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Author's Note

There are two key words that sum up my general philosophy of life.

Time and Kindness.

It's my belief that the most valuable commodity in our lives is time. We all have our own circumstances and our own priorities, but every decision we make is governed by time. No matter your wealth, your background or your opportunities, time and the passing of it is something we all share. When we sleep, when we eat, or when we brush our teeth, time passes. You cannot cheat it. But each of us can individually choose how to spend it.

It is an unavoidable fact of life that our time on this planet is continuously reducing. And rather than shy away from that idea and think of it as morbid, I would encourage you to embrace it. Let it smother you with impatience, let it awaken you. Let it push you towards opportunities and steer you around conformities. Your time credits are yours to spend how you wish. How are you spending yours?

When I do eventually run out of time I would like to know that I used it well. That I didn't frivolously and mindlessly fumble through the hours and days without asking more of myself, discovering more about the people around me and the infinite beauty of the planet on which we live. I want to invest my time, not just spend it.

If each day equals one time credit, then I invested over a hundred credits running around the coastline of Britain. In exchange, I gained memories to treasure, and a fresh perspective; I learnt lessons, and forged deep emotional bonds that are only earned through this particular type of investment.

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As for kindness, it is the greatest gift we have. Unlike time, each of us can determine the amount of kindness in our lives. Kindness is a multiplier. We can choose to be kind to others, and that kindness spreads like ripples in a pond, and is often returned. In turn, the feelings it generates enhance our time. During this journey I was gifted packets of kindness daily. Others were investing their time and kindness in me.

My hope, as you read these pages, is that you'll see that time, although constant and uniform for us all, if invested wisely, will bring you unparalleled rewards.

Are you spending your credits or investing them?

I invested 128 credits to run Britain. Like all worthwhile investments, it was a risk. But without risk there can be no reward, and the experiences and friendships I gained in return were more than I could ever have dreamed of.

My eternal thanks to all who invested their time and kindness to make this journey and this book possible.

A thousand times, thank you.

Introduction

I couldn't take my eyes off the lion.

She sat totally still and to attention, her hind legs neat, back straight, eyes soft but wide and fixed on mine. She was mid-distance between the toffee-coloured sand in the foreground and the frothy, ink-black waters of the English Channel behind her. It was a beautifully still night. Nothing but sand, ocean, sky, and lion. She sat and stared me down from less than 20 feet away. Her left ear stood tall, cocked to the heavens, sharp and unwavering. She had an air of calm and concentrated elegance. Must have been young, but old enough to hunt, I thought – and, importantly, old enough to spot the weak. And weak I was. Very.

I was limping along the Jurassic Coast of Dorset, approaching Bournemouth Pier. It was 1 a.m., towards the final stages of day 6. It's fair to say that it's rare to see a lion on the beaches of the south coast of Britain – some would say unthinkable – but no, I saw her all right.

'Chris, do you see her?'

'Who?'

'That lion with the one big ear – she's beautiful!'

I pointed to the sand, but she was gone.

Naturally, Chris, my brother, who was running alongside me at the time, raised an eyebrow combined with a frown, along with a slight smile in the corner of his mouth, not sure what to make of what I'd said.

I was deep in the caverns of my own mind. A hallucination, of course, but it felt as real as anything I'd ever seen. I smiled back to him, realizing that I must be in a pretty bad way to have seen a lion on a

beach on which I'd spent much of my childhood. My mind felt mushy, my body barely standing. With a shake of my head in an attempt to fling the nonsense from my thoughts, and a squint of confusion as I looked down at my feet again, I stumbled on into the night with Chris by my side to steady me, making outrageously slow progress – so much so in fact that at one point two drunks staggered past us despite leaning backwards and weaving all over the place.

Chris had come to join me for the final few miles of day 6, which started in Portland and finished at Bournemouth Pier. He met me at the short chain ferry that links Studland with Sandbanks. He had his bike with him, having cycled from the hospital after his night shift. He'd obviously received a call from the team and been told that I was struggling. He was planning to come and meet us somewhere, likely near his home in Bournemouth, but neither of us had expected me to be limping with poles, and for him to be pushing his bike, with one eye on my health. He'd just finished twelve hours as a nurse in A&E, and I was on the verge of becoming his next patient.

I was in way over my head, having decided to attempt to run around Britain's mainland coastline – 5,240 miles – in a hundred days.

Running is a solo endeavour, and spending this much time on your own is hard for some. For me, it's utter peace – at least it is when I'm not on the verge of collapse and being haunted by beastly apparitions. Usually, the rhythm of running helps to settle my thoughts and order my head. With my mind at rest, my senses are heightened, sharpening further with every step. The church bells in small villages, the jangle of keys as a commuter walks to their car to begin their day, the distant trudge of a tractor. I treasure running in the early mornings – just birdsong and a rising sun signalling the beginning of a new day, my inner thoughts and regular steps a metronome of peaceful, patient progress. As I write this, I can still hear the sounds and take in the smells of Britain as I traversed its streets and footpaths, morning to night, day after day. The first cry of a seagull above a harbour, the smell of freshly baked bread wafting up a sleeping high street, the tang of cut grass and snatches of passing conversation – all remain as vivid as the day I encountered them, just as the infinite patterns of ruptured and fractured tarmac remain ingrained on the soles of my feet, an indelible imprint of the journey.

