

A WALK THROUGH TIME BY PAUL SALOPEK

ABOUT FIFTY THOUSAND YEARS AGO the first anatomically modern humans became foreign correspondents: They walked out of Africa, spreading news of far horizons, and explored the unknown world.

I am proposing to do the same.

Using the archaeological record and the latest discoveries of “genography,” the young science of tracing prehistoric migrations through gene markers embedded in human DNA, I’ll walk in the footsteps of our ancestors, following their ancient route out of the Great Rift Valley of Africa, across the Middle East, through Central Asia to the tundra of Siberia, eventually hopping a boat across the Bering Strait to North America, and trudging from there down the entire length of the New World.

This immense foot journey begins at humanity’s cradle and ends on the stormy shores of the Antarctic Sea—at the last continental corner of the Earth to be settled by humankind, Tierra del Fuego, some 12,000 years ago.

A walk of this magnitude, along this route, has never been attempted in a single lifetime.

It is a hegira across 2,500 human generations. Across 22,000 miles of our planet’s surface. And across seven years of my life. Far from being a stunt, it is a serious narrative project that draws together all the strands of my experience as a traveler and a journalist—innumerable journeys to among distant rivers, mountains and highways, plus a background in natural science—and braids them into the ultimate story of us: an “assignment” in the spirit of Herodotus, or of the medieval Islamic traveler Ibn Battuta. Alternating between deep history and the cacophony of contemporary life that I’ll encounter along the trail, it is, in sum, a very long walk into our becoming.

As an investigation into human restlessness, this transcontinental stroll out of the Paleolithic African “Eden” also stretches the boundaries of storytelling in the age of digital media. It is a low-tech, high-concept vehicle for rendering journalism as a form of pilgrimage—one that we’re all walking, wittingly or not, into a challenging new century. And via respected partners in academia and the media, I will invite a truly global audience to tag along on this voyage of rediscovery.

Think of the *Out of Eden Walk* project as a 21st century equivalent of the *New York Herald* dispatching Stanley to look for Livingstone—a slow, overland approach to reportage so retro, so antique in its human pacing (about 30 million paces, by my calculation) as to seem cutting edge. Another helpful comparison: the Pundits who rambled over Central Asia a century ago, compasses glued to their walking staffs, exploring remote Himalayan passes for the Raj. Only this time no empire will hoard the charts. This trek belongs to us all.

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UNIVERSAL NARRATIVES stitch the *Out of Eden Walk*.

Indeed, picture this journey as a gigantic loom. The route is a shuttle that swings back and forth, again and again, between the two competing origin stories that we tell ourselves about who we are, and how we got here.

At one end is *Homo sapiens*’ 50,000-year trajectory out of darkness and muck, superstition and fear, into the glory and light of reason and science. At the other extreme, it is our fall from grace, from natural-born nomads and hunters seduced by farming into the angst of city living, the regimentation of industry, organized warfare, global climate change—the works. Both of these paradigms shimmer like mirages on the walk’s horizons, hinting at the paradox that unsettles our supercharged way of life. Which scenes witnessed along the trail will endure the longest? Is it the camel trains of pastoral nomads that I will join in the deserts of Djibouti? Or the massive concrete dams that plug the Colorado River—colossal modern artifacts that, viewed through the lens of sustainability, can seem more ephemeral than camelhair tents?

For almost two years I have been researching this ambitious trek, which begins in January 2013 in Ethiopia, where the first anatomically modern humans evolved about 160,000 years ago. I have parsed a dazzling variety of stories that will crop up along our ancestral pathways, as mapped out with increasing clarity by geneticists sampling the human family’s DNA. With nowhere near the granularity required to describe the 80-100 major articles I have pre-reported before setting out, the following are a brief sampling of the stories that will walk towards, like stone cairns set atop mountain passes, from start to finish:

> **The Dawn Start.** Researchers consider the Great Rift Valley of Ethiopia one of the cradles of humankind. In some respects, we know less about the first anatomically modern people who left Africa than we do about far more ancient,

apelike forbears a million or more years old. These tireless wanderers, the first advanced talkers, visual artists and technological innovators—as well as the tiny ancestral population that gave rise to all modern ethnic groups—remain oddly mysterious. One of the oldest known *Homo sapiens* fossil sites, Herto Bouri in the parched Afar state of Ethiopia, is the natural starting line for the walk. A team of eminent Ethiopian and American scientists with decades of field experience in the region will join the first miles of the walk.

