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Lola Akinmade Åkerström is an award-winning Nigerian-American writer and photographer based in Stockholm, Sweden. Her work has appeared in several publications including National Geographic Traveler, BBC, CNN, The Guardian, amongst others. Lola's photography is represented

by National Geographic. From working as a field journalist during an expedition race in Fiji to blackwater rafting and caving in New Zealand to chasing Northern Lights and husky sledding in Lapland, Lola is always up for an adventure and hopes to someday reach both the North and South poles.



Emily Johnson and her husband, Brian Mohr, have spent nearly one thousand nights in a tent together. Last winter, Emily skied into labor before bringing their daughter, Maiana, into the

world. Emily and Brian co-own Ember Photography and provide photography for clients of all kinds worldwide.

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Story and photos by Lola Akinmade Åkerström

*When these women hit sixty, they upped their adventurous games.
Meet the ladies who are fervently traveling, racing,
and working into the prime of their lives.*

THE NEW AGE OF

Alpha put me to shame. Under the oppressing, near 100-degree heat in Egypt's Arabian Desert, her lean muscular frame was hunkered over the handlebars of her mountain bike with beads of sweat dripping down her face. She occasionally took quick swigs of tepid water from her water bottle while forging on; digging her wheels into thick sand and fighting through loose layers, with rolling sand dunes in the background.

Me? I'd already given up a few miles back and was riding, defeated, next to my bike in the back of our supply pickup truck. The stench of my embarrassment filled our truck, considering I was at least 40 years younger than Alpha.

Already in her early 70s, African-American triathlete Alpha Bennett, who I met three years ago while on a biking tour of Egypt, frequently left us in the dust as we cycled through scorching desert making our way from Hurghada to Luxor with a cruise down the River Nile in-between. A woman of few yet poignant words, I quickly grasped that Alpha was a doer not a talker, but I wanted to pick her brain, to know what turned her on and kept her going as an athlete for so long.

According to the 2013 Adventure Tourism Market Study by the Adventure Travel Trade Association, adventure travelers tend to be younger than more conventional travelers with an average age of 36, compared to non-adventure travelers who average 41 years of age. But meeting Alpha tuned me into this new breed of female adventurers—women who scoff at the aging process and beat it with every heart-pounding expedition and hair-raising thrill.

I wanted to discover what unique traits older female adventurers share, so I reached out to three exemplary adventuresses who are in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, including Alpha Bennett.

Alpha, 75 **TRIATHLETE**

Growing up in Bermuda, Alpha was active in sports and participated in her middle school physical education classes. She migrated to New York for high school and went on to study and work as a lab technician there. Alpha met her late husband who was in the Air Force during their time in

Alpha tried her first boot camp-style exercise class when she was in her 40s, went skydiving for her 65th birthday, and hasn't slowed down at 75 years old.



ADVENTURE

New York. Becoming a military wife meant moving from place to place, which fueled a budding love for travel.

But there was still something missing.

She felt driven to take on extreme adventures and competitive sports instead of just leisurely touring Europe via the air-conditioned confines of a bus reserved for the elderly. And that spark ignited when Alpha's daughter, who was in the Army Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), invited her to join a boot camp-style exercise class. Alpha was already in her 40s.

"That was fun," Alpha reminisces of that sweaty, physically challenging camp. "And at that moment, I realized I could actually enjoy doing this."

The "this" she was referring to meant pushing her body to its physical limits. To seemingly immortal extremes that shamed me, her junior, in the Arabian Desert on that hot day.

Since her first boot camp class more than thirty years ago, Alpha has explored roughly fifty countries and participated in hundreds of

races. She has finished at least eight full marathons, including Iceland's Akureyri Marathon, and completes an average of three races per month. "With running marathons, hiking, and biking, you get to see more of a country," says Alpha, who currently runs with the DeKalb Striders Running Club and travels with the Metro Atlanta Cycling Club. Both are located in her home base of Atlanta, Georgia.

