

MAN ON THE RUN

“A purpose beyond ego.” Four simple words, yet they’ve driven South African adventurer, conservationist and motivational speaker Braam Malherbe to run millions of steps from the deserts of Asia to the icy plains of Antarctica. By Richard Holmes

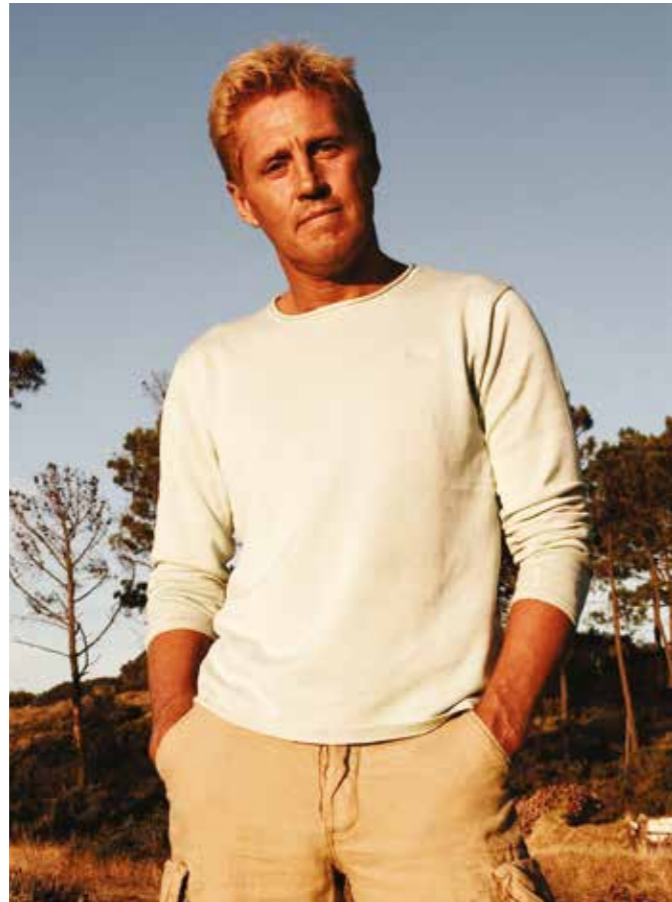
In 2006 Malherbe, together with running partner David Grier, became the first to run the entire length of the Great Wall of China. Just two years later, after enduring major knee surgery and a prognosis that he’d never run again, he followed it up with a run along the entire coastline of SA. The 3 300km odyssey took the pair from Oranjemund on the Namibian border via Cape Town to Ponta do Ouro, on the border of Mozambique. Both adventures raised millions of rands for Operation Smile (see sidebar) and launched Malherbe into a career of full-time activism and adventuring in aid of conservation and charity work.

“I believe in the simple principle that the more you give, the more you get; what you reap, you sow,” says Malherbe, from the terrace of his home on the high slopes of Signal Hill above Cape Town. Paragliders ride the thermals above his front garden and the Atlantic Ocean sparkles brightly out to the west.

A love of nature has long been an integral part of Malherbe’s make-up, particularly after a formative spell with the Wilderness Leadership School in KwaZulu-Natal during his teenage years.

“The Wilderness Leadership School experience sent me on a whole new path,” he says. “The one question that really rang a bell with me is whether each of us is an asset or a liability to the planet.”

Inspired to find ways of being an asset, time spent in the wilds of the Hluhluwe-Umfolozi Game Reserve sparked a project to raise funds to conserve the Langebaan Lagoon from



“Ordinary becomes extraordinary when you have a purpose.”

heavy development. While still a pupil at Cape Town’s Rondebosch High School, Malherbe decided to run from Plettenberg Bay to Cape Town: it was the first time he’d put one foot in front of the other to raise funds for conservation.

“I’d never run more than 8km in my life and I was a crap runner,” he laughs. “But it was a defining moment because I realised that if you have a purpose beyond your ego, you can achieve pretty much anything.”

Yet Malherbe’s life hasn’t only been a succession of celebratory moments and personal growth insights: it hides a darker past. Family illness and bankruptcy were defining features of his teenage years and in 1984, his own insolvency spiralled him into a deep depression. Fittingly, it was a night in the high peaks of the Cederberg mountain range that jolted him back to life.

