



Dude, I'm loving the ride!

For irrepressible adventurer, life's an unending quest

By James B. Meadow, Rocky Mountain News
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Dude, have you ever been arrested in Wadi Halfa, been detained in Benishangul-Gumuz, had grenades hurled at you in Somalia, or flogged your way past cynicism, doubt, gale-force winds and acres of ice en route to launching a blind man to the top of Mount Everest?

Dude, have you ever been menaced by a hippopotamus, charged by a crocodile, sawed off three of your fingers, or served as a walking tureen for a stew of germs that cause malaria, hepatitis, schistosomiasis and God knows what else?

Dude, have you scaled more dizzying mountains than people have teeth, drag-raced your self-customized 1955 Chevy, married the high school homecoming queen, fathered three children before you were 25 and - oh, yeah - become the first person in history to lead an expedition down the length of the 3,253-mile Blue Nile River?

Well, dude, you've done all this - and way more - if you happen to be 50-year-old Vincent Pasquale Scaturro, "PV" to your friends; native of Hollywood, Calif., resident of Lakewood, Colo., confidant of Planet Earth. A man who has been described as "flamboyant," "autocratic," a "modern-day swashbuckler" and a "polymath." Not too bad for someone who "was born a hundred years too late."

"Dude, I'm possessed, I'm beyond possessed," says Scaturro, invoking his favorite four-letter word, his frequent smile emerging from under a thick shrub of a moustache.

As his home and cell phones ring relentlessly, laden with calls from California, Namibia and locales in between, he says in a voice soaring with enthusiasm, "If the adventure is big and the athletic challenge is there, that's what I want. Something different, something that's never been done before."

"PV is so full of bravado and good spirit, he just carries you away," says Erik Weihenmayer, of Golden, who never thought about becoming the first blind person to summit Mount Everest until Scaturro suggested it - which was about five minutes after they had first met.

"When he decided to lead our expedition on Mount Everest, I got a sense that he liked to defy the odds," says Weihenmayer. "I think PV gets a perverse kick doing things people say can't be done."

As in, oh, navigating the greatest river in the world.

Descent into history

There he was, minding his own business, contentedly leading a group of friends up Mount Kilimanjaro, when Scaturro got a call on his cell. It was Richard Bangs, author, adventurer and friend, who wanted to know if PV was interested in working on an IMAX film about the Nile River, the waterway PV had always considered the "Mount Everest of Rivers."

Scaturro was game, but he was more interested in taking the IMAX project a bit further, like, say, to the nth degree.

He'd always considered the Nile to be the "greatest river in the world," and in the back of that bubbling lava bed known as his brain, lurked the notion of doing something *big*: a source-to-sea descent of the Blue Nile.



Have you ever been arrested in Wadi Halfa, been detained in Benishangul-Gumuz, had grenades hurled at you in Somalia, or flogged your way past cynicism, doubt, gale-force winds and acres of ice en route to launching a blind man to the top of Mount Everest? For irrepressible adventurer, life's an unending quest.

But first, a little geography.

Two distinct rivers make up the Nile. There is the White Nile - which begins in Uganda's Lake Victoria - and the Blue Nile, which emerges out of the highlands of Ethiopia. It is at Khartoum, Sudan, that the two rivers blend into the Nile proper and snake on to the Mediterranean Sea. Although the White Nile is longer, the Blue Nile provides 85 percent of the water that flows into Egypt and, as such, is the lifeblood of that country.

But not only is it bigger and - owing to a hellacious spree of Class IV and V rapids through its notorious Northern Gorge - faster, the Blue Nile had another fascination for Scaturro: Unlike the White Nile, no one had ever managed a complete descent of it.

Oh, there had been attempts, but all had ended unsuccessfully, several tragically, with the would-be explorers drowning in the rapids, being shot by *shifas* (bandits) or simply disappearing.

Adding to the Blue Nile's formidable nature is the fact that for much of its serpentine route, there were no maps. As Gordon Brown, Scaturro's only partner on the entire journey, would later say, "We were flying blind."

Danger? Mystery? Virgin territory? No wonder the Blue Nile was Scaturro's kind of river.

Of course, convincing others that it was *their* kind of river wasn't so easy. Since Scaturro was going to need help - for starters, someone to row the second 16-foot Easter egg-yellow inflatable raft - he sent out an e-mail call to arms to 35 people. Only two didn't think he was nuts.

