

An Incredible Journey

for Patricia Glyn, finding Africa was the greatest adventure of her life, writes Noor Jehan Yoro-Badat

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Patricia Glyn sits on the veranda sofa, eyes closed in concentration and gently strokes one of her dogs, Mopho. Then, with a deep breath, she belts out the first verse of a Janis Joplin song in a rich mezzo range.

Oh Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz? / My friends all drive Porsches, I must make amends / Worked hard all my lifetime / no help from my friends / So Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz?

Her rendition ends and her eyes sparkle. She blushes. Clearly Glyn is slightly embarrassed. At one point in her life, she wanted to be an opera singer. "But they (the University of Cape Town Opera School) despaired of me," she says with candour, speaking from the comforts of her home, which she has restored to its cosy and serene splendour in Craighall. She stretches her long, trim legs clad in zebra print leggings, and continues.

"Opera singers are single-minded. They don't speak for days, go jolling or holler, like I do. I would come rushing in after having been on the mountain, and I'd be told that I could not sing and do such things. I had to choose. My fellow opera singers were the calm types and I realised that I did not have the temperament. I was too self-critical and have this big voice. So it was gently put to me to rather do something else."

Reluctantly leaving this path in their life, she took the one less travelled. And to borrow a line from a poem by famous American poet Robert Frost, perhaps "that has made all the difference".

Travel she did, pitching her strength "against rivers, mountains and long roads and found great enjoyment in these trials".

She mentions at the beginning of her book, *Footing with Sir Richard's Ghost*, that: "I have become somewhat addicted to the intense joy and profound insights that come with extreme exertion – well, extreme by my 'un-sporty' standards.

"I have climbed Mount Kilimanjaro twice, had a good stab at Mount Aconcagua (the highest peak in the southern hemisphere), walked 500 km from the lowest to the highest points of Zimbabwe and spent three months on a expedition to Mount Everest, reporting from Base Camp on a South African team's efforts to stand on top of the world".

On reflection, she smiles in delight at the person she was as a child. "I was incredibly bookish, the nerd, pale, wan, and nervous practising the piano. I was spectacularly shy and had hang ups about it. I was far too tall for the boys of my age in school."

At 46, like many women, Glyn nonchalantly says she still had hang-ups about her body, but "this body has served you Tricia", she reminds herself.

"That's what I love about life; it explains part of me, of what I can do."

Before the adrenalin kicked in, taking her on the adventuring road, she was in broadcasting for 13 years, hosting different shows on radio and television. In 1996, she was selected to present the controversial documentary series Point Blank, which saw her tackling issues (which in hindsight, she says, was 'before its time') and aspects of South Africa that were often ignored.

She begged on the streets, spent a night with prostitutes on Oxford Road, hung out with crack smokers and spent three days with the dead at a Johannesburg mortuary. On that, she remarks that 'death teaches you how to live' and the 'ignominy of death is the great equaliser in South Africa'.

One of the poignant stories of death that she recalls was of a woman who had gassed herself. "She had her make-up done," says Glyn. "What could have happened to her during the course of putting her make up on that she would want to have been a 'pretty corpse'?"

On a lighter note, she talks of inspiring interviews that she has had with some of the world's best explorers, scientists, and remarkable people who have overcome life's adversities. One in particular has inspired her deeply.

"This woman and her fiancé were out at sea when they spotted a tornado [coming towards them]. Her fiancé ordered her to go down below while he was trying to secure their navigation system. The last thing she heard was him saying 'O my God'. She woke up 25 hours later, the mast was gone, the navigation was gone and he was gone. This was the love of her life. For 42 days she used the stars to navigate," narrates Glyn. For her, it was a testimony of people having the guts to go on and not give up.

One of the most demanding, but profound journeys that she has undertaken is shadowing the footsteps of her great-great-grand uncle, Sir Richard George Glyn and his brother, Robert.

The former had kept a diary of their odyssey, in 1863, from Durban by ox wagon to Victoria Falls, becoming, she said "one of the first white men after David Livingstone to reach the falls". What little her late father John, had told her during her childhood was 'enough to provide fuel' for her 'schoolgirl imaginings and grist for many a playground boast".

It was one Sunday, in spring 2004, when she decided to read a copy of the diary. She read it from cover to cover, and vowed to walk their route herself.

On March 16 last year, keeping to the timetable of her ancestors 142 years before, Glyn, with her expedition team and her 'buddy' Tapiwa, an African dog, set off from Durban. They travelled on the days her ancestors travelled, setting camp when they did. She reached Victoria Falls on July 22, elated, yet sad and introspective about her life.

There is a picture of Glyn in her book; she cuts a solemn, solitary figure, a stark contrast to the majesty of the falls behind her. A closer look reveals the unashamed emotions she bares to the camera. She had walked 2 152 kilometres, tested her physical strengths to its limits and experienced the greatest adventure of her life. What she knew about herself was reinforced during her pilgrimage through the bush: a deeper respect and love for this continent and its people, a deep sense of loss for the destruction of much of its game through wanton hunting, and a strong conviction to help in the conservation of this land.

She writes of her 'epiphany out in the arid bushveld' while paying tribute to the falls by throwing shells, silver coins and a walking stick that she had brought with her:

"... I cried and cried for all the 'monsters; we kill-clever apes have destroyed, each of us in our own way. With each fling of these precious talismans into the foaming river below, I vowed to try to live the resolutions I had made in the bleak landscape of the Makgadikgadi Pans – to tread lightly on the earth and deal gently with her people."

"I resolved to become a vegetarian and to learn an African language. I apologised for the hurts I'd caused and celebrated the contributions I had made ... I thought about what I should do with the second half of my life on the continent I adore, and the walks across her glorious terrains that I hoped still lay ahead.."

At the end of that journey she writes: "... I know that every time I hear the shy chirrup of a Scops owl or smell the dust in crisp, white grass; when I lie under an old tree or feel the late afternoon sun on my throat, I shall be filled with the sense of peace and purpose that was mine for four and a half months on our glorious subcontinent. And I shall do what I have done every day since I returned from the Victoria Falls – I shall celebrate being an African".

Now, more than a year later, Glyn looks rested. She's published her book and has had a hectic schedule of talks about her adventure.

She is ready to tackle another project. She is tight-lipped about it, except to say that her next adventure will be 'on African soil you can bet on that, the dogs will be involved, they're my buddies and I can't leave them at home, and it will have an historical angle".

> *Footiing with Sir Richards's Ghost* by Patricia Glyn is available from the author. Email her at patriciaglyn@wol.co.za