

'I'm addicted to danger'

Anjaly Thomas has travelled to some of the most dangerous places in the world – and she's done it alone. She tells Shiva Kumar Thekkepat why she will never hang up her backpack

Dragging her injured right leg through the mud, Anjaly Thomas gritted her teeth against the pain. She was halfway up a steep hill, deep in the jungle, and somehow had to keep going. So digging deep into her reserves, the Dubai-based journalist braced herself against the cold, harsh landscape, and slipping and sliding, finally scrambled to the summit. "What am I doing here?" Anjaly, 36, thought, collapsing. She kept wishing she could get back to the warmth and give her twisted ankle time to heal.

But it was day one of her nine-day trek across 96 kilometres of rugged, isolated terrain – malaria-endemic rainforests, wide and fast-flowing rivers, narrow or non-existent tracks, humidity, extremely cold nights, and torrential rains – on the Kokoda Trail in Papua New Guinea, and there was no time to rest.

Wet and shivering as much with tiredness as with the cold, Anjaly would have turned back to Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea, if she hadn't already made some progress. Realising it would be as much of an effort getting back as it would be to keep going, she vowed to carry on. Besides, she knew that eventually she would relish the challenge and the danger – as she had on every one of her backpacking adventures so far.

"I knew it would be tough – in fact, one of the toughest in the world – and trekkers will swear by

the varying degrees of hardship you face along the track, end to end," says Anjaly. "This was perhaps one of the hardest things I'd ever attempted. You walk for eight hours and find you've just covered five kilometres. I'd also twisted my ankle while training to get fit for the trek. I did have doubts about whether I'd be able to do it injured, but I had set my heart so much on it that I didn't hesitate."

Those who know Anjaly, know why she wanted to carry on – she's a travel addict, and loves exploring the world solo with nothing but her backpack. She has visited 35 countries, including some of the most dangerous places on the planet. "Papua New Guinea is one of the most dangerous places to be, so much so that hotel guests are not allowed to leave the hotel premises without armed guards," Anjaly says. Inter-tribal warfare and an endless stream of kidnappings, carjackings, and vicious murders mean it isn't safe to venture out alone. But even accompanied, Anjaly learnt she needed to be extra-vigilant.

"I was riding around town in a van and happened to stick my hand out of the window," she says. "The person opposite me urgently asked me to pull my hand in. At first I didn't understand, but when I looked back I realised a bunch of teenagers with machetes had been running after the van to chop off my hand – for the ordinary watch I was wearing."

It was not an isolated incident. Another teenage gang later accosted her when she was leaving a nearby

supermarket with a bag of fruit. "I assumed they were after the fruit, but they weren't," exclaims Anjaly. "They wanted my wallet, watch and camera. I ran for my life and in the process of running, I dropped the camera, which I guess saved me."

Fast-forward to the Kokoda Trail. "When my two porters Vico and Jones and I reached Camp Goodwater, one of the many camps along the way, I was ready to give up," says Anjaly.

"It was just the start but it had taken me quite a bit of walking and slipping to reach here with my bandaged right foot. I was already regretting my decision [to come]." Fortunately, the camp was run by a local tribe – and one member was a baby. "Of course, no one spoke my tongue – but seeing a baby made all the difference," she says.

"I have no idea how or why but just cuddling that frail little fella made me stronger, somehow. As though all the fatigue washed away – and then he cried. A real human baby cry – in the middle of a forest where it was easy to go for days without seeing another human, except for the guides. It was magical. I'm sure I will never see that baby again, but he gave me that push to carry on the next day."

It was a trek that would have normally taken Anjaly nine days to complete. However, due to her injury, she took 12 days to finish. "In the end, it was well worth the pain and effort," she says.

Though it would appear that it is just the unusual and the dangerous that interests Anjaly, there is another



Our intrepid adventurer in Dubai



Anjaly feels the trouble she had to go through to get to DPRK was worth it



Anjaly at the source of River White Nile

side to her backpacking – she has pioneered what she calls relief travel: helping the unfortunate in the place she visits with essential supplies, or volunteer work. When *Friday* first met her, she was holding a jumble sale of items donated by friends and colleagues at the Uptown Mirdiff mall to collect money for a trip to Kenya.

The money was not to fund her travel – it was to buy essential goods on arrival, such as flour and eggs that would help some starving families, or whatever she discovers they need. "Once when I was in Tanzania, Africa,

'Teenagers with machetes had been running after the van to chop off my hand - for my watch'

the bus I was travelling in broke down. A bunch of kids were begging and I gave them some packets of soup I had left. They promptly tore them open and swallowed the powder.

"That's when I started my relief travels – collecting stuff they need and getting it to them," she says.

"The locals would not know what to do with some of the things we want to give them. So I collect money

or things I can sell at jumble sales, and buy flour, beans, eggs, things they can cook and eat, along with clothes, soaps and pencils – which are a luxury in many African countries – to give to orphanages, special needs homes, or even people on the street.

"There are many there who haven't used a full bar of soap or seen an unused pencil..."

Relief travel, Anjaly explains, does not necessarily have to be attached to an organisation that facilitates the donation.

"I have gone from working with voluntary projects raising thousands of dollars in the poorest countries in the world, to doing my own thing now. Even if I don't get a donor to sign up, there is the satisfaction of knowing I have been hands-on doing something that had made a difference," says Anjaly. "When I visited a special needs centre in the interior of Kenya and donated medicine and stationery,

the only reaction I got was a smile – but when you are among 30 children who cannot even open chocolate wrappers, you know that smile means more than words can ever say."