"I have always been curious about the world we live in. I think travel is one of our most wonderful freedoms, and sports keep our minds and bodies youthful," Alpha says. "After my husband passed away unexpectedly, I began to get more involved in fitness activities. I trained alone for my first marathon in New York City at age 48. For several years after that, I ran mostly marathons and half marathons. Later I decided to do triathlons. I was honored to place at the top of my age group in these races."

I wanted to know Alpha's secret. How could one sustain such endurance well into her 70s while outpacing others decades younger? But alas, there wasn't one.

“There really is no secret,” shares Alpha. “You have to truly love biking, swimming, running, or whatever it is you’re doing. Either you like exercising or you don’t. If I didn’t like it, I most definitely wouldn’t be doing it.”

In other words: passion.

Considering that she went skydiving for her 65th birthday, I had to take Alpha at her word. An avid cyclist, Alpha has been able to combine enviable travel experiences with her love of fitness. She has cycled and hiked in Mexico, Iceland, Morocco, Bulgaria, France, Switzerland, Cuba, New Zealand, Germany, and, of course, Egypt, where we met. Alpha’s most notable adventures include riding sections of the Tour de France route and taking in some fabulous scenery in France, to biking and hiking in New Zealand’s stunning South Island, to swimming in a volcanic thermal crack after finishing the Akureyri Marathon in Iceland. Her next adventures include hiking at the Grand Canyon and bike touring across the United States.

While one would think being considered a senior and an older adventurer would have its challenges while traveling and participating in adventure sports, Alpha’s age hasn’t been a challenge while on the road other than getting lost and struggling with the local language—two challenges which know no age limits. “I believe that if you travel with a good heart, a smile, and patience, everyone will accept you for who you are,” Alpha says. “Step outside of your comfort zone and see our world. Enjoy life to the fullest. Remember that age is only a state of mind. The world is waiting to meet you.”



Ann, 62 GLOBETROTTER

For Ann Lombardi who considers herself 62 years young, “home” is wherever in the world she happens to be for more than a few weeks. And when I caught up with Ann over e-mail, she was tucked away somewhere in the Swiss Alps.

It seems that travel genetically courses through Ann’s veins. The excitement of facing something unknown and discovering the world in an active, up-close, and personal way, was what drew her to adventure travel. “Since my mother and dad were both athletic, curious people, I think even family vacations we as children took also had a bit of adventure travel in them,” shares Ann, whose curiosity about the world started with her fifth grade geography research paper on the Sámi people of Finnish Lapland.

“Growing up, I think I was really fortunate to have globally minded parents, who were active members of what was then called the Atlanta Council for International Visitors,” shares Ann. “Every few weeks, my dad would whip out the globe and ask us to find the home country of our next international visitor. My brothers and I also would take turns looking up that country in our trusty Encyclopedia Britannica.”

For Ann, this meant sharing her home and evening dinners with fascinating people from across the globe—from a Dutch Parliament member and a Philosophy professor from Ghana to an endurance cyclist from Brazil.

Ann has been to so many countries and says that she would visit each and every single one again in a heartbeat. Her adventures have even taken her to Finnish Lapland to experience in-person life with the indigenous Sámi she wrote about in fifth grade. “I recently made a list of the countries I have visited and was surprised to see that I am now up to ninety-five. Though I realize that quality matters more than quantity, I secretly would like to make it to one hundred within the next two years,” adds Ann. She has hiked the Swiss Alps to visit an alpine cheese maker’s hut in Switzerland. She has competed in the world’s largest women’s cross-country ski race in Norway after a few minutes of one-on-one serendipitous training from an Olympic Gold medalist in cross-country skiing. She’s braved overnight trains in Bulgaria, Romania, and Turkey, taken part in a traditional shaman ritual in Korea, and also finished in dead last in the Berlin Marathon.

For Ann, her innate curiosity, which was born in her youth and continually

Seasoned world traveler Ann has yet to visit Antarctica but aims to see it while the continent is still solid.