In the shadow of tragedy Scaturro, of course, remained undaunted - but not out of recklessness. Indeed, Kim Scaturro, his second wife, always thought of him as "calculatingly safe." And with good reason: Few knew better than he the deadly risks that always shadow adventurers.

In 1993, while Scaturro was leading a trip down Canada's Alsek River, his boat flipped in furious rapids, dumping everyone into the freezing water. One woman tried to swim through the current to shore, hit her head on a rock and died. That "devastating, absolutely devastating" experience kept Scaturro off big rivers for 18 months.

Later that year, tragedy revisited him in the Himalayas. As he and Gregory Gordon were descending 23,494-foot Mount Pumori, Gordon slipped. Twenty feet behind, Scaturro watched helplessly as his friend whirled out of control and plummeted to his death.

Though his zest for adventure would forever be tempered by a sharp sense of his own mortality, Scaturro didn't exactly sequester himself with a good book. In 1995, he took on 29,035-foot Mount Everest, the world's tallest peak. But at 26,000 feet, the malaria he had contracted years prior on the Omo River in Africa erupted. Lying in the snow to try and cool his fever didn't help. Nothing did.

Scaturro had to turn back, "shattered" by his failure. "I hate to fail," he once said. "Sure, I *have* failed, but I hate to."

So he did what he had to do. When he got off the mountain, he obtained the first available climbing permit to go back up. Three years later, in 1998, Scaturro was standing on the top of the world.

Which was 180 degrees from his locale at the close of 1995.

In December of that year, Scaturro's youngest son, Adam, was horsing around with a fellow member of his high school football team. The buddy got Adam in a headlock and threw him to the ground. Hard. Hard enough to snap Adam's neck.

"There's nothing in life that will make you want to kill yourself like the sight of your son taped to a board in an emergency room with his neck broken and a neurologist telling you he won't walk for the rest of his life . . . (that) he'll be a quadriplegic," Scaturro would recall nine years

later, boisterous voice gone soft, eyes to the floor. "That was, by far, the worst time of my life. I remember going outside and just weeping."

By the time he met Weihenmayer in 2000, Scaturro had scaled a host of other daunting mountains - Denali in Alaska, Amadablam in Nepal - but was itching to return to the tallest in the world. Yet, when asked later what possessed him to suggest Everest to a blind climber he had known for five minutes, he would smile, shake his head and say, "Dude, I have no idea."

Neither did the mountaineering fraternity, many of whom dismissed the idea of a blind man scaling Everest as foolhardy at best and deadly at worst.

The idea, however, resonated with Weihenmayer, whose subsequent successful climb would make him an inspiration for blind - and sighted - people all over the world. But as Weihenmayer stood atop Everest, someone was missing.

Down at 27,500 feet, Scaturro had become deathly ill. Maybe it was the malaria kicking in again. Or the altitude. Or maybe even his prodigious energies gave out.

"I think PV just exhausted himself," Weihenmayer said.

While most climbers were resting in preparation of the assault, he said, Scaturro was doing all the physical labor attendant to the expedition, including talking on the satellite phone with sponsors at 2 a.m.

"And he did it all with a smile," said Weihenmayer.

For Mike O'Donnell, a member of the climb, "When I think of PV, I imagine one of these guys standing on the bow of a ship, peering into the fog, yelling, 'Raise the mainsail!' "

O'Donnell insists "There's probably only a handful of people in the world who could have pulled off a trip of that magnitude with the style, grace and effortlessness that he did."

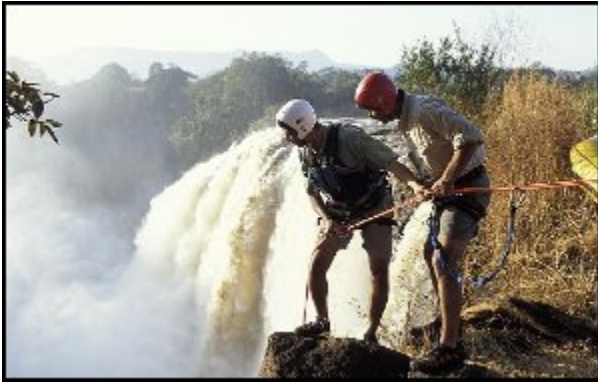
Most astonishing of all to O'Donnell was the fact that of the 21 people in the Scaturro-led expedition, 19 summited Everest, an unprecedented feat on that formidable mountain.

