

the Long, WINDING ROAD



Cheating death, crossing some of the world's harshest terrain and conquering the Great Wall of China. For Kiwi Nathan Gray, it seemed like a good idea at the time. WORDS STEPHEN JEWELL

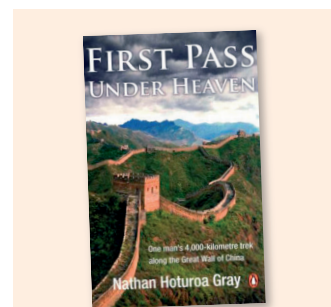
There is no better person to dine with in Chinatown than Nathan Hotorua Gray. The 33-year-old former Wellington-based lawyer, who recently moved to London, bypasses Gerrard Street's more ornate establishments before settling on a less conspicuous family-run restaurant. "I usually go into the kitchen and look at what they've got and say I want some of this and I want some of that," he tells me, before conversing with the waiter about the menu in his native tongue. Gray spent two years in China as part of a multi-national band of travellers who set out in September 2000 to become the first Westerners to walk the entire length of the Great Wall since English runner William

Lindesay in 1989. Invited to join the expedition by Diego Azubel, an Argentinean photojournalist who was filming a National Geographic documentary, Gray has since turned his life-changing experiences into a book, *First Pass Under Heaven*. "What I went through was so full-on that I had to basically get it out of me," says Gray. "Once I finished the walk, a book seemed to be the next logical step and it was very much about just making sense of what I've done. It took a good couple of years of almost cathartic analysis to work out what I put my body through." Gray is not exaggerating — the terrain was at times so tough and the weather so bleak that he and his companions cheated death by enduring snowstorms, lightning strikes and intense heat.

They were dependent upon the generosity of the locals for food, shelter and, most importantly, water. "When we were crossing the Gobi Desert, I had a five-litre bottle and that's nothing for three months trekking through some of the driest parts of the planet," says Gray. "You look after it, you conserve it. You take small sips. If you honour it as the resource that it is then it will live up to that when you need it." *First Pass Under Heaven* is named after the last watchtower you encounter if you begin your trek — as Gray did — in the Gobi Desert and move east towards the Bohai Sea. "It's a special place," says Gray. "It's very much a connection point between the heavens and the earth. It sets the tone for the journey. If you embark on that, you really are living on the threshold between life and death the whole way." After parting company with his original companions and several breaks — including a stint back in New Zealand — Gray eventually reached the Bohai Sea in September 2002 after nine non-consecutive months of

walking, including a particularly harrowing month on his own. "It may not have worked out like everyone thought it would, but when you're out there stretching and testing your limits, whatever happens — as long as you stick to whatever you want to do in terms of your own journey — then it has to be celebrated," he says. "Especially now as when I look back, it was a particularly crazy thing to do but you don't realise that at the time. It's only later on that you realise that was huge!"
» *First Pass Under Heaven* is out now through Penguin Books.

“When I look back, it was a particularly crazy thing to do”



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