea.' Seriously. I'd done some testing prior to leaving Sydney to ensure everything worked, but I needed to be completely familiar with it all before heading into remote Africa. Our lives were going to depend on some of it.

There was getting the stove going, which was way tougher than it should have been, trialling the water filter, getting highly proficient with the GPS and double-checking the satellite phone and the solar equipment. The route, broken into 50-kilometre stretches, had to be mapped out and loaded into the GPS, which was a long and painful process.

I felt a bit of a twat with all this new gear, along with a brand-new PFD (personal floatation device, aka lifejacket), throw bag, helmet and clothing. It was all necessary but felt excessive in a country where the majority live in basic conditions. Many don't have access to electricity, child malnutrition is an issue, and the education and healthcare system is lagging significantly, and sanitation is in need of improvement.

Over 40 per cent of the population live on US\$1.90 (US dollars) or less per day². This put things in perspective. Many are living a hand-to-mouth existence to meet basic physiological needs of food, shelter, clothing, and health care.

When it comes to health, according to World Health Organisation (WHO) data published in 2018, life expectancy in Uganda is 60.2 years for men, 64.8 years for women — ranking Uganda 159th in the World Life Expectancy. Yet the population growth is large, with women, on average, each having a whopping 5.6 births.

Shortly before heading off, I had fun talking about my plans to a group of school kids from an international school in Kampala who were staying at Jinja Basecamp. I was inundated with questions, including how I'd deal with crocodiles, what would happen if my paddle broke? And why wouldn't I just fly?

But one girl blew me away with her insightful comment, 'To do something like this, you need self-belief.' At ten years old, she got it. I felt in need of more of that self-belief. Even with everything in place — the team, the food, the equipment, and our plan — there were still many moments of self-doubt.

One positive of self-doubt was the level of preparation it drove and the lack of complacency it created. I had to acknowledge that but not let the worry take over. It was time to focus on all the planning that had been done, the endless research, the team with me, the people here in Uganda at the end of the phone if needed and be confident that we'd deal with anything that came up along the way.

So, I kept taking action, working through the to-do lists and this distraction took some power away from the doubts. The reality, however, was that I was edging ever closer to paddles hitting the water. *This expedition might actually happen.*