The climbers were equally affected by what they witnessed at base camp, before the ascent even heated up. There was Scaturro, bustling about the desolate 17,500-foot site, moving small boulders, clearing scree, chipping away at ice - trying to make the terrain "wheelchair accessible" for Adam, determined that his son would join him for an intimate taste of the Himalayas.

And so he did.

But for Scaturro, the adventure was bittersweet. Yes, he was thrilled that Adam was at base camp. Yes, he took pride in having 19 men summit. But there was also the knowledge that, for the second time in three tries, *he* didn't.

Still, if Everest 2001 was a crucible of mixed emotions, the anodyne for Scaturro's pain was simply a new adventure.



Michel L'Huilier © Special To The News

Pasquale Scaturro instructs Mohammed Megahed on how to rappel off the top of Tassisat Falls on the Blue Nile. It was the first time Megahed had been on a rope. At the base of the 150-foot falls, expedition members got in their boats and took off.

The journey begins

Eventually, Scaturro found his crewmates. First off, there was Brown, a gifted kayaker from California, who was hopeful of running a chunk of the river in his 8-foot craft. Additionally, Mike Prosser and Kurt Hoppe, both of Colorado, were enlisted.

Due to time restraints, though, Prosser signed on for only a month, Hoppe for even less. And so, although there would be a changing cast of native cooks, interpreters and security, only Brown would endure the entire journey with Scaturro.

Given Scaturro's reputation as a fastidious organizer and stickler for details, it figured that his definition of a source- to-sea route would be very narrow. Whereas most considered Ethiopia's Lake Tana to be the start of the Blue Nile, Scaturro insisted the *real* source was farther up at the Spring of Gish Abay at Sakala, wedged in that country's highlands, where the water trickled out of the rocks and into a small pool. To start anywhere else would be "cheating," he believed.

So it was at the remote springs, where electricity didn't exist, where most natives had never seen a white man, that Scaturro filled a Nalgene bottle with the Blue Nile's source, duct-taped it for protection, and, with Brown, set off overland.

Yes, overland: Scaturro's insistence on starting from Sakala not only added 125 miles to the descent, it also meant the first 45 miles would be on foot because the river never widened beyond 24 inches. Even then, the Blue Nile was only deep enough to carry kayaks for the next 80 miles.

Finally, on Dec. 30, Scaturro and Brown arrived at Lake Tana, met up with Prosser and Hoppe and began rafting down the Blue Nile.

It wasn't long before the journey became really interesting, as the men encountered Class IV rapids near 150-foot Tassisat Falls. Then, after portaging around the falls, Scaturro & Co. came to the even-more violent Class V and VI rapids in the Northern Gorge. (Class VI rapids are generally considered to be virtually unrunnable by all except whitewater experts. Even then, the risks are profound.) It was here that a huge wave swept Prosser overboard and into the river's black depths before he fought back to the surface.

Of his "near-death experience," Prosser would later say, "Someone once said, drowning gives you time to contemplate your imminent demise."

Yet, there are different ways to drown. And in PV's case, it was a small miracle that he wasn't pulled under by a childhood his wife called "tumultuous."



Michel L'Huillier © Special To The News

A hippopotamus eyes the expedition in the western gorge of the Blue Nile in western Ethiopia.

Overcoming chaos

The marriage between Scaturro's parents, Vincent Scaturro and Audrey Bolton, was a confluence of flame and gasoline. Their passionate, volatile natures often collided, sending the household careening toward domestic violence. Police were no strangers to the house, often arresting Vincent, a Sicilian immigrant who, for reasons never made clear, named his five sons after himself.

For Vincent Pasquale, the second oldest, the chaos of home was assuaged a bit when he was 8 and a friendly teacher paid his way to a YMCA summer camp in the mountains. He not only fell in love with the outdoors, he had an epiphany.

It occurred when a counselor decided to climb 11,502-foot Mount San Gorgonio, one of the highest peaks in Southern California. Pasquale pestered him to come along. As the trail grew steeper, the other campers fell away. Then, the counselors. Now there was just Pasquale and one adult. Weeping with exhaustion, the boy somehow beat back all the reasons for quitting and reached the top. *I can do this. I love this.*

When Pasquale was 11, his mother began to hear voices. Then came the hallucinations. Paranoid schizophrenia, the doctors said. Vincent moved his family to Thousand Oaks, 90 minutes from Hollywood. He, however, remained at his restaurant back in town, visiting maybe twice a month. With their mother's condition worsening, the five boys were essentially on their own.

