

Peace and paddling

Kayaker *Sandy Robson* has spent the past four years striving to complete an epic paddling journey – from Germany to Australia.

Living in Australia, it's easy to believe we live in a peaceful world. As technology improves we can further convince ourselves that the quality of life under this peace is also improving, and that flow-on effects mean these benefits of peace and happiness spread beyond our borders to the rest of the world. But every now and then an example presents itself to prove that the world isn't what we thought it was and, worse still, the situation may even be regressive.

Under the iron rule of the Mongol Empire, the people living along the Silk Road of the 13th and 14th Centuries experienced what is believed to be one of the longest and most complete periods of peace ever experienced over such a broad expanse of land and plethora of cultures. During these times, it was commonly said that "a maiden bearing a nugget of gold on her head could wander safely throughout the realm". Not only is this no longer true of the nations once controlled by the Mongol Empire, it seems a fantasy for any place we might imagine today.

ADVENTURE IN THE 20TH CENTURY

Just seven years prior to the outbreak of WWII in 1932, a German-born adventurer by the name of Oskar Speck embarked on a journey that began in the Danube River and concluded in Australia just seven years later. Travelling by folding kayak, Speck's travels would see him passing through the Middle East, Pakistan, India and Southeast Asia. Such an undertaking does not occur without its fair share of hardship, which in Speck's case meant deprivation, harsh weather and the occasional threat of violence from the people he met along the way (his diary describes several such incidences, of being shot at and of being detained by indigenous people, among other things). However, Speck's journey went rather smoothly overall, until he gained shore in Australia. 'I had reached my goal, after seven years and ... I walked straight into internment, for Australia and Germany were at war,' he wrote. Despite being made a prisoner of war for the duration of WWII, Speck went on to become an opal merchant in Sydney and came to consider Australia his home. Years after his death in 1995, Speck's amazing kayaking

odyssey is being recreated by an Australian paddler.

Sandy Robson's passion for outdoor adventure was fostered during her time spent studying Outdoor Education at Latrobe University's Bendigo campus in 1993 and has since considered such pursuits to be her profession as well as her hobby. Having joined Western Australia's Sea Kayaking Club in 2002, her evolution towards becoming a dedicated paddler was further promoted when a hip replacement two years later meant she had to give up bushwalking completely.

IN SPECK'S WAKE

Robson's own odyssey began soon after a failed attempt to circumnavigate Australia by kayak. It was 2007 and she had been making good progress in her journey until she came to Cape York. It was here that Robson was attacked by a crocodile and was forced to abandon her plans.

"After a year of paddling for that expedition in 2007, I was motivated to undertake another long journey," she says. "The Oskar Speck expedition captured my attention

because of its significance to the history of sea kayaking. It's the longest sea kayak journey ever made and has never been retraced in modern times, so I thought 'Why not give it a go?'"

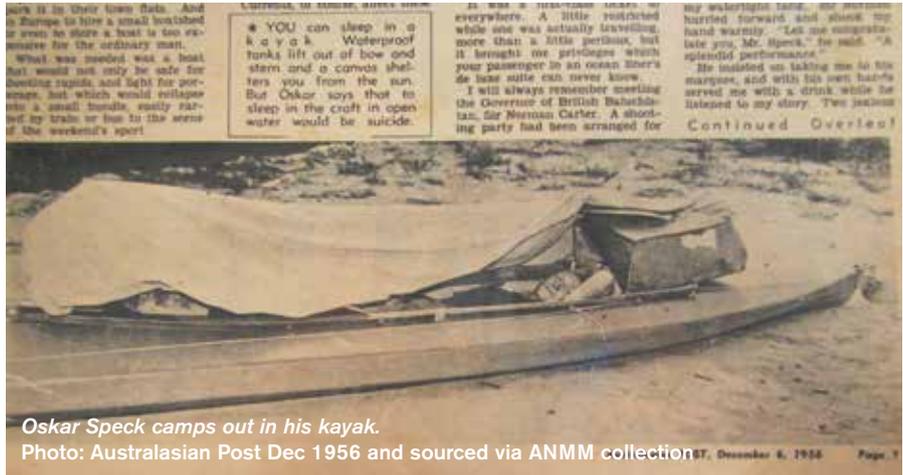
This kernel of an idea evolved into a full year of planning in 2010, until Robson came to actually commence her journey in 2011. Just as Speck had done, Robson planned to set off from Ulm, Germany on the Danube River, but unlike the German adventurer, Robson recognised the need to recreate the trip in several stages.

