

THE ROUTES OF CHANGE

When Markus Pukonen found out his dad was dying of leukemia, he pondered the question “What would I want to be doing if I was told I was going to die?”. He tells **Heather Francis** his answer.

Photography by **Markus Pukonen**

TRAVELLING AROUND THE WORLD WITHOUT A MOTOR is no easy feat. But for Markus Pukonen, the man behind the non-profit Routes of Change, circumnavigating the planet without using a motorised vehicle is all part of a movement to inspire people to work toward creating a more sustainable future.

In 2008 Markus received news that would change the course of his life. He was working as a firefighter in the forests of British Columbia when he learned that his father had been diagnosed with acute leukemia and, without treatment, he had just two weeks to live.

Suspended in the air on his flight home to Toronto, Markus began to evaluate his life. He asked himself one life-altering question: “What would I want to be doing if I was told I was going to die?” By the time the wheels met the tarmac, Markus had the answer. He wanted to make

a change in his own life and, hopefully in the lives of others. It was from this inspiration that the organisation funded purely by sponsors and donations, Routes of Change, was born.

A passionate outdoorsman, adventurer and filmmaker, Markus wanted to work on a global scale; however, it would be his dedication to environmental and social justice that would shape Routes of Change, which would see Markus travel around the globe seeking out the people who inspire change while documenting the journey.

Hoping he could use “adventure and entertainment to support the unsung leaders of our planet as they work to create a healthy future for all beings,” he decided to circumnavigate the globe using any motor-less means possible. From stand-up paddleboards, kayaks and sailboats, to swimming, skateboards and pogo sticks, sustainable travel taken to this extreme makes for one hell of an adventure.



It's not always a lonely journey and Markus has been joined by people along the way. Here, he's paddling down the Mekong River with Felix Irion.



Visiting the Lao people on his bicycle trip across Southeast Asia.



Markus sailed 4500 nautical miles solo across the Pacific Ocean.



Markus gets a unique view of the Golden Gate Bridge from his SUP.



Foregoing the warmth of a car for skis during winter in the Rocky Mountains.

At the time I write this article, Markus is located in Southeast Asia, almost halfway around the world from where he started when he walked out of his childhood home back in Canada more than three years ago. When I ask him if it felt good to reach the milestone, one that few will ever be able to tick off their bucket list, he pauses. In his usual down-to-earth manner, he is quick to point out that his projected route will cover more than 80,000 kilometres, and at 29,000 kilometres and counting, he has only covered a third of the distance. “But yeah,” he finally admits with a laugh, “it feels great!”

For Markus, the journey isn't about setting any records, or showing the world his stamina and endurance. It's simply an example of how one person living mindfully and purposefully can make a significant impact. “It's easy to live in denial of the effects we are having on our environment – on our community, our relationships with friends and family and on the natural environment,” he says. “I feel like I am fulfilling my purpose on the planet by living honestly.”

I first meet with Markus when our sailing routes cross in Palau, Micronesia. I watch his lanky six-foot-three-inch frame on the foredeck of his nine-metre sailboat from across the anchorage. He has just enough space for the manual pump and the ever-increasing volume of his inflatable SUP. When we meet ashore later that day he is wolfing down a burger – he has just completed a solo 4500-nautical mile sail from Hawaii, after all. I don't keep him long, but I'm immediately struck by his kindness, his welcoming smile and, despite his gruelling trip, his energy.

Over the next few weeks we share anchorages, beers and tall tales. Sailing across the Pacific Ocean with the trade winds, it turns out, is one of the tamer modes of transportation Markus has used. His solo ski trip across the Rocky Mountains in winter, where he carried less weight in

his backpack than the average high school kid, sounds terrifying. His 10 kilometres of pogo sticking across the city of Winnipeg, downright joyous. His hopes to swim the English Channel from France to the UK, utterly exhausting. And his non-stop dancing? Infectious.

Since then, Routes of Change has seen Markus canoe down the Mekong, SUP across Hong Kong Harbour and cycle thousands of kilometres through Laos, Cambodia, Thailand and Malaysia. And while life on the road, or off it, isn't always easy, Markus says that seeing the people who want to “live to their purpose and potential” is the ultimate motivation. Especially when it comes to inspiring kids. His regular visits to schools are huge morale boosters, explaining he likes “changing the way (the kids) see the planet and what is possible.”

Markus has always been an independent traveller and is comfortable on his own, but that's not to say he doesn't enjoy it when his family and friends join him on the journey. His sister sailed through the Philippines with him, he found a backpacker to help him paddle down the Mekong, and a fellow cyclist kept his pace through much of Laos. “I have

found a growing sense of love and gratitude towards others. My belief in how good people are has been strengthened,” he says.

Although there are still many kilometres to be travelled, I satisfy my curiosity by asking what happens when the journey is over. “I am documenting so much right now, with video and voice memo, so when I do get back to Toronto I will edit a feature-length documentary and build the organisation so that other people can do a similar journey and continue to support local not-for-profits. I would like the organisation to continue on beyond me.”

You can follow and support Markus on his Routes of Change on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook and at www.routesofchange.org

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