Then Audrey Scaturro was institutionalized. Although she would periodically return home, by the time Pasquale was 13, *he* was the adult, *he* was head of the household, cooking, organizing, securing food stamps.

While holding the family together, Pasquale evolved into the classic overachiever. He pulled down A's in high school and became a star athlete. He got a job working nights at a gas

station, learning enough to rebuild a very cool dark green 1955 Chevy, which he found abandoned and turned into his own drag racer.

Anybody who knew him would marvel at what a quick study he was. Cars, cooking, school - things just *came* to him. Or maybe he just willed himself to learn. As Romano Scaturro (all the brothers use their middle names) says, "He doesn't want to rely on anybody for anything."

Effortlessly popular, he was elected junior class president; as a senior, he was homecoming king. Of course, he was dating the homecoming queen. A year later, he married her. A year after that - when he was 19 - Scaturro became a father.

The fledgling family moved to Texas, where Scaturro managed a few gas stations. But something was wrong. He didn't know it then, but the wanderlust that would one day propel him all over the globe was starting to bubble. He saw a billboard that promised, "See the World. Join the Air Force." So he did.



Kurt Hoppe © Special To The News

Pasquale Scaturro updates maps before entering the river's grand canyon.

Dawn of an explorer

His tour of duty up, Staff Sgt. Scaturro and his family wound up in Flagstaff, Ariz. There were three kids now, and even with the GI Bill paying his way at the University of Northern Arizona, Scaturro still had mouths to feed.

He decided to become a home builder. The only catch? He knew nothing about home building. He took a job at a construction company, spent 10 days soaking up things, then quit. He figured it was time to go into business. "How hard could it be?" he asked himself.

He started building a house - "every stick of it" - from the foundation to the framing to the cabinetry. When he wasn't sure what to do, he'd pack a flashlight, visit other sites at night and figure it out. He taught himself to create blueprints. He finished the house, sold it, then bought another piece of property.

Things were OK, but his schedule was nuts: college during the day, home building at night, coaching his son in basketball in his spare time, limping along on three hours of sleep.

One evening, exhausted, he was working on a house when his table saw slipped. He looked down through the blood and saw one finger on his right hand was barely hanging on - two others weren't. He scooped them up and sped to the hospital. The doctors reattached what

they could. Two days later, Scaturro was back on the roof of the house, nailing shingles. What the hell - he was left-handed anyway.

He graduated from the university in 1980 with a double major in geology and geophysics, moved to Denver and began doing oil and gas exploration for AMOCO. That lasted five years. He went into business for himself. How hard could it be?

Not too. Seismic Specialists Inc. quickly established itself as a success, and Scaturro was traveling all over the planet - Azerbaijan, Tunisia, Chechnya, Ethiopia, Somalia.

Some places were insanely dangerous. In Somalia, rebel soldiers pointed grenade launchers at him; some tossed grenades. It got to the point where he was "not uncomfortable when there are people around me with guns. Usually I can negotiate my way out of any trouble."

Part of his negotiating skills lay in the fact that languages came easily to him. He rarely traveled anywhere without learning a "few hundred words." A little Nepalese, some Arabic, a smattering of Russian and Amharic.

Traveling to some of world's remotest locales only fueled his adventuring nature. By now he was heavily into mountain climbing. Rivers came next.

In 1984, he read an article about the Bio-Bio in Chile. "Let's do this," he said to friends. He built the frames for the rafts and set off on his first "wild" river. Others followed - the Omo, the Zambezi, the Tekeze.

What these latter three rivers all had in common - aside from their furious rapids and logistical challenges - was their location. They were African rivers, and Africa exerted a potent sway over Scaturro. It became "my favorite place in the world," a wonderful, wild amalgam of sights, sounds, people and adventures; a continent of mystery.

And the home of the Nile.

When Scaturro & Co. weren't threading their way through roiling white water in the Ethiopian stretches of the river, they were busy avoiding cranky hippos. When pachyderms weren't posing a threat, crocodiles were. More than once, Brown - who, in his 8-foot kayak, sometimes felt like a "snack" to the 12-foot reptiles - was charged by the crocs.

Even the rafts were fair game. While rowing one section of the river, Prosser felt a *thunk*. Pulling his oar from the water, he saw tooth marks on both sides.