> **Out of Africa.** There are several ways to disperse out of modern-day Africa. I can follow the original path of ancient *Homo sapiens* northeast through the Great Rift Valley to the Red Sea coast, then cross the Bab el-Mandeb, the “strait of grief” that hunter-gatherers once straddled to reach the Arabian Peninsula. According to mitochondrial DNA studies, every person alive today descends from a few thousand individuals who first stepped out of Africa near this spot around 50,000 years ago, when low sea levels created a navigable archipelago. From those Pleistocene pioneers to today’s economic migrants, this watery hinge between Africa and Arabia remains a major crossroads. Alternate routes are being planned, however, should my passage across the Red Sea prove impractical. One option is to walk northward through coastal Eritrea, Sudan and Egypt to reach the Middle East by the end my first year.

> **Abraham’s Walk.** William Ury, an American conflict resolution expert at Harvard University, has plotted a walking route through the Middle East that traverses the religious topography of three grand religions—Islam, Christianity, Judaism—to encourage people to find common ground, and consider their shared spiritual origins. His trail starts in Haran, Turkey, and meanders for 55 walking days to Hebron, on the West Bank. I’ll walk part of it.

> **The Genesis of Empathy.** Shanidar Caves, northern Iraq. A walk through mountainous Kurdistan leads to a famed rock shelter where the first tangible evidence of human compassion has been preserved: the skeleton of an elderly, crippled Neanderthal man who was swaddled in pollen from 50,000-year-old bouquets. These findings are still being debated. But they nonetheless suggest that human compassion was a factor in our colonization of the world.

> **The Lessons of the Silk Road.** Researchers disagree about how the earliest bands of advancing *Homo sapiens* interacted with the archaic relatives they encountered across the globe. Genetic evidence suggests occasional interbreeding. But other findings hint that we outcompeted or even destroyed the older cousins we encountered along the trail. (A recently discovered species of human, *Homo denisova*, occupied much of Eurasia when our ancestors first arrived: the denisovans are long gone, though a few of their ghostly gene markers survive in modern Polynesian populations.) The tale of human conflict is old. In Central Asia, however, I will walk the route of one of the greatest commercial pathways that has ever unified the world through trade—the Silk Road. Today, globalization is fusing the planet’s economies like never before.

I will write about these issues as I trudge through polyglot Central and South Asia into the booming workshop of the world: China.

> **A Treasury of Tongues.** Evidence of anatomically modern humans dates back 40,000 years on a tree farm outside of Beijing. (This site, Tianyuan Cave, offers the first fossil evidence of feet deformed by an ambulatory invention: shoes.) Scientists say one of the earliest routes that prehistoric Adams and Eves took through China followed the Pacific Rim. Hugging coastlines, foraging for shellfish—a rich source of Omega-3 fatty acids—our ancestors ingested “brain food” for millennia, perhaps helping birth a neural revolution of words: the advent of symbolic language gave *Homo sapiens* an advantage that made them unstoppable.

Today China is a repository for more than 200 languages. But in a trend replicated around the world, such linguistic diversity is fading before the spread of national languages such as Mandarin. In China’s case, the disappearance of local tongues is abetted by the largest migration in our species’ history: up to 130 million people have been uprooted by economic modernization in China, which makes the US Dustbowl—400,000 migrants—look like a solo dance. Walking through the country, I will move and live among this tide of post-industrial nomads.

> **Walking with Reindeer.** Crossing the wild Amur River into Russia, I will meet Sergei Zimov, a quixotic scientist who is recreating an Ice Age “reserve” near Kamchatka, complete with reindeer and imported American bison. Zimov is trying to increase carbon sequestration through grazing—that is, by returning a small chunk of Siberia to its post-glacial grasslands condition. (Grasses soak up large amounts of CO₂.) This is just one of scores of global warming stories along the walk’s route. There is an unsettling circle to close here: Just as the first humans colonized the Earth at a time of climactic instability, hop-scotching ice ages, so we are confronted today by a planetary climate distorted by our civilization’s massive carbon wastes.

