

Scaling the Dragon's Back The Great Wall Trek

written by
Karen Patrick



Supporting

DementiaUK

Improving quality of life

Scaling the Dragon's Back

The Great Wall Trek

Remembering China, seeing the Terracotta Warriors and walking part of The Great Wall for charity.

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I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to friends and colleagues who so generously gave their time to proof-read and review earlier drafts of this book.

Names of people mentioned in this book

The real names and identifying descriptions of the people mentioned in this book have been changed. I did not know at the time of travel I would write this book and do not wish to infringe any personal liberty or human rights. If they read this they will know who they are.

FOREWORD



It was an ordinary day, back in May 2012, in the small Fundraising Office at Dementia UK when we took the phone call from Karen Patrick, saying that she intended trekking to the Great Wall of China to raise funds for our work. Little did we know that an extraordinary adventure was about to begin!

Like many of our supporters, Karen and her family have personal experience of a loved one with dementia. She knows how hard it is to cope when someone so familiar loses their faculties, their ability to communicate, look after themselves, and eventually recognise things once well-known. There is a lack of high quality support for families affected by dementia, which leaves them isolated and struggling to deal with its impact.

That's where Admiral Nurses come in. Admiral Nurses are specialist mental health nurses who provide emotional and practical support to the whole family – they are completely unique. Only Admiral Nurses work to support family carers as much as the person with dementia; only Admiral Nurses join up local services and act as advocates to ensure that families can access what they need; only Admiral Nurses become a life-long partner on the journey of dementia.

There are 25 million people in the UK with a close friend or family member affected by dementia. The problem is worsening as we all live longer. We desperately need more Admiral Nurses which is why Karen's personal endeavour has made such a difference. The money she has raised has gone directly to Admiral Nursing, helping us sustain existing services and set up new ones.

We are proud and humbled to have been chosen by Karen as the beneficiary of her trek. Her book brings to life the highs and lows of this incredible undertaking. She said that she wanted to "make a contribution to something that really matters". By supporting Dementia UK's Admiral Nurses, she has helped provide a lifeline to people affected by dementia which is a pretty wonderful thing to do!

We would like to thank Karen, and her supporters, and everyone who reads this book – a lasting tribute and a great read!

Joanna Westley

Head of Fundraising & Communications

Dementia UK

About the Author



Karen is a freelance conflict resolution specialist. A qualified conflict coach and mediator, she works with organisations and individuals helping them to identify solutions to diffuse and resolve conflict situations.

She has a wealth of experience in advising on and facilitating resolution of employment disputes, also with supporting excellent employee relations practice. Before specialising in conflict resolution Karen spent many years working in human resources.

Scaling the Dragon's Back is her first book.

Karen lives in Cambridge, UK.

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Introduction – Why the Great Wall Trek?

I had never done anything like this before taking on for me the huge personal challenge of walking part of The Great Wall of China for charity. I was excited and apprehensive at the same time. The trek would involve walking for an average 6 hours a day and cover approximately 80 kilometres of the Wall around Beijing walking steep mountainous terrain trekking through woodland and farmland in some of the more remote areas of the Wall. The trek would take me along some old unrestored sections of the Wall which were crumbling in many places, and on recently restored sections which had smooth flagstones and steps, lots and lots of steps. On the trip I would visit Beijing, and having travelled so far also take the opportunity to visit the old capital and start of the Spice Road in the city of Xian, home of the Terracotta Warriors.

Why? I wanted to help make a difference, give something back, make a contribution to something that really matters. If I were a doctor I would save lives or improve the quality of a patient's life. I am not a doctor and so saw this as one way in which I could contribute. I also undertook the trek for personal reasons to help regain my confidence and sense of self following what had been a difficult few years dealing with major life issues. Planning for the trip and project managing the fundraising would give me a real sense of purpose which had been sorely lacking in my life of late.

Given the research I had done about The Great Wall I thought I knew what to expect. However, once on the Trek it quickly became clear I did not know what I had let myself in for. I was to find it tough, mentally demanding and physically challenging. On

more than one occasion I seriously doubted I would cope with the Wall's demands and complete the trek. But hey no one said it would be easy.

Why choose the Great Wall Trek out of the many charity fundraising events I could have chosen? Two reasons really. Firstly, I had always been interested in China, its history and culture, and with what I had seen and read in the media which reported of the mainly negative effects of the staggeringly rapid changes taking place in the country. Secondly, quite simply I was fascinated by The Great Wall, the largest man-made structure ever built, - a modern wonder of the world, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Stretching for approximately 6,000 kilometres (its exact length is much debated) from central Asia, across the Gobi Desert, through the remote country and mountains of northern China and ending on the shores of the Pacific Ocean. It is widely believed The Great Wall can be seen from space. It cannot. It was the American Illustrator Robert Ripley who made this claim back in 1932, a claim made 30 years before anyone had actually been in space! I was to find the Wall is not all brick built as I had thought. According to where on the Wall you are it may be little more than a mound of compacted earth, loose crumbling stone barely a foot wide in places, or, it may continue across open country and be hardly noticeable at all. The route of my trek centred on the area of the Wall to the north of Beijing which has been described as a roller coaster of dragon's back brick riding to the ridges and tops of the mountains. Here the Wall snakes through the hills and wild countryside and clings to the top of the mountain ranges. I would walk on the Wall, alongside it or through shrubbery and undergrowth to reach it.