Along the shore, the explorers noted 15-foot pythons, magnificent birds and regiments of baboons. Unlike the relatively placid serpents and birds, however, the baboons would often throw rocks at the boats, mirroring the behavior of angry natives.

There was also the specter of rifle-bearing shiftas. As Brown later related, "I didn't know it before this trip, but one of my least favorite things is to be shot at."

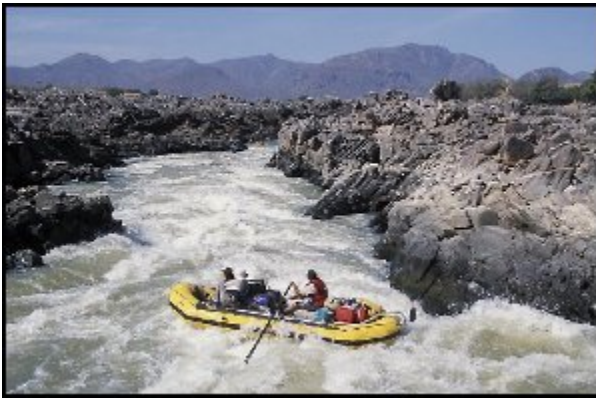
He wasn't thrilled either about being detained for two days by a belligerent militia in the Benishangul-Gumuz region, men who wanted bribes. But Scaturro - calm in the face of guns, adept at cool-headed negotiating - glided them out of trouble.

Encounters with rebels were rare, but then, in many spots along the river, so were encounters with *anybody*. Often, the explorers flowed down corridors where the nearest people were hundreds of miles away - "the end of the world," Brown called it.



Kurt Hoppe © Special To The News

Expedition members lower a raft into a section of the river in Ethiopia.



Michel L'Huillier © Special To The News

Pasquale Scaturro runs the rapids in the western gorge of the Blue Nile just before entering Sudan. As soon as the expedition emerged from Ethiopia the rapids stopped. Several hundred Gumuz people had gathered to watch the river-runners.

Alone in the desert

By February, they were in Sudan, past Nubia, then into Khartoum, where the Blue and the White Nile merged. With the exception of their time in Khartoum, for a full 37 days in Sudan, neither Scaturro nor Brown laid eyes on "a single other tourist, adventurer, traveler or any other Westerner." Aside from a translator and cook, their sole companion was the vast Sahara Desert.

Frequently, as the Nile widened and slowed, they had to employ their tiny 15-horsepower motors. But technology - solar-powered cells, computers, GPS instruments - was often overwhelmed by the unrelenting force of the elements. Temperatures would reach 100 degrees by 10 a.m., then spiral 20 degrees higher, as if "someone opened an oven door."

Beyond the brutal heat were the *khamsins*, 50 mph winds that roared off the desert, detonating *haboobs* - blinding sandstorms that invaded nostrils, computers, sleeping bags, any available crevice or crack for endless hours; turning the sky a "dull white, sort of like some massive fog had rolled in and shrouded everything along the entire river."

But the true bane of the trip was the bureaucracy that confronted the men at Lake Nasser.

Created in 1972 by the construction of the Aswan High Dam, the largest man-made lake in the world - 300 miles long and 18 miles wide at some points - was perhaps the most heavily protected area in Africa, zealously guarded by the Egyptian military because of its strategic importance. When Scaturro and Brown tried to gain access to the lake, they were rebuffed by the Egyptians and forced to return to Wadi Halfa, in Sudan. Lacking visas to re-enter Sudan, they were placed under a cordial, but confining, temporary arrest.

When finally released from Sudanese custody, Scaturro embarked on the most challenging part of the journey: traveling to Cairo to secure clearance to cross Lake Nasser - something unheard of for foreigners. The Egyptian government suggested the men stow their equipment on one of the ubiquitous cruise ships and cross the lake, tourist style. In whatever language he chose to invoke, Scaturro said no way.

While the failure to navigate their rafts across Lake Nasser might not have violated the letter of the law of Scaturro's first descent - technically speaking, the lake was man-made and not part of the Nile's natural geography - it certainly would have compromised its spirit. And he didn't want *anything* to taint the legitimacy of his source-to-sea expedition. Hadn't he scrupulously limited the number of food drops along the way? Hadn't he eschewed outside help on portages around waterfalls or rapids?

