

Lifestyle | Features



Saudi trekker Abdullah Alsulmi crosses a desert area near Al-Khasrah area, some 350Km west of Riyadh, during his solo trek to the Qatari capital ahead of the FIFA World Cup. — AFP photos

For Saudi fan, road to World Cup is a desert trek

The idea hit Abdullah Alsulmi earlier this year, while he was watching a television show in which a senior Qatari official promised an “exceptional” experience at the upcoming World Cup. His excitement building, the 33-year-old Saudi recalls thinking: “I will go to Doha no matter what, even if I have to walk!” It was an unlikely beginning to what has become an audacious adventure dismissed by some of Alsulmi’s own relatives as “crazy”: a two-month, 1,600-kilometre (1,000-mile) solo trek from his native Jeddah to the Qatari capital. Alsulmi says the journey, faithfully documented for his thousands of Snapchat followers, is meant to highlight regional enthusiasm for the first World Cup in the Middle East which Saudi officials have pitched as a milestone “for all Arabs”.

“We want to support the World Cup,” Alsulmi told AFP one day last week as he sheltered from the midday sun near roadside shrubs in the town of Al-Khasrah, 340 kilometres southwest of Riyadh. Wearing a wide-brim hat and a backpack to which

he’d affixed Saudi and Qatari flags, he said: “I consider myself like a Qatari who is very interested in this World Cup and its success.”

Sun and scorpions

Alsulmi has experience with extended treks in Canada and Australia, where he used to live, yet those pale in comparison to the rigours of traversing the Arabian Peninsula. He typically sets out at sunrise and walks until 10 or 10:30 am, but then the heat forces him to break for a few hours before resuming in the afternoon and continuing until sundown. Occasionally he walks at night to maintain his goal of around 35 kilometres per day.

To keep his load light, Alsulmi subsists on food he can buy at petrol stations, often chicken and rice, while showering and washing his clothes at mosques. His social media posts capture details of life on the trail, from the mundane to the menacing: his nightly search for a spot to sleep, and the time he eyed a scorpion dozing dangerously close to his tent.

He also records conversations with Saudis he meets along the way, many of whom offer snacks and juice to keep him going. “There are moments of ups and downs, but when I meet people and hear these sweet words - ‘We will follow you on your account and support you’ - this encourages me to finish,” he said.

Straying from the main roads as often as he can, he says he has been rewarded with a taste of the varied scenery on offer in the kingdom—something he didn’t fully appreciate before. “Walking from Jeddah to Doha, every 100 kilometers is different. I mean, the first 100 kilometers there are sand dunes, then mountains, and then comes empty land, then farms,” he said. “I am going through all terrains in one country in two months. This is a beautiful thing.”

A ‘simple’ sport

Alsulmi hopes that by posting about his experience, he can inspire other Saudis to consider trekking through their homeland. “When I do this, I want to con-

vey to people that hiking and walking is a beautiful sport, even if the weather is difficult here in Saudi Arabia, even if the terrain is difficult. We can do it,” he said. “It is a sport for simple people. You only need a bag and a few simple things, and a tent and nature.”

If all goes according to plan, Alsulmi will arrive in Doha in time for Saudi Arabia’s opening showdown against Argentina on November 22. It will be a moment of divided loyalty, since Argentina is his favorite team. Four days later, he has a ticket for the Green Falcons’ match against Poland. His hopes are high for a Saudi squad that has now qualified for six World Cups but advanced to the knockout stage just once, during its 1994 debut. “This year we have good players. The coach is the great French coach (Herve Renard),” he said. “We expect and hope that this year the team will deliver an exceptional performance.”—AFP

Qatar hopes World Cup flying headdress will be 2022 vuvuzela

Qatar wants the 2022 World Cup mascot of a flying white headdress to symbolize football’s showcase tournament, just as the noisy vuvuzela horn did when South Africa hosted it in 2010. A flying keffiyeh headdress named La’eeb, meaning super skilful player in Arabic, is the official World Cup mascot and is omnipresent on billboards across Qatar and on television. “La’eeb is a fun and mischievous character who comes from the mascot-verse, a parallel world where all tournament mascots live,” world football’s governing body FIFA said in its announcement. “He will bring the joy of football to everyone.”

The keffiyeh headdress, also known in the Gulf as a shemagh or a ghutra, is designed to protect against the sun, sand and dust. But it has not shielded



This file handout picture made available by FIFA on April 1, 2022, shows La’eeb, the official mascot for the FIFA World Cup Qatar 2022.

World Cup 2022 organizers from jibes on social media. Reaction to La’eeb has been mixed. Twitter comments have mockingly compared La’eeb to the cartoon character “Casper the Friendly Ghost” or a flying bedsheet. But it has its fans too.

La’eeb has been adopted by some

internet blockchain communities in China which have issued tokens bearing the mascot’s likeness. Qatar’s World Cup organizers would like to see a repeat of the Club 2019 World Cup championship when players from the Mexican side Monterrey wore keffiyehs after winning a match. Bertrand Roine,



Didier Grande, tosses in the air one of the fan shemagh scarves.

who won the world handball title with France and then moved to play for Qatar, has with his business partner developed the keffiyeh’s link to the World Cup by designing headdresses in the national colors of the 32 countries taking part. Roine hopes the colorful scarves will become “symbol” of the

games. “One friend told me, you have made a vuvuzela for Qatar,” he said. South Africa’s deafening vuvuzela plastic horns blew their way to worldwide notoriety with fans enthusiastically honking them at every goal.—AFP



Bertrand Roine, is pictured with one of the fan shemagh scarves, also known as ghutra or keffiyeh, that he designed.



Didier Grande, is pictured with one of the fan shemagh scarves.



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