As she helps more and more people, Anjaly wants to travel – and help – even more. She's backpacked through countries including China, Indonesia, Kenya,

Thailand, Cambodia, Turkey and Uganda alone, and has just returned from North Korea – which is rarely on anybody's list of countries to visit.

So, why does she do it? "Because it is my life," she says. "Actually, it runs in the family – we all have itchy feet. Since I was a child I could never sit in one place – being on the move helps me be sane."

Anjaly has two older brothers, Avinash and Maneesh, and was a tomboy. "My father never told me 'you are a girl, go play with dolls'," she says. "He always encouraged me to do whatever I wanted. We had our bicycles as kids, and we'd go off on them to explore around town. We would never sit at home."

Anjaly began travelling solo accidentally while at law school in Mangalore, India. "A bunch of girl students decided to go to the neighbouring tourist state of Goa at the end of the first term," she says. "I planned everything around it, though I'd already been there a



Travel throws up some tempting offers... Anjaly tucks into a tarantula in Cambodia

few times. However, as the date approached, everyone started backing out. I was the only one left when the day finally arrived.

"I had put so much into it that I decided to go alone. I was 17. I just packed a bag and I left."

But when she reached Goa, Anjaly's bravado began to fade. "I was scared, I had no idea how to check into a hotel by myself," she recalls. "So I slept on the beach in Madgaon, next to a cow, that night. It felt like a safe place, because I was so new. And it was, though the beach was full of fishermen. Maybe if something had happened that night, I wouldn't be travelling alone to far-off places now.

"But it kicked off my travel bug. I still do the same thing. I still stay in bus stations, public places. No one has ever troubled me."

After graduating and getting a job with a newspaper in Bengaluru, Anjaly started exploring northern parts of India. When the tsunami struck the eastern coast of southern India in December 2004, she and two of her colleagues collected relief material and went to Cuddalore and Pondicherry – two of the affected areas – and distributed essential items to the victims.

Not long after that, a job offer from a fledgling tabloid newspaper in Dubai saw her travelling plans take off in earnest. Anjaly began exploring the world, starting with Thailand. Soon, other countries and more challenges – including a solo trek up Mount Kilimanjaro – followed.

"I almost died three times during the Kilimanjaro trek," she says. "I slipped on ice and nearly fell off the mountain. My water supply froze, it was snowing and pouring with rain. I was dizzy, soaked to the bone, with a fractured arm and didn't know what I was doing."

But she made it, thanks to sheer determination. "I can be stubborn as a bull in adversity," she laughs. "Throw me a challenge and I will never back off. All the problems I encountered on the Kilimanjaro trek were just that, challenges to be met. And I did."

After that she set her sights on the



Anjaly meets the men of the Huli wigman tribe at the start of the Kokoda Trail, in Papua New Guinea



Up close with a python in Thanalot, near Bali, Indonesia

Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK, or as it is more commonly known, North Korea) which she finally visited in July this year.

"It was an itch for something unusual," she grins. "I come from the world's largest democracy, while DPRK is a completely military-run state – where individual freedom is overshadowed by the state – but I was attracted by the country so curiously lacking in freedom. I wanted to see and experience it for myself. I was aware of the limitations to the visitor, of how we'd be herded around by minders and shown only the best in the country – yet I wanted to go."

What Anjaly saw in North Korea

'I almost died three times during the Kilimanjaro trek. I was dizzy, soaked and had a fractured arm'

was shocking. "People shy away from tourists, refusing even to smile, or hiding their faces upon seeing a camera," she says. "I saw no posters or billboards or even the nameboard on a store – the only colour on the billboards were propaganda posters. The city has no character although it is one of the cleanest I've ever visited – not a blade of grass out of place."

From the unusual to the dangerous, Anjaly plans to keep travelling alone, even if she marries in the future. "It sounds very clichéd, but every place has taught me something, and every person I met has enriched my life in some way,"

she says. "Travel has defined me as a person, and made me so tolerant and patient that nothing surprises or angers me. I've travelled in trucks in the back along with cattle. I've ridden in matatus (makeshift motor vehicles) in Africa without brakes, whose seats fly off at the slightest provocation, and that only stop when they hit something. I've eaten snakes and spiders, even tarantulas."

She's held a dying child in her arms in Uganda – where she was volunteering at an orphanage that looks after abandoned kids with HIV – and wept at the remnants of the carnage that took place in the Killing Fields of Cambodia. "It all changed me into a better person," she says.

There are a lot of places left for Anjaly to see. "I want to go to South America," she says. "I want to walk through the Amazon, see anacondas in their natural habitat. I'd like to see the polar bears in the Arctic, and

penguins in the Antarctica." But before that, she's planning to climb Mount Everest.

She loves to write and has penned a book

about her initial travel experience called *Almost Intrepid*, which received good reviews and has been selling well since its release last year. Part two is already in the works.

And for material to write, she will keep travelling. "To me, backpacking denotes freedom," she says. "Wanting to travel alone doesn't make you weird. Today's woman is fiercely independent and to me, travelling is an extension of that freedom to do what one pleases."

Almost Intrepid by Anjaly Thomas is available at Jashanmal book stores, Spinneys and Kinokuniya for Dh49.