

Norton man takes long-distance love to next step

BY AMY DeMELIA / SUN CHRONICLE STAFF | Posted: Thursday, October 20, 2016 10:31 pm

NORTON - David Kleber and Maria Weinmann have taken the concept of a long-distance relationship to a whole new level.

Kleber, 49, of Norton will soon be joining Weinmann, his 43-year-old fiancée, who lives in Germany, on a five-month adventure backpacking the Te Araroa trail, which stretches 1,860 miles across the two main islands of New Zealand.

Kleber said getting to hike a long-distance trail in New Zealand and see wildlife ranging from the ubiquitous Kea birds to the ancient Kauri trees, is just a bonus to being on the same continent again with Weinmann.

"I'm very excited about the trip," Kleber said. "Maria talked a lot about what her next adventure would be. It sounded perfect - I get to go on this adventure with the girl I fell in love with and I get to see a country I've always wanted to visit."

The pair share a passion for long-distance hiking. In fact, they met last year while backpacking the Continental Divide Trail, which runs 3,110 miles along the spine of the Rocky Mountains from this country's border with Mexico to its border with Canada.

Their love story got off to a bit of a rocky start at their first meeting at Pie Town, N.M., when Weinmann, was wary because Kleber didn't exactly look like a thru-hiker.

"It wasn't the best impression," Weinmann admitted with a chuckle. "He was completely clean - he was not looking like 'hiker trash' - and he was cooking for all the hikers, so I thought maybe he worked there. He had all this heavy stuff, including a wooden stick, which I learned later he was carrying because it came from his stepfather."

Fortunately, that impression faded and the pair decided to team up to hike through an avalanche-prone area. Their love snowballed from there as they hiked mile upon mile of trail together.

"By the time we got to the border of Colorado, I knew he was a funny guy and I liked him. I thought if I have to hike over these mountains and through the snow, why not with this guy? It was the best decision of my life," Weinmann said.

Weinmann was the one who picked the Te Araroa for the couple's next long-distance hiking trip.

"On the trail, you meet hikers from all over the world and they talk about trails they've done. I met a guy from Australia and he told me about Te Araroa. I've always wanted to see New Zealand, so that was kind of in the background all the time, too. It has such a great variety of environment, from rain forest to beaches, and everyone who's been there says they loved the beautiful country," Weinmann said.



Norton backpacker

Maria Weinmann, of Germany, and David Kleber, of Norton, atop Grays Peak in Colorado during their long-distance backpack of the Continental Divide Trail.

The couple plans to take five months to hike the Te Araroa, hiking about 17 miles per day with around 23 pounds on their backs. Like many backpackers, the couple obsessively counts ounces to make hiking big distances more comfortable, including by cutting their toothbrush handles a bit shorter and burning book pages once they've read them, all the while making sure not to compromise their safety by leaving something important at home.

Both were already long-distance backpackers before they met, as Weinmann has completed the Pacific Crest Trail, which runs 2,670 miles through the wilderness of California, Oregon and Washington, while Kleber has thru-hiked the Appalachian Trail, which runs 2,174 miles from Georgia to Maine.

Kleber started backpacking in 2010 after a motorcycle accident that nearly took his life. Walking was difficult after the accident, but Kleber kept pushing himself to add miles as he walked around town to recuperate.

"I wasn't a hiker, but I needed a challenge. I wanted to prove my doctors wrong, so I decided to go hike the AT. I got some gear together and started hiking," he said. "I got addicted to the feeling of accomplishment you get when you put in a 25-mile day. When the trail ends, I feel bad it's over. For those 2,000 or 3,000 miles, you've amassed a mountain of great memories. It's just amazing."

Kleber, a mechanic and bartender, says he worked two or three jobs seasonally to save up money for his long-distance adventures.

Weinmann, who is a veterinarian and zookeeper, began long-distance hiking when she began to feel drained after skipping vacation time for years for college and to start her career. While it wasn't by design, initially, her holiday "walk" ended up taking her 1,800 miles from Paderborn, Germany, to Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

She said she enjoys the physical and mental challenge of long-distance hiking.

"On a long distance trail, you leave everything behind - it's like cleaning your soul," Weinmann said. "It's a mixture of what you see, impressions from being in a new country and having only two things to take care of every day: Where do I put my tent and what am I going to eat? It helps you appreciate things when you get home because you have so many choices of food at the supermarket and you can have a hot shower anytime you want."

The couple will reunite in early November and will spend their first two days in New Zealand getting their trek organized - from buying supplies to arranging transport to the trailhead at Cape Reigna. Where they will end up, after they finish their hike in Bluff is yet to be decided.

Follow their adventure online by visiting www.mariaelfe.com.