

## **Interview with Juraj Horniak**

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**Juraj Horniak, a modern-day Don Quixote, will embark on a solitary walk along the coast of the Mediterranean, all the way from Algeciras to Istanbul, in a year-long journey of 8,000 kilometres. Slowly, step by step, eight million steps.**

**He'll be partnering with the Slow Food movement, whose main objective is to recuperate authentic traditions and time-honoured values that are in danger of extinction, gradually eroded by the forces of globalisation and consumerism.**

**The 8 Million Steps crew, directed by Juraj's daughter Maia, will document the epic walk in a feature film, TV series and online episodes, weaving a colourful tapestry of culture, food, art and history of the Mediterranean.**

You were born in Czechoslovakia, but after graduating in visual arts you escaped from your country. Why? How do you remember that stage of your life?

My last years in Czechoslovakia were idyllic – it was a period of liberalisation, referred to as "Prague Spring", with students like me leading the charge to end the totalitarian rule of the Stalinist regime. We were young and filled with hope, intoxicated with the idea of a new society where freedom, humanity and respect would reign. Unfortunately, it was not to be: in August 1968, Soviet bloc troops invaded my country and squashed any form of dissent with increased brutality. I had no choice, I had to escape – I spoke out openly against the crimes perpetrated by the vassals of the communist dictatorship, and I knew the police were closing in on me. I was destined to be arrested sooner or later, so escaping was an act of self-preservation.

You are a citizen of the world, an artist, a humanitarian, and you're in love with Spain. In 1990, disenchanted with the politics of big business, you sell your design company Horniak & Canny, abandons Australia and decides to settle in Seville. You strike me as being one of those people who live a life based on ideals and principles, and you don't seem to be afraid to take risks. How would you define yourself?

That's a big question, comprising several questions within. Yes, I consider myself a citizen of the world, or more accurately a nomad, so I am a strong advocate of unrestricted freedom of movement – my heart goes out to the millions of refugees who are treated with utter contempt and disregard for basic human rights. I've always detested intolerance, injustice and the impunity of those in power, which is why I spent nearly a decade working as global communications strategist with a South Sudanese rebel movement fighting against the Jihadist forces of Northern Sudan, who were systematically wiping out the non-islamic population of the South for 50 long years. The leader of the liberation movement, my good friend Dr John Garang, eventually became the Prime Minister of Southern Sudan in 2005, when he finally won the battle for independence; tragically, he was killed in a helicopter "accident" only a few weeks later. I was there at the time; I didn't see eye to eye with the new government and, after enduring a harrowing night in a blood-stained prison cell, I left the country and have not returned since. Bloody principles, they get you into a lot of trouble...

You're right, I gave up a very comfortable existence of running a large design and advertising agency in Sydney because I felt there was more to life than commercial success. I've always been attracted to Spain – its Mediterranean traditions and lifestyle – so I chose to settle in Sevilla and, buoyed by the proceeds of the sale of my company, I spent six glorious years there, doing only what I was really passionate about: writing, painting, making films, in other words everything that doesn't make money! No wonder it didn't last – I had to return to Sydney where I established a new company, 3C, which still exists today.

I think it's essential to live by certain principles and to follow one's dreams and ideals; much too often, we compromise and settle for a sensible existence – writers write ads (I did, too), architects sell real estate, artists sell their soul to the highest bidder... That's why I decided to break free of the tedious routine of "normal" living and embark on the quixotic adventure of walking 8,000 km along the Mediterranean coast – my 8 Million Steps project. Am I afraid to risk? I am attracted to risk like a moth is to flame – we can't make progress and discover new frontiers without taking a risk.

**What was your first impression of Seville, and what attracted you to our country so much that you made the choice to live in the South?**

Sevilla seduced me as soon as I laid my eyes on her – it was truly love at first sight! To me, Sevilla is pure magic – the locals' vitality, irrepressible *joie de vivre*, laughter, people talking (usually all at the same time!), touching each other with ease and warmth, nibbling on tapas, drinking wine – it's terribly contagious. How could I not feel at home?

**In 1996 you decide to leave Spain and return to Australia. Why? What do you miss most about Spain?**

As I said earlier, I simply ran out of money. By then, I was married to Paz, a Sevillana, and we were expecting a child (Carlos, now a young master of Japanese calligraphy of all things!), so I went into business again. I've missed Spain every single day since then; I miss the scent of orange blooms, Sunday cervecitas in a tiny bar on Plaza del Salvador, my wonderful friends of course, the Mediterranean priorities that put a life well lived ahead of chasing commercial success at all cost... I miss the culture and the beauty of Spain and its people. I often get accused of idolising Spain, especially Andalusia, but that's what happens when you fall in in love...

