

Top of the World

Combining their love of sailing, mountaineering and the environment, this enterprising Swiss family has roamed the planet on a purposeful mission.

When I first met the peripatetic Schwörer family last summer — parents Dario and Sabine, and their children Salina, Andri, Noe and Alegra — they had been uncharacteristically landlocked, docked in the harbor in Cordova, Alaska, for months. Their aluminum sloop looked out of place on the working waterfront, among the men welding and hammering aboard the fleet of tired seiners. Having recently climbed Mount McKinley, Dario had earned a rest, especially considering his family and he were putting down roots, at least temporarily, for the first time in over a decade at sea.

The Swiss clan had arrived in Cordova the previous fall, coming from the Aleutians via Hawaii aboard their 50-foot yacht, *Pachamama* (Incan for “Mother Earth”). Alaskan fishermen, recognizing their beloved tool on the sloop’s mainsail — the decal of a huge Swiss Army knife — brought them fresh salmon.

The Schwörers were on the northernmost leg of their “Top to Top” expedition, an adventure 12 years in the making, during which they’d circumnavigate and Dario and Sabine would scale the Seven Summits, the tallest mountains on each continent, to raise awareness of climate change. (Sabine didn’t summit certain peaks when she was pregnant or breastfeeding, remaining in base camps, though Dario promised to return to those mountains later so she could climb them.) By the time I met them, they’d already knocked off Mount Everest (Asia), Aconcagua (Argentina), Mount McKinley (North America), Kilimanjaro (Africa), Mount Blanc (Europe) and Mount Kosciuszko (Australia). Only Antarctica’s Mount Vinson remained.

According to what is now Schwörer lore, the knife maker Victorinox lent the decal to their mainsail and became expedition sponsor after learning that the umbilical cords of each of the family’s four children, born along the way, had been cut with a Swiss Army knife.

After running a small adventure business in the mid-1990s, Dario, now 46, became a guide in the Swiss Alps. He also studied climatology, earning a master’s degree. Sabine, 39, had been an oncology nurse with a passion for climbing, and met her future husband while taking a mountaineering class from him. They married and set sail on their Seven Summits mission soon after the turn of the century, hoping to spread their message far beyond the Alps. “My office was melting,” said Dario, who reckoned the trip would take four years.

“That was my motivation.”

Twelve years and 50,000 nautical miles later, with four kids born in three different countries, the Schwörers have spoken to over 70,000 students and undertaken numerous community service projects. They helped Fijians develop local water-purification practices and carried bodies from climbing accidents down from Mount Everest. From Hawaii to the Aleutians, they collected scientific data for the International Pacific Research Center, testing seawater radioactivity after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster.



Over the course of their 12-year, 50,000-nautical-mile voyage, the Schwörer family has called their 50-foot cutter, *Pachamama*, home. Along the way they’ve made several modifications to the boat, including the enclosed deckhouse, which was donated by friends.

A benefactor helped them build *Pachamama* on the condition that after the adventure, they’d sell the boat and return the money. The boat was Dario’s concept, designed by the French naval architects Joubert/Nivel and built by Locmeral and Alwoplast in 2000. It’s driven by a Nanni 5280 HE diesel and is equipped with two wind generators and 11 solar panels, all from a slew of sponsors.

While the Schwörers were in Hawaii in the summer of 2013 and considering a place to winter, a sailing couple had told them about Cordova. They eventually chose it over Homer, to the south and west, because of the town’s ski lift and welcoming reputation. Over the following year, the Schwörers settled

into the community and spoke at the school; took students on glacier trips and hikes; hosted cleanups; and volunteered with local environmental organizations to measure salmon fry. The Top to Top expedition seeks to inspire environmental change and accountability with children through their interest in the outdoors. Dario also prepared for his Mount McKinley climb; at the summit, he spread the ashes of a Cordovan who’d passed away.

I met the Schwörers in the summer of 2014 while writing an article about them for *The Cordova Times*. I spent some time on *Pachamama*, and joined them on a practice sail for the Northwest Passage, which they’d originally planned on tackling later that season. (Those plans have since changed, and they now plan on a Northwest Passage trip this summer.)

On that June morning, *Pachamama* was a beehive of activity. Salina, 9, the Schwörers’ eldest daughter, stood hold-

his hands next to hers on the wheel.

Leaving the harbor, the kids couldn’t decipher the channel. “Where do I go?” Noe asked. Dario pointed and gave quick directions. Alegra got stuck in the steering wheel and began to cry. Anja — a 23-year-old teacher who discovered the family on Swiss television and eventually became the children’s tutor — came to the rescue.

