

INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

They started out as a couple and a car. Now 13 years and four kids later the Zapps are still on the road with no intention of stopping

By NICK VAN DER LEEK



MAIN PICTURE: The Zapps have toured the world in their 1928 Graham Paige vintage car. From left are mom Cande, Wallaby, Tehue, Paloma and Pampa and dad Herman. **RIGHT:** On locomotive enthusiast Wilfred Mole's Free State farm.



LEFT: On top of the world at Mount Everest Base Camp, Tibet. **RIGHT:** Cande breast-feeds Wallaby in Australia while the rest of the kids tuck into a picnic. **FAR RIGHT:** The Zapps in the Australian outback.

THE Zapp family would probably thank you if you urinated against their car's wheels on a hot, dry day – it's what they have to do occasionally to prevent their ancient vehicle's wooden spokes drying out and snapping. Well, they do it if they don't have any other water available on one of the long stretches during their seemingly endless trip around the world.

The Zapps certainly aren't your average suburban family. Thirteen years ago dad Herman and mom Cande left their home in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and since then they've had four kids, each born in a different country. And because they aren't materially wealthy, make-do characterises their lifestyle – even when it comes to maintaining the wheels of their 1928 Graham-Paige car.

The gypsy life is all they've known as a family. They've driven along the roof of the world in the shadow of Mount Everest, joined the buzz of traffic beneath New York's skyscrapers and forded the mighty Amazon river. Now they're crisscrossing South Africa.

We caught up with them on a perfect day in the Eastern Free State. Herman (44) is a former network technician who has a glint in his eye that hints of a quirky sense of humour; former secretary Cande (42) has the look of someone who's enjoyed a long holiday in the sun.

Sitting on top of the car is their oldest child, tousle-haired Pampa (10), who was born in America. Brother Tehue (7), wearing a green shirt emblazoned with a red car, was born in Argentina. On the back seat sister Paloma (5), born in Canada, is reading a book. Three-year-old brother Wallaby was born in... yes, you got it, Australia.

The family is lodging with businessman and locomotive enthusiast Wilfred Mole on his Ficksburg farm. He spotted the antique car and invited the Zapps to be his guests.



GALLO IMAGE/AFR GIE RT/STOCK/SHOOT MEDIA, NICK VAN DER LEEK PHOTOGRAPHY

When they got to the farm they couldn't help laughing – Wilfred owns an old black car that looks just like the Graham-Paige. "They're about the same age too," Wilfred says with a chuckle. He also owns 18 old locomotives and vast sheds filled with vintage tractors and for once, the Zapps' old jalopy looks quite at home among all these museum pieces.

One of the first things we want to know from these veterans of the open road is what they think of South African drivers. "Coming from India, the Philippines and Indonesia they're so good," Herman says loudly in a heavy Spanish accent.

Over a simple lunch of pasta and Coke we learn that fuel is the family's biggest expense. "Petrol is very expensive here," Cande says. They fund themselves because "our dream is free, and once we agree to do one thing we start to lose our freedom to be explorers", Herman explains.

When they run short of cash they sell copies of their book, *Spark Your Dream**, the story of the first year of their travels which has been reprinted four times in English and eight times in Spanish.

It's soon clear they don't respond to questions about which countries they've enjoyed most, or about the dangers, highs and lows they've experienced. It goes against their philosophy on life and travel, to be open-minded and receptive to everything and everybody wherever they go.

And anyway, they're rather bored with the same old questions.

"Our home is wherever we are," Herman says. "Our home is this car." He smiles and taps the bodywork. He points to a sticker depicting a car riding around the world. It says, "Driving around our home."

The family has few possessions, not even souvenirs. It's essential for them to travel light but the absence of material goods makes them less of a target for criminals. Yet they were robbed once – by baboons in the Drakensberg!

An indication of their philosophical approach is the fact that the car's fuel gauge wasn't working when they left Buenos Aires 13 years ago – and it's never been fixed. "People think I'm a mechanic but I don't know much about cars," Herman confesses.

"We pick up a stick on the side of the road, stick it in the tank and then look," Cande laughs. Or they calculate distance on a map according to fuel consumption of 5-6

km/litre.

They set out with trepidation that day in January 2000 but they'd been dreaming of the journey since they'd met as children. The car broke down after the first 55 km, but every setback just made them more determined to press on.

They cover about 20 000 km a year – around 260 000 km so far – and have stayed with about 2 000 families.

Skype, from Herman's laptop, helps them stay in touch with their family and friends, and Herman takes loads of pictures. They have cellphones and stay in touch with the news via the internet.

"You have a beautiful country," Herman says repeatedly. He likes green places and forests, Cande explains. She, on the other hand, likes emptiness. "She likes quiet places," Herman says.

In South Africa they loved the Kruger National Park. Herman can't believe he finally got there after hearing so much about it. While they spotted the Big Five they also had six flat tyres in the park. But they sold more books there than anywhere else.

"Each time someone stopped to help they felt bad that they couldn't fix our wooden-spoke wheels so they bought a book instead," Herman recalls.

The Drakensberg and St Lucia on the KwaZulu-Natal coast were also special to them. They'd wanted to be further north in Africa by now but altered their plans when people insisted they visit Cape Town.

It's obvious Cande and Herman are still loving their adventure together, but what is it like travelling so far with four children? "Children are a blessing," Cande says.

Fortunately they've had few medical problems. Paloma suffered convulsions in Australia and they took her to a hospital in Sydney – and Wallaby was born 40 km from the hospital. Pampa broke a leg while using a zip line in South Africa.

There's one rule for the kids: "They may not watch DVDs or play with their digital toys during the day in the car."

What about education? "They're learning everything first-hand," Cande says. "The world is their classroom. We home-school them using an online syllabus."

WILL they ever end their journey? "We thought this journey around the world might take



The Zapps arrive at Capitol Hill, Washington, on their way to Alaska.



The mudgard of the trusty Graham-Paige doubles as a crib.

us two years," Herman says. "It's now 13 years and we think we'll still be on the road for at least two more. We haven't seen Africa yet, or the Middle East.

"What I've learned on this journey is that the more I learn the more I realise how little I know. We have to give ourselves the chance to live on Earth. That's what we're doing. And what better way than to experience it with your family?"

They're saving Europe for last. But as always, this free and unfettered family won't allow timetables, money or even destinations to prescribe where the road will take them.

"People have trouble putting us in a box," Cande observes. "But we like that. We don't belong to any organisation or sponsor or institution. We're just following our dream and our dream is to explore; it's as simple as that."

*Available from kalahari.com for R200. **S**