**You lived in many different countries. What is the perception of Spain abroad?**

It depends where you are. I am often in Japan and the Japanese adore everything Spanish – people, food, art, flamenco, absolutely everything. In my experience, it's very different in Anglosaxon countries; true, people lap up the typical Spanish tourist offering of sun, paella and sangria, but it costs them to accept that Spain is a highly developed nation producing world-class artists, intellectuals, scientists, chefs and a host of other accomplished professionals. It's a shame. Why do they refuse to see the clearly visible achievements of Spain? Just because they won the battle of Trafalgar? One of the aims of the 8 Million Steps project will be to revindicate the Mediterranean not only as the historical and cultural heart of Europe, but also as a vibrant, progressive and dynamic society in the world of today – I'll be interviewing hundreds of erudite individuals who will open the eyes of those who underestimate the people of Southern Europe.

**Let's talk about 8 Million Steps, your adventure that will start in Spain and consists of walking 8,000 km along the coast of the Mediterranean. How did the idea come about, and with what objective?**

I have reached the age of 60 and there's no more time to waste – I am going to spend the next few years of my life exploring the essence of the Mediterranean and championing the virtues of slow living, hoping to leave a legacy that someone may find of some value. As one of my favourite writers, Rafael Chirbes, once said: "En las edades de oro no se moría; quedaba la obra, el trabajo."

I decided to walk along the entire coast of the European Mediterranean, 8,000 kilometres (or 8 million steps), all the way from Algeciras to Istanbul. The journey is going to be documented in a cross-platform body of work: weekly video episodes will trace the adventure in real time; we'll produce a twelve-part TV documentary series; we'll publish a book featuring specially commissioned work

by a selection of Mediterranean writers, artists and photographers; and we'll record a compilation of traditional and contemporary music from the regions we'll traverse.

**With this project you'll realise the dream of your youth – to capture the essence of the Mediterranean, its culture and history, while you walk from Algeciras to Istanbul. What challenges will you face? Do you feel physically prepared?**

The 8 Million Steps project unites all my life-long passions: the Mediterranean way of life, culture, history, art, food, wine, music, ideas, walking, storytelling... you're right, I'll be realising the dream of my youth.

I am sure it won't always be easy – the challenge of walking 25 km per day is daunting and I expect there will be times when I'll wish I'd never have started, but I feel up to it, well prepared, both mentally and physically.

**Your daughter Maia, a film director, will be in charge of producing a documentary series about 8 Million Steps. Who else will accompany you on your adventure?**

Maia is a magnificent person, a perfect companion for the long journey ahead; she is also a highly accomplished and versatile film-maker – she will direct, shoot and edit the whole project. We'll be accompanied by her husband Basil Hogios, a well-known music composer and arranger, who will be in charge of the soundtrack and the recording of original music along the way, and Sarah Poer, Italian-born producer whose credentials include organising Nowhere Festival in Spain.

**Let's talk about the funding of the project and the various entities and individuals that will provide material support.**

The 8 Million Steps project is initially funded from my own pocket – I believe it's best to focus our energies on the creative aspects of the venture, cut a few episodes and demonstrate what we're capable of before we approach potential sponsors; it's important that they see the real thing, because there are plenty of great ideas floating about, but only a few get properly executed. The objective of 8 Million Steps is not commercial anyway, but of course we'd be more than happy to have some of the costs covered so I don't have to retire in poverty (I can see my children and ex-wives nod their heads in agreement). We'll be looking for corporate sponsors, plus we're open to crowd funding. If anyone wishes to contribute they can do so via (*web address to come*) – your donation will be greatly appreciated.

Our most important sponsorship is not financial – we are supported by the Slow Food movement and it means a lot more than money to us.

The journey starts in March. When will it finish, and what do you plan to do afterwards?

If all goes well, we should reach Istanbul in exactly a year. Afterwards, I'll be busy processing the fruits of our labour – finishing off the TV series, compiling the essays, photographs, art and music gathered from our Mediterranean artist friends, continuing our blog, writing... I imagine that it will take a few months. And then, I have no idea – this is a journey of transformation for me, so who knows what kind of person will emerge at the end of it all?

The spirit of Slow Living is palpable in your project. These days the expression “Slow” is used in a superficial sense, often as a marketing slogan, but of course the word really stands for a philosophy of life and certain principles. How do you define Slow Living? You are a champion of this way of life, so what does a day in the life of Juraj Horniak look like?

Very true, the word "Slow" has been depreciated by commercial use and abuse – I wish we had clearer boundaries around what it means. For me, it's not an abstract concept at all, it's to do with the daily reality of how we live. When I lived in the outskirts of Sevilla, I used to buy my food in a small market with a few vendors and a café in the middle of it. I never knew what I was going to cook, so I left the choice of ingredients in the hands of Rafa the butcher, Pepe the fish monger and lovely Evelia, the fruit and vegetable lady; they used to fight over who's going to pay for my coffee and when it was Rafa I was treated to a carajillo. There was never much produce on sale, just the freshest ingredients in season, all sourced locally, often picked by a neighbour that very morning.

