

Sailing through climate change

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By Colleen Dardagan

A 10-year dream to sail into the port where the annual climate change talks are under way has finally come true for a Swiss family of six, whose lives are spent sailing the oceans and climbing the world's highest peaks, while finding the best solutions to save the planet.

Once completed, the Top to Top expedition would have achieved a world record by being the first to travel all climate zones, crossing seven seas to the seven highest summits using only nature's power.

"We have done this to set an example of what can be done by living in harmony with our climate and to share the climate solutions with schools and universities along the way," said expedition leader Dario Schwörer.



Dario Schwörer, his wife, Sabine, and their two-year-old son, Noe, relax on Pachamama in Durban. Picture: Colleen Dardagan

"It has always been our dream to be in the same city as the COP17 talks (17th Conference of the Parties of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change), but it was never possible before because we were on different ends of the planet (from where the meetings were being held). We are very excited to be here in Durban."

With only two more mountains to climb, one in Alaska and the highest peak in North America, the travellers – Schwörer, his wife, Sabine, and their four children, who were all born on the expedition – have sailed 42 613 nautical miles, climbed more than 400 000 vertical metres, cycled more than 18 000km and visited more than 50 000 students across the planet. Their two-year-old son, Noe, was the youngest person to make base camp on Mount Everest.

Their boat, Pachamama, the Incan word for Mother Earth, is equipped with 11 solar panels and two wind turbines, and Schwörer says the family's lives are lived according to the rhythm of nature.

"We arrive in a country and leave when we feel our work is done, and the weather and tides are favourable," said Schwörer.

He said it was important for everyone to start finding solutions to climate change, rather than just pointing out the negative things.

"We don't want to point out what's going wrong, but rather give good examples and solutions to inspire children in schools."

Perhaps the best story told by the family is when their first child, six-year-old Salina, was born in Patagonia and they had to use a Swiss army knife to cut her umbilical cord.

"Our boat hit a container off the South American coast and was badly damaged. We did not have any sponsors then, so we knew no one would come to our aid. It took us two weeks to limp into port and then

two years, Sabine working as a nurse and I as a mountain guide, to keep ourselves going while trying to get the boat repaired.

“It was during this time that Salina was born. Victorinox, the manufacturers of the Swiss army knife, somehow got to hear about it and immediately offered to sponsor us. They were the first. We are now sponsored by the Swiss government, SGS (which provides inspection, testing, certification and verification services to ensure that products, services and systems meet quality, safety and performance standards).”

While the family are still waiting for an invitation to the UN conference and to get recognition for the expedition's work, they are one of the few who have arrived in Durban using only the wind and sun to power their journey. - The Mercury

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