

Love off-the-beaten-track with Raleigh International

11 February, 2008

Forget lonely hearts columns and speed dating this Valentine's Day – in Raleigh International's 23 year history the charity has played Cupid to countless intrepid couples who have found love well and truly off-the-beaten track.

Romance can strike unexpectedly and in the unlikeliest of places, but from the sun-swept deserts of Namibia to the volcanic slopes of Costa Rica, with wedding bells chiming in Ghana, Raleigh International's love-struck couples' life-changing stories truly span the globe.

Anna and Gagbuni Ibrahim Abdulai

This week, former Raleigh International logistic manager Gagbuni – known as Ibbi – will be travelling 3,165 miles from his home in Ghana to be with his new wife, Anna, in the UK in time for Valentine's Day. 'We haven't seen each other for nearly five months and have only been married for seven months, so our start to married life hasn't been particularly usual,' Anna says. 'But, if you learn anything on Raleigh, it is that life will always bring challenges and living is about not just surviving those challenges but thriving on them.'

Anna, 29, went on expedition to Ghana in 2002 and Ibbi, 27, took part in an expedition in his home country in 2003. The couple subsequently met at a Raleigh International workshop in the UK while sharing their experiences with a group of young people also preparing to join a Raleigh expedition. 'We became good friends and remained in contact even when Ibbi returned to Ghana – anything more seemed an impossibility, but now we are husband and wife, which reminds me of one of Ibbi's favourite sayings – the impossible is only just a little bit more difficult than the possible.'

Ibbi and Anna were married in July 2007 in Accra, followed by a three-day traditional wedding festival in Tamale, Ghana. 'We spent our honeymoon delivering books and pencils to children at a school that I helped to build in Gbum Gbum while on expedition,' Anna says. With Ibbi on his way to the UK, Anna adds: 'We are now looking forward to wedding celebrations here in the UK. Who knows what adventures our next honeymoon will bring – perhaps that will be another Raleigh adventure!'

Kate and Dai Williams

When 33-year-old marketeer Kate and 37-year-old volunteer manager Dai were drawing-up wedding plans they knew it was going to be difficult to beat their first date – camping in the middle of the Messum Crater in Namibia, cooking baked beans on an open fire, surrounded by ancient rock paintings with not a soul around for hundreds of kilometres.

But in 2006, after meeting on a Raleigh International expedition as a country director and volunteer press officer three years before, the couple tied the knot at Longleat Safari Park, because Kate says: 'It was the closest thing to Africa we could find in the UK – with lions, giraffe, zebra and rhino in the park and hippos in the lake next to our marquee!' The wedding was overflowing with Raleigh International members from more than six expeditions and they returned to Namibia for their honeymoon, which also saw them travelling across Botswana and Mozambique.

Kate says: 'Going on expedition was exceptionally life changing – not only would we never have met, but we met a lot of our friends through Raleigh. From watching the sun set over a herd of elephants, or, more scarily,

seeing lions footprints outside the tent in the morning, Raleigh has given us some very precious and unique memories.’ The couple now live in London and their first child, Megan, was born in September. ‘We’ll definitely be encouraging Megan to apply to do a Raleigh expedition in 18 years time!’ Kate added.

Mark Ashby and Hayley Bonner

While volunteering as a Raleigh International trek leader in Costa Rica in 2006, Mark won a meal for two at a jungle resort and eventually plucked up the courage to ask fellow volunteer, Spanish interpreter Hayley, on their first date. ‘We had a fabulous evening staring out at the moon-lit slopes of the Volcano Turrialba – who would have thought just over a year later I would be living in India with him!’ Hayley says.

Since meeting Mark, 36, has gone on to be Country Programme Manager for Raleigh India and Hayley, 31, is the Host Country Participant Coordinator. ‘Expedition life holds new challenges and excitement on a daily basis, living in India is such a colourful and vibrant experience and having someone to share it with simply makes it perfect,’ Mark says.

Asked why so many couples seem to have been hit by Cupid’s arrow on Raleigh, Hayley answered: ‘Being part of a Raleigh expedition is an intense and a unique experience. People come on Raleigh to have fun, to learn more about themselves and to meet kindred spirits. The atmosphere engenders romance as you are in an exotic place, working in close-knit teams, and talking to people until the early hours – falling in love happens effortlessly.’

Far from being a hotbed of holiday romances, Raleigh International has given more than 30,000 people the adventure of a lifetime – and while the charity can’t promise that Cupid’s bow will strike it can guarantee that participants will experience a unique, meaningful and challenging expedition in awe-inspiring locations around the world.

Forget signing-up with a dating agency this Valentine’s Day, since being founded in 1984 Raleigh International has seen more intrepid couples get hitched than Cilla Black could have dreamt of in her Blind Date heyday – love really can be discovered off-the-beaten-track.

ENDS

For more information about Raleigh International visit www.raleighinternational.org or call 020 7183 1270.