


OUTLAW

UNSCRIPTED ADVENTURE WITH FEATURED OUTLAW

# Mandela van Eeden

BY AMANDA EGGERT



Mandela van Eeden soaks up the last rays of sun on the Clark Fork river in Missoula.

During her 2010 commencement ceremony, Mandela van Eeden scrawled a list of things she wanted to do in the next 10 years on the back of her University of Montana diploma.

The timeframe is loose; really, the list is a compilation of adventures van Eeden—a lover of all things fuzzy—wants to have before she tames her travel itch and gets a dog.

Sea kayaking New Zealand’s Milford Sound and biking around its South Island made the list. Traveling to India to study Ashtanga Yoga also appears, and van Eeden recently checked that one off. “It’s been my dream my entire life to go to India,” she says, her blue eyes showing some residual jetlag from the long flight back home to Missoula, Montana. “I’ve been in love with this country for my entire life, but I had yet to go there.”

Two months abroad haven’t sated her appetite for the spices, sounds, colors and people of India. And so the dream of owning a dog might have to wait for a while longer. Van Eeden feels certain she’ll return to the bustling thrum of the world’s largest democracy.

“I’ve been traveling all over the world for three decades and I feel more comfortable, more at home, more connected, and more accepted in India than I have anywhere else in the world,” she says.

“Let me be clear,” she continues. “I don’t blend in—in any way—in India.” Van Eeden’s athletic 6-foot frame, blond hair and blue eyes are considered exotic many places she’s traveled, and India was no different. Every so often, someone would stop her on the streets of Kovalam, the fishing village on the southwestern coast where she studied yoga, and ask for a picture; she would gracefully oblige.

Van Eeden thinks it must be India’s near-constant threat of chaos that instead unspools into a “perfect flow” that appeals to her. Cambodia, Vietnam and parts of Africa also share that edge-of-chaos quality. “I’ve always connected with juxtaposition,” she says. >>



**M**ANDELA VAN EEDEN'S PARENTS NAMED HER after legendary South African president Nelson Mandela. Her father is South African and her mother is American, and her childhood was split between a game reserve on the southernmost tip of Africa and Billings, Montana, her mother Jeani van Eeden's home state. An international flight attendant, Jeani whisked her daughter around the world from a young age: Australia, New Zealand, China, South Korea, Vietnam, Argentina, Mexico. "We went everywhere that United Airlines flies," she says.

When van Eeden was 8, she was enamored with her father's didgeridoo hanging on the wall of their South African home.

**"It would not have been good if I stayed out on the streets that night ... [The didgeridoo] literally saved my life."**

He told her not to play it, but his admonition had the opposite effect; van Eeden became fascinated and, at 18, got serious about learning the instrument.

Now she doesn't travel without it. In a world with too many languages to learn in a lifetime, van Eeden says music is an international language, humanity's common denominator. The didgeridoo is her skeleton key of choice. It's also gotten her out of a tight spot more than once.

A decade ago, van Eeden ran into money issues while traveling solo through Uruguay. Her bank canceled her ATM card under the assumption the charges from South America were fraudulent. Van Eeden couldn't convince them the expenses were hers.

With just a couple dollars left, she settled onto a cobblestone street in the old part of Colonia del Sacramento and started playing the didgeridoo. By the time darkness descended and the witching hour was well under way, she'd made a few friends and earned enough money for a night at a youth hostel and some empanadas.

"It would not have been good if I stayed out on the streets that night," she says. "That opened my eyes ... [The didgeridoo] literally saved my life."

**Left:** Van Eeden likes to end yoga classes she teaches with a brief didgeridoo session.

**Right:** She has guided on the Grand Canyon with Outdoors Unlimited for four years.

**I** N SOME WAYS, VAN EEDEN IS REPAYING THAT DEBT NOW.

During her recent India trip, she visited dozens of schools and introduced thousands of kids to the didgeridoo, all for free. “I think it’s important to give your time,” she says.

In the evenings, van Eeden traded the instrument for a microphone to conduct interviews with all manner of Indians for the radio show she hosts and produces.

Twice a week, “The Trail Less Traveled” airs on a Missoula radio station called The Trail. Van Eeden likes to open her interviews with the same question: “Where did you grow up and how was outdoor adventure part of your childhood?” She pays particular attention to how her guests have evolved in their chosen pursuits. Nobody is born an expert, she likes to point out; we were all beginners at one point.

During the three years she’s produced the program, van Eeden’s interviewed adventurers and athletes, scientists and conservationists including kayaking great Doug Ammons, and Pratik Patel, founder of the African Wildlife Trust. But it’s not only the famous that interest van Eeden. She interviews men and women from all walks of life who share their hard-won wisdom.

“She’s like a sponge,” says Elizabeth Fricke, a senior assistant director of UM’s Outdoor Program, and the woman who is largely responsible for introducing van Eeden to rafting and yoga. “She’s humble ... and she respects the [mentorship] process. She respects the old salt.”

Neither instructing yoga nor hosting a radio show pays much, at least for

the time being. (Van Eeden says she would eventually like to take her show to a national media outlet like NPR.) Fortunately, the job that supports her other endeavors is a good one. The past four summers, she has spent May through September as a Grand Canyon raft guide.

Van Eeden fell in love with rafting as a college freshman at UM. She went on a new student orientation trip down the Alberton Gorge of the Clark Fork and thought, “People get paid to do this? Where do I sign up?”

She didn’t waste time. Van Eeden started volunteering with the UM Outdoor Program and it wasn’t long before she was guiding on progressively more difficult stretches of whitewater on longer and longer trips: Class III, then IV, and finally V.

The winter after her college graduation, van Eeden moved back to Africa where she guided clients down some of the biggest whitewater she’s ever run—in underinflated rafts and using old goat leads as ropes to secure gear.

When she left Montana for the Orange River Gorge on the border of South Africa and Namibia, she was in a still-new relationship, which made leaving difficult. She decided she had to go—raft guiding in Africa was her dream. “I didn’t want to have love or a boy get in the way,” she says.

But ultimately, that relationship brought her back to the States; after eight months overseas, she decided it was time. Van Eeden and her partner Wesley Harmon have been together for six years now.



A lifelong tinkerer with a background in physics and entrepreneurship, Harmon builds carbon fiber electric and bass guitars. He spent this past winter in Florida building a boat with his uncle.

Harmon shares van Eeden’s outdoor inclinations and adventurous spirit, but she still finds value in the independence solo travel affords her. “I [am] able to really focus on spontaneity,” she says. “I actually thrive when I’m traveling by myself.”

She also thrives in Montana. Fricke says although there’s something “wanderlusty” about van Eeden, she’s still a grounded individual who places importance on family.

Last November, van Eeden and her mother invested in a 20-acre plot of land set in a larch forest and intersected by Butler Creek. One day it will be her home. “It’s paradise,” she says of the property just outside Missoula. “It’s very quiet. There’s wild turkey and whitetail deer and black bears and lots of elk.”

Van Eeden says Missoula will remain her base camp for adventures near and far, but she wants to continue traveling—Fricke says it’s “always been in her blood.” One day she’ll settle into the Butler Creek property with a dog. Just not yet. 🐾