> **Beringia—the Cold Bridge.** About 15,000-22,000 years ago, North America’s first human visitors took a very long rest stop. They paused for some 4,000 years in Alaska’s chilly, prehistoric Serengeti, waiting for glaciers to melt. Then they poured down the eastern flank of the Rocky Mountains, or paddled down the American shores in canoes, occupying an immense virgin continent within a single millennium. Their appearance helped trigger one of the largest mass extinctions of animals since a meteor wiped out the dinosaurs. (Among the creatures possibly hunted into oblivion: an armadillo the size of a Volkswagen Beetle.) Today, in the anthropocene or “age of humans,” our hunting continues, only now on a vaster scale and with high technology. I will cross the Bering Strait by oceanographic research vessel, writing of the looming international scramble for the Arctic’s thawing natural resources, prime among them oil.

> **A World Once Called “New.”** The journey’s final leg down the Americas will last two and a half years. I will inch through big themes here. The polarization of politics in the United States—occurring not coincidentally, perhaps, as the world’s richest state diversifies into a “minority-majority” demographic by 2040—offers a laboratory for the meaning of national identity in the 21st century.

Exploding urbanization in Latin America presents another momentous story along the zigzagging path of our migration across the world: In 2010, for the first time in history, more people on Earth lived in cities than in rural areas. What does the proliferation of countless vast, often ungovernable mega-cities portend for the trajectory of human aspiration? Do the now familiar ruinscapes of gargantuan slums mask an even more profound development: a world in which, by 2020, some 90 percent of our species, at last cheaply interconnected on the digital grid, can communicate with each other?

> **Onward, Over the Horizon.** In 2020, I will unlace my last pair of walking boots among the long-dead campfires of the culturally extinct Yaghan people of Tierra del Fuego—seal hunters who once greeted Darwin almost two centuries ago. Many social scientists warn that next century will be a bottleneck for our species. Climate change, growing resource scarcity, the Web-stoked dreams of billions in the developing world—few leaders seem prepared to face these questions squarely. How much longer can the Northern hemisphere’s addiction to cheap oil last? Which societies will innovate transformative solutions? Which will lag behind? The *Out of Eden Walk* interrogates these challenges at foot level, seeking unsung examples of human ingenuity along the trail.

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SUCH AS?

> **The Aid Maze.** More philanthropy than ever, public and private, is percolating across the world. Market-inspired ideas such as microfinance are the latest panacea. But few donors realize that even this noble tool is being dulled by a self-perpetuating aid industry. Apart from vital disaster relief, does any humanitarian aid truly solve long-term problems? Why are the back roads of Nepal adorned with the rusty signs of thousands of failed development projects? Why, after an infusion of more than 10 billion in emergency aid, is Somalia still unable to muster a civil society? Such topics will be the subject of an ongoing inquiry throughout the walk.

> **Wired World.** Six billion cell phones are ringing across the globe. A Kenyan researcher calculates that, in an average day, a Maasai cattle herder can potentially access as much information through a basic smart phone as US Presidents did in the early 1990s. What does this revolution herald for local economies? For the news media? For cultural endurance? The wired world’s

impacts on all aspects of life is evolving too rapidly to describe. I will walk through the corner cybercafés where this profound experiment is taking shape.

> **Local Laboratories.** Sea level Bangladesh is literally being drowned by the watery onslaught of climate change. The government is promoting the use of floating hospitals, schools and even “farms” —rafts of soil—to combat the rising tides. These ideas are desperate. But like the reforestation of Africa’s parched Sahel by local farmers who have revived the old tradition of planting nitrogen-fixing trees, small solutions often prove the most successful. I’ll be on the lookout for these homegrown ideas.

> **The Book Apostles.** A recent UN study found that, astonishingly, just 10,000 books have been translated into Arabic over the past 1,200 years—barely the number of titles translated into Spanish annually in Spain. Some Middle Eastern writers are trying to use inexpensive digital technology to make up that literary deficit. As I ramble through Cairo, I will highlight this herculean effort, and reflect on the challenges that different societies confront in mass education. (India, for instance, will need to build 1,000 new universities over the next 20 years just to keep up with population growth.)

Still, as worthy as these subjects might be, the world walk isn’t just about “serious” journalism. It celebrates the adventure of being alive today in the world.

