

Bubble man's journey began decades ago on land

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Reza Baluchi came to South Florida on a quest to run the 3,500-mile outline of the Bermuda Triangle, inside his homemade "hydro pod," like a hamster in a wheel.



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Reza Baluchi rolled into Florida in 2014 in his Ford F-150 pickup truck, hauling a large metal frame that would later encase his homemade "hydro pod" bubble.

South Florida, like so many other places before, was meant to be a pit stop for the Iranian-born athlete. He planned to take his bubble out to sea, running inside it like a hamster in a wheel, to Bermuda and then

Puerto Rico and then back to South Florida.

Baluchi's unconventional trip is befitting of the political refugee whose life has been one long trek around the world, supported by odd jobs and friends he makes along the way.

Baluchi, 44, has completed several physically challenging endurance runs to promote his message of peace and personal freedom. He twice ran from Los Angeles to New York, and once circled the U.S. perimeter in a 11,720-mile trek.

With a bubble, he figured, he could run on the water.

The U.S. Coast Guard has twice stopped him off the coast of Florida. But Baluchi remains determined to follow through on his quest to trace the 3,500-mile outline of the Bermuda Triangle in his bubble, and intends to take to the sea again this month.

"I want to do something unique. Show children that anything is possible if you want it," he said. "My mission and my message is, 'Don't give up.' Everything you want, you can do it."

Before the bubble

Among the sad-faced immigrants at a detention center in Arizona, one man stood out.

"He had a huge smile and crazy hair. He was happy, he was just delighted while others looked miserable," said immigration attorney Suzannah Maclay.

In a mixture of broken English, Portuguese and Farsi, he told her he had been riding his bicycle all over the world, visiting more than 50 countries to spread a message of peace. He worked odd jobs along the way, fixing cars, working in construction, washing dishes or cooking.

It sounded like an extraordinarily tall tale, she said.

But then Baluchi showed her his scrapbook of photographs and newspaper clippings about his adventures "from all over the world," she said. "I begin to realize: This is true."

It was November 2002, and U.S. border agents had found him sleeping in a tent in Arizona. He said he had gotten "bad directions and got lost cycling" and crossed the border from Mexico.

"I go to sleep. In the morning, I wake up and I see helicopter over my head," he said.

He was a long way from his hometown in Iran, where his parents were rice farmers near the Caspian Sea. Growing up, he said he would run several miles to get to school and his job as a car mechanic. After serving in the army for a mandatory two years, Baluchi said he was imprisoned for breaking rules in Islamic culture, like not fasting during Ramadan and wearing a Michael Jackson T-shirt.

"They tortured me; they broke my shoulder," he said, demonstrating how his arms were bound on his back.

He was in his early 20s when he fled Iran. He first went to Germany, then kept traveling.

Maclay and her agency at the time, which offers free legal services to immigrants facing deportation, took his case and petitioned for political asylum in the United States.

"He's not a conformist, and being in Iran at that time, his behaviors drew attention and criticism. At that time, he could have been hurt for doing stuff like that," she said. "That's the heart of the asylum case."

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— Reza Baluchi

Baluchi said he stayed active during his four months in detention, running laps around the perimeter of the yard, his sights still on his goal: to run across the United States to show "Iranians love peace."

In February 2003, he was granted political asylum and moved to Los Angeles, the starting point of his run to reach Ground Zero on the second anniversary of 9/11. He made it.

"I kind of feel like he's the perfect immigrant. No one does American [values] better than immigrants. He's enthusiastic and he's got this big dream," Maclay said.

Running from dawn to dusk

Baluchi was planning his next endeavor when David Barghelame met him at an Iranian grocery store in Denver about 2007. Like so many others, the Colorado car dealer soon found himself swept up in the latest adventure.

"I start finding out he has an interest in running the perimeter of the United States. I got interested," said

Barghelame, who also was born in Iran. "We got [a donated] RV camper, and I decided maybe I should go with him to see if he can really do it."

Barghelame drove the motor home for part of the trip, from New York to Washington, D.C., watching Baluchi run from dawn to dusk, wearing out several pairs of shoes as he crossed from one state to the next, undaunted by his blistered feet.

"I really didn't think he was going to finish it, and he did," Barghelame said. "When you think about it, this is a gift God has given him."

Barghelame said Baluchi gained support from local groups wherever he went. "He gets a lot of support from the Iranian-American community. Iranian radio stations would interview him almost daily," he said.

When passing through different towns, people who heard about Baluchi would go to meet him and run alongside him. Some would offer them food, gas, or a place to park their RV for the night, Barghelame said.

Baluchi has raised some money for children's charities, such as Colorado Children's Hospital, which reported receiving \$581 from him.

He said he now prefers to raise funds through his own charity, which he named Plant Unity because children are "like the roots of a tree" that need nourishment to grow.

Records show Plant Unity, registered in California, was suspended in 2013 for failing to meet tax requirements. Baluchi said he had some issues filing the tax paperwork but has since paid the required fees and is in the process of reactivation.