“Remember that age is only a state of mind. The world is waiting to meet you.”

stoked by her worldly parents, is what keeps her going into her 60s, and she has her eyes set on competing in Switzerland’s Cross-Country Ski Marathon, exploring Bhutan and Central Asia, and visiting Antarctica before it melts. “I think people have always found it entertaining to meet active senior adventurers, especially from the U.S.,” says Ann. “Nothing like breaking the old stereotype. Don’t put off that long-awaited trip any more. Go for it! And if no one wants to go with you, just go by yourself. Traveling alone really is the world’s best education.”

Barbara, 82 POLAR EXPLORER

While vying for a spot on a North Pole expedition—more like a social media contest where I needed to get as many votes as possible—I stumbled across a name. Barbara Hillary, the first African-American woman in her 70s to have reached both the North and South Poles. Considering Barbara braved the danger of frostbite in subzero temperatures for days during her ski trips to both poles while I was campaigning for a spot on a luxury ice-breaker only to hop off at the North Pole once there, that same shame I felt with Alpha in Egypt resurfaced.

After retiring as a professional nurse, Barbara Hillary became fascinated with arctic travel. She found new challenges learning snowmobiling and dog sledding in the United States and Canada. During this time she became aware that no African-American woman had reached the North Pole. On April 23, 2007, after having overcome both lung and breast cancer, Hillary reached the North Pole. Just a few years later, in her late 70s, she also became the first African-American woman to reach the South Pole.

Barbara’s remarkable discipline and focus were cultivated by her mother Viola, who Barbara names as her personal hero to this day, having raised her two daughters as a single mother. “We never had a sense of mental poverty,” Barbara shares. “There was no ‘woe is me’. You had to be prepared to work and stay focused. If you got knocked down, you got back up.”

Now in her early 80s and a motivational speaker, Barbara is planning her next major expedition, set for 2014 and under lock and key, which will be equally as impressive as her polar treks. According to Barbara, old people have no excuse to be bored and no right to be boring. “Wouldn’t it be better to die doing something interesting than to drop dead in an office and the last thing you see is someone you don’t like?”

“People today think the world owes them something,” Barbara goes on to say. “The world doesn’t owe you a damn thing. You get off your ass and you work.”



Alpha has cycled and hiked in at least seven continents and completed eight full marathons. Her next adventure goal is to bike tour across the United States.

The Rising Age

If passion, curiosity, and discipline were the base ingredients for being an adventurer well into one’s latter years, I wanted to know if advancements in medicine and physical health had equally important roles in this rising age. So I reached out to John R. Morris, M.D., who is involved in clinical research and is a board certified otolaryngologist (ear, nose, and throat specialist) based in Louisville, Kentucky.

In early August, he, along with 69-year-old Barb Long and three other men between the ages of 65 and 75, went climbing and camping in the Gore Range of the Rockies near Vail, Colorado. “We crossed over a pass at approximately 12,000 feet. All of us were in good physical condition—a prerequisite obviously—but only Barb exercises daily and had near three percent body fat which was enviable indeed,” shares John. “Barb Long hails from Alaska so staying in shape for the outdoor life probably comes more naturally to her than to us Kentuckians.”

According to the World Health Organization, people are living longer than ever, with global life expectancy figures for women increasing from 64 years in 1990 to 72 years in 2011, and these expectancy figures show no signs of slowing down.

Naturally as we grow older, the readiness and strength of our bodies decreases. But today’s expectations for older people are different. From better nutrition and advancements in medical technology to significantly lower infant mortality rates, it seems the twenty-first century woman has many more years to accomplish whatever goals she has set for herself. Also helping her toward her active goals is the better quality of life and health that’s possible, thanks to medicine, nutrition tools, and technology.

“We all expect to be able to do at age 69 what we did at 29, albeit just a bit slower,” John goes on to say. “So, why not do what one has always wanted to do?”

But the real question we all ask of ourselves, he notes, is why. Why do it? Why bother into one’s latter years?

“I think two things explain why Barb Long and our friends challenged that mountain, whereas our parents would never have considered such a thing,” shares John. “Firstly, improved medicine and better health; secondly, expectations of being able to do it. Barb Long’s asthma was her only physical impediment. A problem eliminated by a simple inhaler.”

So why not accept the challenge and go? ■