At the time, I visited my sister in an industrial part of Germany and she took me to a massive hypermarket: everything you can possibly think of under one roof kind of a place. Kiwis from New Zealand, mangos from Cameroon, strawberries from Andalucía, plus of course the endless stacks of multinational junk food. I felt sick in the stomach – I imagined landscapes covered in plastic and poisoned by chemicals, enormous fleets of planes and trucks criss-crossing the world, chains of warehouses in which lowly-paid workers function like human conveyer belts, all that commotion... to what end? So that the privileged Europeans can eat anything they want, any time they want it? At whatever cost?

I realise that not everyone has the luxury of doing their shopping in a traditional market, nor the time to do it in an unhurried way over a carajillo with their butcher, but we can all adjust our consumption habits and buy only what is in season, locally produced if possible.

Slow living is not only about food of course. In the Mediterranean context, I see it as respecting the cultural heritage and traditional values that have served the

society so well over the millennia; I'm not suggesting that we all dress as Nazarenos and sing saetas, what I mean is that we should try harder to resist the temptations of the globalised, commercialised and relentlessly fast style of life.

As for me, at the moment I find it difficult to practise what I preach – like most urban professionals, I am subjected to daily pressures, always short of time. I wish I could say I meditate or tend to my vegetable patch on the roof of my attic, but I'm afraid I don't. That's another reason why I can't wait to start my 8 Million Steps walk – I'll be putting one foot in front of the other for a whole year, keeping in close touch with the earth and with the people I'll meet along the way.

**You are posing a lot of questions about how we, the Mediterraneans, identify with our culture. Caught up in the fast pace of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, it seems that our culture and our traditional values are no longer present in our daily life. Are we in danger of losing our identity to the frenetic rhythm of contemporary living?**

This question is at the core of 8 Million Steps. We'll explore and document the essence of the Mediterranean: on one hand, its magnificent cultural legacy and its timeless values and traditions; on the other, its continued vitality and relevance in the world of today.

I'll be talking to prominent figures from the world of culture, arts, gastronomy and politics; the question I'll ask is this – is the Mediterranean that we know and love facing extinction, or is it robust enough to withstand the pressures of the current social and economic crisis, and the insidious advance of globalised commercialism?

In my view, the Mediterranean DNA is still in daily evidence everywhere you look but, as you say, it is constantly under threat – there are parts of the coast that make you cry with their complete contempt for human dimension, local tradition or aesthetic values.

Will the Mediterranean identity, both physical and spiritual, adapt and evolve without losing its soul? That will be one of my main questions as I meander through the landscape – sometimes spectacularly beautiful, other times devastated by greed and corruption.

**We are in the midst of a very difficult crisis which is shaking up not only the economic structures, but also cultural ones. Do you believe that Spain can emerge stronger from this situation? How do you see the Spanish society compared to the one you used to know when you lived here?**

A Chinese economist recently described the Mediterranean as "a place of old people, churches and squares". A spent force, a thing of the past...

There is no doubt that Spain is going through a terrible time, paying a heavy price for the decades of excessive greed and inept governance. Yet if it were only up to the people to lift the country from the predicament it's in, I'd be optimistic – the people are ingenious and energetic, they could get themselves out of this mess. But I'm not so sure about the politicians and the bankers...

Culturally, I observed an interesting side effect of the crisis in Andalucía. As you know, unemployment is shocking in the south and many people's lives have been shattered, but there is also something else happening, something quite unexpected: the age-old family traditions seem to be making a comeback. Families rally to each other's help – "if you don't have work but I still do, you can stay with me and share my food, we can survive together"! I see a lot more solidarity between people, not just families, and I can only hope it's here to stay.

**Your project is supported by the Slow Food movement and it has the blessing of its founder, Carlo Petrini. What can you tell us about your encounter with him?**

I have been an admirer of Carlo Petrini ever since he founded Slow Food in 1986. He is a man of great vision but, unlike most visionaries, he is firmly planted on the ground – his ideas are tangible and actionable. He is an evangelist, but not the fanatical type that lacks humour or compassion; on the contrary, Sr Petrini can be quite light and entertaining. He is a living example of the limitless possibilities we all have within us – a single individual can really change the world!

I went to Bra, Slow Food's headquarters in Piemonte, to meet the great man and his team in March 2013. Unfortunately, he was called off somewhere else and I didn't get to meet him in person, but it all turned out well in the end: I spent four very productive days in Bra meeting with everyone else in the organisation – they told me that "Carlin" had blessed my project and they were going to help me in every way they can, which is exactly what they've been doing since then.

**You're going to embark on your journey in only three months. How do feel?**

How do I feel right now? A little overwhelmed – I am dismantling my life, shedding all my possessions and realising that, this time, there is no way back. It's a little scary, but it's also incredibly liberating: soon, I'll be as light as a feather, doing what I truly love doing!

It will work out, I know – it always does when you obey your heart and follow your dreams.

**What message would you like to send to our readers?**

I'll leave the last word to Antonio, an old donkey driver I met in Frigiliana. I was shooting a film there and he was an extra; he turned up late for his scene and I was angry. He just said: "You foreigners are always in a hurry... don't you realise that the faster you run the sooner you'll get to your grave?"