“The conservationist Dr Ian Player was a good friend

and mentor, and he often spoke of the power of the wilderness and the healing effect of nature,” says Malherbe. “Nature brought me back to my senses. I’d become a liability to the planet, not an asset.”

He went on to become an honorary ranger for the SA National Parks, co-founded the Table Mountain National Park’s lauded Volunteer Fire-fighting Unit and got involved in youth development.

Then his friend David Grier came up with the idea of running the length of the Great Wall of China (4 218km over 98 days).

The purpose was to raise funds for the first Operation Smile mission to SA (see box alongside). At the end of the run, the pair had raised enough money to enable dozens of children to undergo life-changing facial reconstruction surgery.

“If it hadn’t been for those kids, I think I would have given up. After three weeks in the

David Grier and Braam



in the foreword to Malherbe’s book, *The Great Run* (Jonathan Ball). “The body is merely a slave to the mind. And if the mind can be convinced of the value of the task, there’s little that’s impossible.”

Grier and Malherbe proved Noakes right and on 15 December 2006, they reached Old Dragon’s Head, the eastern-most point of the Great Wall of China.

The pair went on to run another world first along the length of SA’s coastline – tracing a “smile” around the bottom of the subcontinent and eventually raising more than R2,5 million for Operation Smile.

2011 saw Malherbe partner with adventurer Peter van Kets in a race to the South Pole marking the centenary of the Scott-Amundsen expeditions. His time on the ice sparked a new focus to his

OPERATION SMILE

Founded in 1982, Operation Smile is an international charity which aims to provide life-changing facial surgery for underprivileged children worldwide suffering from cleft palates. Volunteer medical personnel operate in 60 countries on six continents, working with local medical staff, hospitals and governments to provide free operations for these youngsters.

Malherbe’s been an ambassador for the initiative since 2006 and the R2,5 million raised by his runs in both China and SA have enabled more than 700 children to undergo treatment.

2016 marks a decade of Operation Smile operating in SA. To mark the occasion, the organisation launched Operation 45, a campaign to raise awareness of cleft

lip and palate surgery. Forty-five minutes is all it takes to perform the operation and the campaign will follow the progress of two young boys who underwent the procedure in January this year.

“Operation 45 will expose how quick and affordable it can be to fix this condition. It will also highlight the difference that correcting a cleft lip or cleft palate can make to an individual,” says Tamlin Abrahams, Regional Director of Operation Smile SA. “We want the public to become excited about the chance to change someone’s life. Whether it’s by donating, organising a campaign in your office or volunteering (non-medical professionals are also always needed), we want the campaign to show just how easy it is to get involved.” Visit: <http://southafrica.operation45.com>

adventures: climate change.

“It’s the most pressing issue facing the survival of humanity (and that of most other species) on earth. That’s not a maybe – it’s a definite. It’s postulated that we’ll lose 50% of all species on earth by the turn of the century. Marine biologists say there could be no edible fish left in the oceans by 2048. It’s habitat destruction simply as a result of one species – human beings – dominating everything.”

The oceans are particularly close to Malherbe’s heart and the rise in acidification, dead zones and plastic

pollution form the focus of his next adventure.

The Cape2Rio yacht race takes place every three years, pitting professional and amateur sailors against 6 700km of the Atlantic. This year Malherbe and Van Kets will attempt a world first by rowing the route unsupported. The expedition’s expected to take three months and will focus attention on the plight of the world’s oceans.

The Cape-to-Rio Row is simply a warm-up, though. In late 2017, the Earth Challenge will see Malherbe and Van Kets travel 38 000km as they

circumnavigate the globe along the Tropic of Capricorn, with zero carbon emissions.

The expedition ties in with Malherbe’s Do One Thing initiative, which encourages everyone to perform least one action to help save the planet. Part of the Earth Challenge will see a mobile app harness social media to encourage more people to protect the planet.

“If you’re not part of the solution, then you’re part of the problem,” says Malherbe. “My ultimate dream is to be the greatest asset I can be to the planet.” 🌍