In anarchic Congo, I once found intense beauty flourishing amid deep woe: Thousands of skinny bicycle traders pushed their cargos hundreds of miles along sweltering jungle trails, through silent storms of pink butterflies. In the south Atlantic, while investigating fishing wars, I listened to destitute Angolan fishermen “sing up” vanishing schools of hake. They chanted lyrics absorbed from their forefathers. And the fish indeed rose under the swaying Southern Cross. As Emerson said, no one suspects the days to be gods.

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TO CALIPER the continents with my legs in seven years, I will walk on average 15 miles a day—about five hours—for half of each year. The remaining time will be spent on logistics, recuperation and writing.

The physical challenges of this journey are obvious.

Borders shut. Passes in the Hindu Kush freeze up. Some countries will require a walking chaperone. Other obstacles include old minefields and the grueling Arctic winter in Siberia. There will be month-long periods of stall. (These pauses have been taken into account in the walk’s overall time budget.) As a practical matter, certain brief stretches of assisted travel, whether on horseback, public

bus, rickshaw or cargo truck, may be unavoidable for safety reasons. The project's vision is sufficiently generous to accommodate these rare exceptions to foot travel. The overwhelming majority of our ancestors' footprints, however, will be retraced authentically, one step at a time.

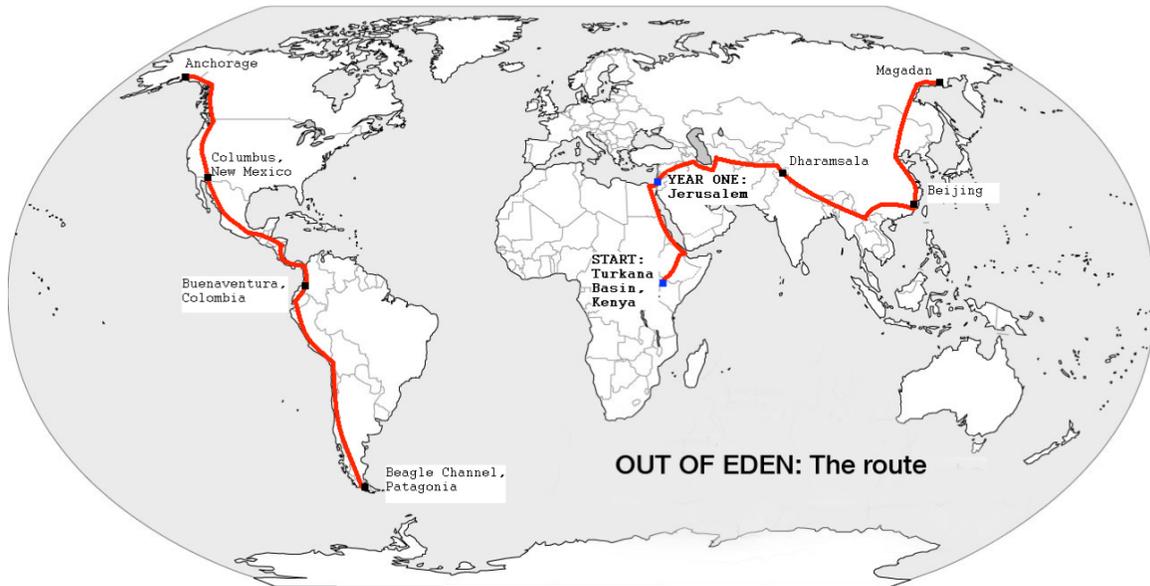
I have spent my life undertaking long muscle-powered journeys in tandem with my reporting. I canoed five weeks down the Congo River during that country's upheavals. I have hunted small game for a month in Alaska. My longest slow-motion journey involved riding a mule 2,000 miles through the mountains of Mexico. That trip took almost a year. A lightweight laptop and small video camera are my two main storytelling implements on the trail. A more vital concern, however, is the question of tone. The *Out Of Eden Walk* will fail, in my view, if it becomes a media event, a cerebral version of a reality show.

The guiding star of the walk's storyline isn't me. It's the journey itself, the swarm of ideas and people encountered along the road. The opportunities to link the ambulatory journalism to education are nearly limitless. The walk's education partners at Harvard and in Washington, D.C., have each begun building a curriculum around the walk. Children can grow up with the journey. I can Skype into any classrooms from anywhere.