Dario unfurled the cutter’s two headsails and set them wing-and-wing. *Pachamama* ran north before the breeze at 4 knots into an inlet surrounded by mountains. Gazing at the sails with forlorn ice-blue eyes, Dario scrutinized them warily. He said the smaller jib had been torn during a freak windstorm off Brazil.

“We were in the middle of the ocean,” Noe added.

“I was so scared,” said Salina.

But the children are comfortable on the boat. When storms



On a shakedown sail last summer, 9-year-old Salina leaned back and gave it her all while trimming the jib (top left). On an earlier hike, 3-year-old Alegra was happy to hitch a ride in her mother Sabine’s backpack (bottom left). A big part of the family’s ongoing Top to Top Expedition is sharing their environmental knowledge with young students, as they did on an outing to Alaska’s Sheridan Glacier (right).

ing the stern line. Glancing at her father, who was on the phone on the dock, she swatted at no-see-ums and seemed to second-guess her initiative. “Papi!” she yelled. Her sister, 3-year old Alegra, the Schwörers’ youngest, stood on the boat with a dripping peanut butter and jelly sandwich. Noe, 5, a sweet-looking blond boy, made faces at Alegra.

After his phone call, Dario put his children to work pulling in the fenders. Noe shrieked under the weight of one but pulled it over the railing. *Pachamama* cast off with the help of its four little deckhands. Alegra clambered behind the wheel, which dwarfed her. “I’m steering,” she announced proudly, with a hint of a Swiss-German accent. Noe joined her, placing

hit while they’re in port, Dario explained, the kids take shelter on *Pachamama*. Still, the family has faced plenty of challenges during their voyage: gales, huge seas and even a collision with a shipping container off Patagonia that destroyed their rudder.

A Frisbee whizzed up from below deck. Andri, 8, the eldest boy, who has his father’s blue eyes (but tinged with mischief), appeared in the companionway. Alegra helped her mother grind a winch. Rain began to fall; the children scurried below deck, moving in unison like minnows. Dario and Sabine donned rain gear and raised the mainsail. The Swiss Army knife undulated in the dying wind.

Beyond a state-of-the-art cruising vessel, *Pachamama* is a home. She is cluttered with all the objects of childhood: buckets of little multicolored shoes, bicycle helmets, toys and books. The Schwörers seemed relieved to be back on the water, temporarily away from the clamor of the harbor.

Down below, Salina and Andri read while Noe and Alegra played with the boat's radio. Noe pushed a button and a folk song played. He turned a dial and the music grew louder until it drowned out his father's instructions above deck. "It's nice," Sabine said, turning the radio off. "But not now." Noe laughed maniacally and Sabine couldn't help but join him.

"He's our DJ," added Sabine.

The speakers were installed as a gift, as was the pilothouse, which a friend donated. At the beginning of their voyage, before the shelter was added, Dario and Sabine had to steer by hand in 45-minute shifts, exposed to the elements. The boat has evolved with the journey.

Topsides, Dario wrestled with the mainsail, checking the reefing lines. "I think it's OK," he said. Alegra clambered back up the companionway and with the help of her mother put her life jacket back on. She tried to help her father with the sail but ended up swinging on a stay and singing instead.

Sabine said that the day's plan was to make sure the sails were in order and there was enough storage for all their stuff that littered the cockpit. "All these shoes," she said, looking incredulous for a moment. Before long, they doused the sails and returned to their slip.

Alaskan hospitality left a lasting impression on the Schwörers, who now consider Cordova their home port. Even so, late last summer they were on the move again. After leaving Cordova in August, then languishing for a couple of weeks in Juneau with computer trouble, the family sailed to San Francisco and traveled inland. In November, Dario and Sabine summited Mount Whitney with their two eldest children, Salina and Andri. From there, the family cycled 800 miles through Death Valley and on to Utah and Nevada to speak at schools. In early April they planned to set sail from California across the North Pacific to visit Hawaii before returning to the Aleutians to prepare for a west-to-east transit through the Northwest Passage this summer. As any long-distance cruiser knows, sailing plans are often speculative guidelines. But eventually they will set a course south for Antarctica, and the final peak on their mighty quest.

One thing the Schwörers have learned along the way is that they've almost had their fill of outrageous mountaineering adventures.

"There are so many beaches to clean and schools to visit," Sabine said. "We could keep on doing that until we're old."

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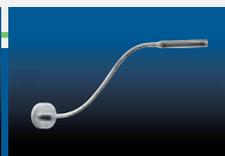
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