The Great Wall had held a fascination for me since childhood. I am a child of the 1960's and can vividly remember 1972 when

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there was so much television coverage of US President Nixon's visit to China the first by a western leader to what was then a country and society closed to the West. Nixon visited The Great Wall. The television coverage of his visit gave me my first memory of the Wall. He visited the Wall at Badaling an area not covered on my Trek. In his speech from there he said of the Wall *"I think that you would have to conclude that this is a great wall and it has to be built by a great people."* Since Nixon's visit China has opened up to the West following Deng Xiaoping's Open Door Policy in 1978 after which foreign tourists began to visit the Wall. I had always hoped someday one of those visitors would be me.

Badaling I have read is the most 'touristy' and commercialised section of the Wall probably because it is the nearest part of the Wall to Beijing. Badaling now gets an estimated 4 million visitors a year. At the height of the national holiday in early October which was to coincide with my trip, it is said as many as 60,000 people a day visit the wall here. The thought sardines and tin comes to mind! Today as well as foreign tourists more and more Chinese are visiting the Wall given rising living standards and the infrastructure development which is opening up this huge country. It was the First Emperor of China who ordered the Wall to be built to protect the newly unified country and Beijing from incursion by other tribes, principally the Mongolians to the north. Over the hundreds of years spent building it many thousands of Chinese died in its construction, leading Chairman Mao to believe the Wall was a suitable symbol for the nation as building it represented an achievement by the ordinary suffering people. It is for this reason Chinese children must visit the Wall as part of their education. The Wall today is redundant except as a symbol of China's rich history; because of

this it is protected and restored by the Government.

To experience China and get a real sense of its history you must, in my opinion, escape the ugly high rise cities that represent modern China with their teeming populace and air pollution and find the Wall. Preferably, if time allows, taking in some of the more remote sections and escaping the crowds of tourists who visit the more accessible sections close to Beijing in their ever increasing numbers.

Fundraising for Dementia UK, Admiral Nurses

I chose to fundraise for Dementia UK, the national charity that supports Admiral Nurses, because I wanted to increase awareness of the vital work of these specialist dementia nurses. You may not have heard of Admiral Nurses, most people have not. Admiral Nurses are registered mental health nurses who work in the community and other care settings and provide much needed support and guidance to people with dementia and their families. Dementia can be a particularly cruel and challenging illness and Admiral Nurses support families through each stage of the illness, particularly through periods of transition, when carer breakdown is most likely. This can include at diagnosis, moving a loved one into residential care and end of life care. Admiral Nurses essentially help and enable carers to cope. They provide family carers with the skills and practical advice and information to better understand and deal with the condition. They give emotional and psychological support to help carers to deal with their feelings and to help them cope with the physical and behavioural changes the illness inflicts on the sufferer.

Dementia UK also provides the Admiral Nursing DIRECT helpline which is staffed by qualified and experienced Admiral Nurses. The email and telephone service, which operates 2.5 days a week, takes an average 60 calls a week, an increase of over 30% in the last year alone. Given the support needed, calls to the helpline can be very intense and time consuming often averaging one-hour plus. The focus of the helpline is always on the quality of advice given to carers and not the quantity of calls answered. The nurses who work on the helpline are incredibly dedicated,

most having full time Admiral Nursing jobs in the community who give up their evenings and weekends in order to cover the helpline.

Lead Admiral Nurse on Admiral Nursing DIRECT, Ian Weatherhead says *"For me, the helpline is an invaluable asset to Admiral Nursing and offers everyone, regardless of where they live, the opportunity to discuss anything with an Admiral Nurse. Many people become regular contacts through the journey of caring for a loved one, seeking advice and support through the various transitional stages of the illness, always knowing someone is there to listen and discuss their situation."*

The demand for this much needed service is apparent and with more funding the helpline could extend its operating hours and offer more support to more carers.

At the time of writing there are just over 110 Admiral Nurses for all of the UK covering in the main the south, Midlands and North (as far as Lincolnshire) of England. That is clearly not enough given one person in England and Wales is diagnosed with Dementia every 3.2 minutes. That's 163,000 new cases of dementia in England and Wales every year. Almost every family is touched by the condition. I would like to see a time when there are as many funded Admiral Nurses in the UK as there are Macmillan Cancer Care nurses. There are over 3,000 funded Macmillan Cancer Care nurses so there is a long way to go. Dementia UK is the only organisation in the UK which provides the specialist Admiral Nurse service for families affected by dementia.

Undertaking the Trek was my own personal way of giving my time and by fundraising supporting the continued development

of the Admiral Nurse services. My family knows from very personal experience what a cruel illness dementia is and the anguish and heartbreak that family carers can go through. **My stepfather, now deceased, was diagnosed with an advanced stage of the condition back in 2003.** He was a kind mild mannered man before Alzheimer's' robbed him of his mind, character and dignity. At the end he was no longer able to do anything for himself, or remember his family and loved ones, including my mother. Over time I witnessed my mum's physical health and mental well-being deteriorate as she struggled with the demands of caring for her beloved husband. These demands brought her to the verge of a nervous breakdown when eventually she was forced to accept she was no longer able to give my stepfather the level of care he eventually needed. I wish there had been an Admiral Nurse on hand to support both of them during that terrible time.