"I broke the journey into five stages over five years in order to make the whole thing more manageable as far as funding is concerned," Robson explains. "Initially I was returning to Australia between these stages to work so that I could raise additional funds, but now I'm trying to complete the remainder of the trip with the assistance of a few key sponsors."

SOLO ADVENTURE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Far from Silk Road's maiden with the gold nugget on her head – and even surprisingly more challenging than Speck's own experiences – Robson's adventure has been dogged by setbacks in the form of closed borders, rough weather and hostile locals. As a result, Robson has had to regularly readjust her plans to encompass a world in turmoil. "During the first leg of the journey in 2011, I wasn't able to retrace Speck's route into Syria due to the war. I was also forced to avoid the rivers in Iraq in order to avoid the landmines left there by Saddam Hussein's regime."

Nor was Robson able to paddle in Iran and Pakistan because of security concerns. Yet her greatest trials hadn't yet begun. "I faced the hardest challenges I have ever encountered on India's east coast, but I had by then



Oskar Speck camps out in his kayak.

Photo: Australasian Post Dec 1956 and sourced via ANMM collection

developed a good attitude to facing challenge, knowing that I would endure the tough times and get through the lows to find the next high." During this stage of the journey, she was repeatedly thrown from her vessel by rough seas and was even attacked by fisherman who assumed she was some kind of terrorist.

More recently, Robson has been forced to wait for weeks and sometimes months in Southeast Asia for calmer seas. Even funding for the trip has been far from straightforward. In March 2013, Robson spent an entire year back home in Australia working while her journey was put on hold. Challenges aside, Robson is passionate about completing this journey in the hope that it draws further attention to the plight of the environment, while also encouraging others to get out and experience nature. "My journey is also helping to promote water sports and kayaking in nations where these activities are just developing, and I am encouraging more women to participate. It feels great to be a positive role model for kayaking," she says.

For all her effort, Robson has garnered some

positive attention that has culminated in her becoming this year's recipient of the Australian Geographic Society's Nancy Bird Walton Award, which has helped fund her journey from Singapore to Papua New Guinea. She also now holds the title of the only person to have circumnavigated Sri Lanka by kayak.

Robson regularly sends trip updates out to her followers online via a blog, and she also hopes to write a book about her travels upon her return. Until then, she hopes that the last leg of her tour – via Indonesia and Papua New Guinea back to Australia – goes ahead without incident. [W](http://www.sandy-robson.com)



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SANDY ROBSON'S JOURNEY: FROM GERMANY TO AUSTRALIA

- **Stage 1** – Germany to Cyprus, covering 4,224 kilometres from May to September, 2011. Being prevented from paddling through Iran and Pakistan, Robson then made plans to take up the journey from India.
- **Stage 2** – India, Gujarat to Tamil Nadu, covering 2,260 kilometres along the west coast of India from December of 2012 to March in 2013.
- **Stage 3** – Sri Lanka and India's east coast, covering 3,196 kilometres from March to August in 2014. Here, Robson had to wait for two months for calmer seas for the crossing to the Sunderbans and Bangladesh.
- **Stage 4** – West Bengal to Papua New Guinea, with 3,974 kilometres completed from November last year until now, Robson is yet to complete this stage of her journey.
- **Stage 5** – The final leg of the journey will see Robson return home to Australia.



Showing people the kayak in Bangladesh at Nijhum Dwip Dec 2014. Photo: Khandaker Rahman