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Erden Eruc plans the ultimate grand adventure

CIRCUMNAVIGATION: Pilgrimage will be all muscle-powered trip.

 By CRAIG MEDRED
 Anchorage Daily News

(Published: May 11, 2003)

Spring was coming fast to the Alaska Range as Turkish-born Muslim Erden Eruc resumed his pilgrimage this month. Behind him was 2,300 miles of the frozen Alaska Highway. Ahead waited a long trudge from Petersville into the mountains and then, hopefully, another 50 miles or so of ice and snow to the summit of North America's tallest peak.

McKinley, at 20,320 feet, is the first big hurdle on an epic journey penciled out by the engineer turned computer software designer who walked away from the hectic world of technology to a future that took him to selling outdoor equipment at the Seattle REI and then on to a grand adventure.

Eruc plans to circle the globe using only muscle power and simple mechanical devices -- bicycles and rowboats -- with stops along the way to climb the highest peaks on six continents.

The style of the journey is unique. The concept behind it, however, has roots in the adventures of the late Goran Kropp, a Swede who rode a bike from his Scandinavian home to the base of Mount Everest, climbed to the top, rode home, and then wrote a best-selling book -- "Ultimate High" -- about the journey.

Kropp and Eruc, foreigners who developed and then shared a fondness for America, became friends when they met in Seattle. It was there Eruc started talking about his long-dreamed-of journey of pedaling a bike around the globe.

He'd sketched that trip out on a map in a Washington, D.C., office a decade before. There was a line that crossed the United States, turned north for Alaska, wiggled its way to Cape Wales, crossed the Bering Strait and kept going across what was at the time the Soviet Union.

It didn't take much research into that trip before Eruc realized the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of such a cycling adventure. His first discovery was that there were no roads and few trails in the far north. The snowmobile-packed Iditarod Trail from Wasilla to Nome and local trails from there to the north might have made it possible to pedal to



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Cape Wales, but no one had -- or has since -- managed to pedal across the shifting ice of the 55-mile-wide Bering Strait.

And even if someone were to do so, the Russian wilderness on the western shore is even more desolate than the Alaska wilderness on the eastern shore.

If reality killed the original plan for pedaling around the globe, however, it didn't kill Eruc's dream. Instead, it morphed into a new vision of a muscle-powered circumnavigation with some sort of boat taking the place of the bike for stretches that are impossible to ride.

The dream was still there when Eruc met Kropp. The Mountaineers, a Seattle climbing group, had invited the climber to the Pacific Northwest city to speak. A member of the Mountaineers, Eruc helped coordinate the visit.

In conversation, the 41-year-old Eruc mentioned to Kropp the idea of a muscle-powered circumnavigation. The Swede was instantly captivated.

Conversation quickly veered away from Kropp's climbing adventures toward Eruc's idea -- and he suddenly found himself being bombarded with questions from the Swede.

Soon, the two men were talking boats and bikes, with Kropp encouraging Eruc to pursue his dream. There was even talk of the possibility of the Swede going along. But he would never have the opportunity.

Within months, Kropp would be dead, the victim of a fall on a popular climbing route at Frenchman Coulee, 135 miles southeast of Seattle. Eruc was below Kropp belaying his friend when the Swede slipped. Eruc watched in horror as Kropp's protection zippered out and he fell to his death.

"It was a very emotional time," Eruc said. The Turk was left feeling he had only two choices for coping: Retreat inward to grieve, which he didn't consider particularly healthy, or "get on with it."

"It was a big, big message saying life is short. The hardest part was getting started, getting over that inertia," he said.

Eruc dug out his maps and started planning. He'd bike where he could and row where he couldn't.

"I was trying to make it as self-contained as possible, Goran style," he said.

By the time Eruc finished planning, he'd mapped out a staggering six-year plan that would take him not only to the summits of McKinley, the coldest peak on the planet, and Everest, the tallest, but would include some monstrous ocean passages in an 18-foot rowboat.

"The odds are stacked pretty good against me," Eruc admitted in an interview here before pedaling north for Talkeetna and then Petersville. "The ocean rowing is the big show stopper."

Eruc has plenty of climbing experience. He's been climbing since his youth in Turkey. He has no rowing experience.

His plan, if he reaches the summit of McKinley this month as hoped, is to hike back from the mountain to Petersville, get on his bike, pedal to Anchorage, take a brief respite in Homer to marry fiancée Nancy Board from Seattle, then pedal back to Seattle to begin training to row.

"I'll have a good six months of training," he said. He has a rowing organization set up to help him and a special ocean-going rowboat under construction. His introduction to big-water rowing will come along the relatively safe coasts of North, Central and South America. The plan is to row from Seattle to Chile, where he will get back on a bike and pedal to Mount Aconcagua.

Even while preparing to confront McKinley, which presents its own perils, Eruc was worrying about the rowing, in large part because it is new and unexplored territory. He will, he said, carry a satellite phone and a receiver for the global positioning system in the boat so that he can track weather and know where he is at all times.

He is, however, a little nervous about the advice other rowers have given him on what to do if bad weather is in the forecast.

"You start rowing 18 hours a day and try to get out of the way," he said.

Before that becomes a real worry, Eruc has to get over the first hurdle -- McKinley.

Friends joined him in Petersville this week for the hike to the base of the mountain. Others are to join him on the Kahiltna Glacier for the actual climbing up the West Buttress route to the summit. And still others are to join him for the hike back from the mountain.

They'll use small planes -- the traditional aid to accessing the Alaska backcountry -- to join Eruc at various points along his journey. Eruc himself plans to fly from Anchorage to Homer for the wedding, but all travel related to the rest of his journey will be muscle-powered. He is carrying his personal and camping gear almost everywhere, but picking up boats and bikes as he needs them along the way.

Forming a climbing team for adventure like this was problematic, Eruc said, because he knew few people who could get the time off from work to join him on the time-consuming, hike-in, then-climb attempt on McKinley he plans. Eruc himself is on a leave from REI, which is providing some sponsorship for his trip. The co-op gave him the bike to ride to Anchorage and has provided other assistance.

He has also been soliciting sponsors through his Web site, www.around-n-over.org. Eruc bills himself as Around-N-Over CEO, as in "chief exploration officer."

"I am on a life journey," he said.

As a practicing Muslim, Eruc plans to take a detour to Mecca on a leg of his planned trip that is supposed to take him by bike from the summit of Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro to the Red Sea to get in his boat and began rowing north toward the Suez Canal, the Mediterranean Sea and on to Turkey, where he gets on a bike to pedal to Russia's Mount Elbrus.

Noting the political strife in that region, Eruc is counting on his faith to get him through. If there are confrontations, he said, he plans to explain:

"This is my pilgrimage. Let me be. Let me through.

"We cannot chose where we are born. We can chose how we live."

And Eruc has made a monumental choice.

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