"I never touch donation money," he said. "My thing is I've been [a] poor kid and I've been working very hard. I want to help children have a better life so they can choose their life."

"He needed a hand"

High school physics teacher Thomas Herrmann was building a sandcastle on Pompano Beach when he first encountered Baluchi and his bubble.

"I thought, 'Wow that's pretty cool,' and I went to talk to him. He told me about his idea to take his bubble across to Bermuda using the Gulf Stream," said Herrmann, who teaches at Cardinal Gibbons High in Fort Lauderdale. "I thought it was very interesting what he was trying to do, so I helped him."

Baluchi worked two jobs at the same time, as a mechanic and dishwasher, to pay for his hydro pod.

The bubble, made of 3-millimeter-thick plastic, is contained in a metal frame with colorful soccer balls spread through the frame for buoyancy. The frame's edges work as paddles, helping him propel through water as he runs inside the bubble.

Baluchi's plan would take him north to Jacksonville, east to Bermuda, then to Puerto Rico, Haiti, Key West and back to Pompano.

Herrmann let Baluchi crash on his couch in Pompano Beach for a few weeks and helped him prepare for his journey. When he was ready, Herrmann helped Baluchi push his bubble out just before dawn in late September 2014.

"It was the good Christian thing to do; he just looked like he needed a hand," Herrmann said. "After listening to his story and getting his vibe, you see that he's filled with a lot of passion."

"It looked like an alien spacecraft"

It was the middle of the night and the *Sindy Sue*, a fishing boat based out of Cape Canaveral, was about 100 miles offshore when Captain Brady Peters noticed a blip on his radar.

"But I didn't see any lights," he said.

At first, he thought it was a vessel that lost power and needed help, but then worried about pirates posing as "dead in the water."

He woke up the rest of the crew, and from about 500 feet away, shined a light on the object bobbing in the water.

"It looked like an alien spacecraft. It was round, it was reflective and had colored balls around it. Especially at night, when we shined a light on it, it gave it like a blue tint," he said.

Then they saw the man inside it.

"He pokes his head out of a little hole and asked, 'Which way to Bermuda?'" Peters said. "Then I thought, 'Oh my God, we got a quack.'"

Baluchi told the crew he was trying to set a world record, Peters said. Peters tossed him a case of water, a loaf

of bread and some turkey. They chatted for a few minutes, and then Baluchi continued his trek.

Hours later, Peters heard Coast Guard chatter on the radio about a guy in a bubble. He radioed the Coast Guard with his position when he made contact with Baluchi. He said he didn't want Baluchi's death on his conscience.

"The seas had grown like 8 feet and the wind was blowing ... it was getting pretty hairy out there," he said.

A Coast Guard helicopter picked up Baluchi some 70 miles off the coast of St. Augustine. Peters attempted to tow the bubble.

"The seas would rock, and the ropes would snap," he said. "We saved the bubble, but the metal frame was torn apart."

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'Which way to Bermuda?'

— Captain Brady Peters

Baluchi was devastated.

"He just starts crying," Peters said. "We were trying to be the good Samaritan, trying to do the right thing, but we foiled his whole operation."

Peters and the crew took Baluchi out to dinner and offered him a place to stay on the boat. Soon he was working with the crew.

"He turned out to be the best deckhand I've ever seen. He was constantly working," Peters said. "But everything was about the bubble; that's what his world revolved around. He was studying wave patterns — the motion of the ocean."

Baluchi spent most of 2015 working on the crab boat while learning more about ocean currents. He used his earnings to build a new bubble.

Baluchi launched his new hydro pod from Pompano Beach on April 22. The trip lasted only two days. Again he was intercepted by the Coast Guard, who had repeatedly warned him he could be fined or detained for

violating their orders not to go without a support boat alongside him.

Building a better bubble

For now, Baluchi's hydro pod floats gently at a marina in **Palm Beach County** while he works out a plan to try his voyage, this time with a support crew and the Coast Guard's approval, sometime in May.

This new and improved bubble has a larger frame that holds 36 buoyancy balls on each side and a waterproof, solar-powered light so he can be seen at night. He designed his own lifejacket with built-in GPS, water filter, shark repellent and emergency phone.

He filled motorcycle inner tubes with his homemade protein bars and attached them to the metal frame of the hydro pod. He stuffed pantyhose with Gatorade bottles and tied them around the edges of the bubble's doors.

At sea, Baluchi plans to catch fish and use empty Gatorade bottles to catch rainwater or purify saltwater with the filter in his lifejacket.

To sleep, Baluchi tips his 12-by-12 foot bubble on its side, to prevent it from drifting much, and hangs a hammock inside.

When he gets too hot inside the bubble, which he said can reach 120 degrees Fahrenheit, he plans to take a dip in the ocean with a leash strapped to his leg so he won't be separated from his vessel.

He said he's not discouraged by the setbacks he's had. And when he finishes his bubble adventure, he will then set about his goal of visiting every country in the world.

"I'm not mad at Coast Guard. I respect Coast Guard," he said. "I want to do this thing ... I'm living my dream."

Staff researcher Barbara Hijek contributed to this report.

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