Finally, after two weeks of carousel-like negotiations involving every tier of the Egyptian bureaucracy, permission was granted. It took three days to cross Lake Nasser; when they reached the Port of Aswan, Scaturro's reward was a flare-up of his malaria.

It must have been a rough bout: He was laid up for a day.

The motivation behind Scaturro's compulsive need to let nothing stop his leap into adventures is, as you might imagine, subject to speculation.

"He was born 100 years too late," said Kim Scaturro, who married Scaturro in 1998. "He's an explorer. He'd never say this, but if he died doing something nobody had done, it would be OK."

Not that there's a shortage of recruits to share his next exploit.

"Sure, it was tough at times," says Brown. "Sure, we ended up in shouting matches a few times. But one of the things about Pasquale is he's the kind of guy who's always solving problems rather than creating them. I'd love to go on another expedition with him."



Michel L'Huillier © Special To The News

Shadows of camels carrying expedition members fall against a mosque west of Aswan, Egypt, near Lake Nasser, which was created in 1972 by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. When Vincent Scaturro and Gordon Brown tried to gain access to the lake, they were rebuffed by the Egyptians and forced to return to Sudan. Lacking visas to re-enter Sudan, they were placed under temporary arrest.

The next adventure

It is not quite four months since April 28, the day that Scaturro and Brown left the Nile and floated into the dazzling blueness of the Mediterranean Sea; not quite four months since they carved their initials onto history. Yet, Scaturro sounds like a man who is anything but impressed.

"When it was over, dude, there was more a sense of relief that, 'Hey, we did it. Nobody died. Gordon and I didn't kill each other,' " he says, stumbling for words, a curious lull for a man so glib and expressive that O'Donnell says, "Hey, he makes me seem like a deaf mute - and I'm Irish."

Isn't there anything else he wants to say about this feat?

A shrug. "It's probably the highlight of my outdoor career."

He pauses, then gets to the crux of his reticence. "It's like, 'Been there done that.' I'm not going to live my life talking about the Nile. I'm looking forward to the next adventure."

In other words, ask him if the Nile sated some of his galloping wanderlust and he'll grin sheepishly, shake his head and say, "Actually, it's getting worse."

No kidding.

As you read this, Scaturro is off tracing the Missouri River – by car, by raft, by foot, by bicycle - from its source to its confluence with the Mississippi River.

After that?

Well, next spring, he's pretty sure he's going to climb Annapurna, another of those dizzying mountains in the Himalayas. On his frequently updated to-do list of adventures, he's also jotted down a "first quest" for the Ark of the Covenant on Ethiopia's Mount Ras Dashen, as well as a first descent of the Mekong River in Laos. There's also the looming lure of paragliding off towering sand dunes in Namibia.

Then there's this other idea, one that's been percolating in his head for a while. No, he hasn't begun hammering out the million-and-one details yet, but . . .

"I wanna drive my Land Rover from South Africa to the United Kingdom and back. Dude, it'd be the mother of all road trips!"

It sounds utterly insane, but then you look at Pasquale Scaturro, geophysicist, mountaineer, river runner, drag racer, dreamer, explorer, adventurer, problem solver and, while we're at it, grandfather of two. You look past the neon grin, and you see the fire lighting up the eyes. You see the boy who climbed an 11,500-foot mountain, the man who scaled Everest and plunged down the Nile. You see all this and then you imagine him motoring across the continent he loves more than any other on Earth, sparring with danger here, talking his way out of trouble there, accumulating adventures everywhere.

You see this and you can come to but one conclusion:

Dude, how hard could it be?



Michel L'Huillier © Special To The News

These Gumuz children belong to a lowland Ethiopian group of people living along the western gorges of the Blue Nile. Adventurer Pasquale Scaturro had always considered the Nile to be the "greatest river in the world" and had been intrigued by the possibility of a source-to-sea descent. Last December, his dream became reality when the expedition got under way in the highlands of Ethiopia.

About the journey

3,253 miles: Distance traveled along the Blue Nile River from Ethiopia to where the Nile flows into the Mediterranean Sea (See map on 27A).

114 days: Time it took to complete the expedition.

15 feet: Length of pythons seen by the explorers, who also contended with hippos, crocodiles and rock-throwing baboons.

The film

- *Mystery of the Nile*, an IMAX film about the historic descent of the river by Vincent Pasquale Scaturro, above, and Gordon Brown will be showing at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science beginning Feb. 25.