In sum, the *Out of Eden Walk* marries the oldest form of storytelling—the Greek bard, the West African griot—with the latest information technology in an increasingly borderless world. The reading public is eager, I believe, for universal narratives in these fractious times. And moreover, we're built for iambic motion; this journey taps into an old nomadic hum in our bones.

There is a personal walk as well, of course. Raised in a small village on the central Mexican plateau, I crossed my first international border at age six. Now, multiple borders run through me. Home is everywhere and nowhere. And as the novelist Evan S. Connell once wrote, "The legend of the Traveler exists in every civilization, perpetually assuming new forms, afflictions, powers and symbols. Through every age he walks in utter solitude towards penance and redemption." And on this primeval journey out of our African Eden, I would add, toward ourselves.

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APPENDICES

I. EXPERT / INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Below is a partial list of individuals and institutions supporting the walk either as advisors or outlets for its storytelling.

- *National Geographic Society* (publishing content and funding field expenses).
- *The Knight Foundation* (funding an online digital media lab).
- *Nieman Foundation at Harvard* (granted a 2012 fellowship to research the walk).
- *The Pulitzer center on Crisis Reporting* (funding the education mission).
- *Project Zero* at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard (funding the education mission).
- *The Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago* (digital interactions with museum goers).
- *Center for Civic Media* at MIT (advising on social media).
- *Zeega*, an online storytelling lab at Cambridge (creative advisor).

- *The Center for Geographic Analysis* at Harvard (mapping consultant).
- Carol Rigolot, Executive Director, Humanities Council, Princeton University.
- Evan Osnos, China correspondent, *The New Yorker Magazine*.
- James O'Shea, former editor, *Los Angeles Times*.
- David Rohde, globalization columnist, *Reuters*.
- Tony Hiss, award-winning author on landscape and urban design, New York.
- Stefan Forbes, Polk Award-winning documentary filmmaker, InterPositive Media, NY.
- Jaspreet Kindra, senior climate change editor, IRIN humanitarian news service, UN.
- Drs. Richard and Meave Leakey, Turkana Basin Institute, Kenya.
- Dr. Berhane Asfaw, Dr. Giday WoldeGabriel and Tim White, the Middle Awash Project, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.
- Dr. Calestous Juma, Africa innovation expert, Harvard.
- Dr. Ralph Holloway, brain evolution expert, Columbia University, New York.
- Dr. Ofer Bar-Yosef, curator of Paleolithic archeology, Peabody Museum, Harvard.
- Dr. Jeanne Schaaf, senior archeologist, US National Park Service, Alaska.

II. ENDORSEMENTS

“As a longtime editor at the Chicago Tribune, where I oversaw the newspaper’s international staff and coverage for more than 11 years before going on to become Managing Editor for News, it was my privilege to work closely with Paul for more than a decade, a period when he produced some of the most outstanding international reportage ever published in American journalism . . . He is perhaps the greatest journalist of my generation, and this project is an inspiring attempt to document the essential human story of identity and discovery.”

--**George de Lama**, former managing editor, the *Chicago Tribune*

“There is no other bipedal creature on the planet besides you, Paul, that could pull this off. I can’t wait for it to begin.”

--**Evan Osnos**, Beijing Correspondent, *The New Yorker*

“This is an absolutely amazing project, described in such beautiful prose that it makes an impossible feat sound not only feasible but poetic.”

--**Carol Rigolot**, Executive Director, Council for the Humanities, Princeton University

“Would you allow me to tag along on some sections?”

--**Jeanne Schaaf**, senior archeologist, US National Park Service, Alaska.

“Madam, do you realize you married a crazy man?”

--**Richard Leakey** (to Paul’s wife, Linda).

III. AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Pulitzer Prize-winning writer **PAUL SALOPEK** was born in California, USA, and raised in Mexico. As a writer he has worked in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia and Latin America. His stories have appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, *The Atlantic*, *Foreign Policy*, *The American Scholar*, *National Geographic*, *Conservation Magazine*, *The Best American Travel Writing* and many other publications. His work has won most of the national journalism awards in the United States, including two Pulitzer Prizes; the George Polk Award; the National Press Club Award; the Overseas Press Club Award; the Princeton Ferris-McGraw Fellowship; the Nieman Fellowship at Harvard and many other honors. Salopek holds a B.A. in biology from the University of California at Santa Barbara. He is married to visual artist Linda Lynch.



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