Clouds became a daily obsession. Some were fluffy, bright white, light and gentle. Others streaked and smeared across the sky. Long, thin and wispy ones would narrow and tail off to nothing, or curl and swirl with the wind. Others, heavy with shades of grey and black, would loom on the horizon as they brewed a concoction of lightning and thunder. At times, a carpet of cloud would vanish, quite literally into thin air, opening the tarpaulin above to nothing but a palette of pastels, baby blues with flashes of sharp white sun flickering through the gaps in the trees. When you do nothing but run for twelve hours a day, every day, for four months, you become highly attuned to the weather. Mother Nature manipulated my soul and spirit daily, as both my close companion and my feared foe.

As my unwilling and increasingly frail body heaved my bruised and disfigured feet into my socks and then my shoes, morning after morning, my body groaned daily for just a few more minutes of bed. But as Britain slept I began another day that wouldn't end until the miles were covered. One road, one shop, one street, one pub, one path, one roundabout, one wrong turn – one step at a time.

Most mornings my mind remained in a state of slumber as I plodded from crest to combe and combe to crest, again and again. My body defaulted to autopilot, flopping from foot to foot, doing what it knew well, while I was frequently lost in a dozy, melodic haze. The progress was slow – tremendously slow – but slow would do. Forward motion was enough.

This is a story of places, moments and emotions strung together through footsteps. There are so many forms in which I remember this journey. I had battles with the weather, and naturally many with myself. There was physical and mental torment and torture. I had fleeting conversations with temporary new friends every day. Like an old cliff crumbling into the sea, I endured the ravages of time and distance, worn down in mind and body by challenge and circumstance. And of course I formed a new type of bond with Britain and its glorious coastline, its natural beauty and the communities it harbours.

Britain is a magical place in so many ways. Firstly, our little island turns out to be not so little when you run around it. The people, scenery, wildlife and the sense of history surprised me in every way, from

the selfless support of strangers to birds and plants that I'd never noticed before, and breathtaking places I'd never thought to visit. It opened my eyes to life in a vastly more profound way than I could have hoped. I had placed Britain in a box of 'just Britain' – familiar, everyday and, if I'm honest, a little unexciting. How wrong I was.

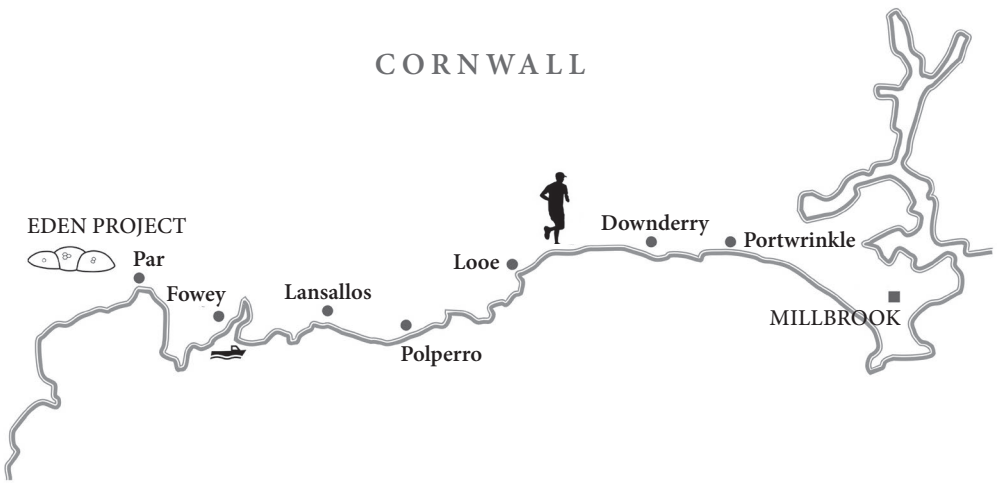
This book serves as a long and winding thank-you note to Britain, to nature, to freedom and opportunity, and to the select few who patiently ushered me towards the finishing post: to Andy, to Nikki, to my team, to the running community, to donors and sponsors, and to everyone whose small acts of support and kindness cheered me on.

Each of the eleven and a half million steps that formed the journey combine to make a patchwork of memories. Each small step was unique; fleeting, yet also permanent. Without every one of those individual steps, the destination would not have been reached. It's these 128 days, meandering painfully around the British coast, that I'd like to share with you. And that is not a typo, as it would have appeared to me at the outset of the journey: I completed the run in 128 days – twenty-eight more than my initial target.

But first, let's rewind exactly ten days before my encounter with that Jurassic Coast lion, before the torture, before the pain . . . I am sitting in my PJs, tucking into a hearty casserole, smiling, laughing, excitement bubbling up through me. I know what lies around the corner, but at this point it is out of sight and out of mind. Mouthful after mouthful of delicious dinner, with family, with friends, a world away from the isolated suffering of what I am about to endure.

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Final Preparations



On 15 April 2021 the headlines in all the major newspapers and on TV news channels were about the Covid lockdown finally coming to an end. Masks were still required, and distancing was advised rather than enforced, but restaurants and businesses were open as normal. Britain was free – and I could legally run, with other people, around the country.

A few days earlier, my good friend Andy had arrived at my parents' place in Cranborne, Dorset. Andy has run many marathons with me around the world. We originally met through 'real' work in the banking sector about a decade earlier, and have bonded through a life of running. From what started as an occasional hello in passing, we began to venture out on extended lunch breaks for long runs, and eventually formed a solid friendship. We both then left the corporate world, for anything less mundane, Andy only recently having taken the plunge to turn his hand to business. He's annoyingly talented at making more or less anything, from small robots made of old electrical components to bigger, more conventional things like extensions and theatre sets. I didn't want him for his construction skills, though – I needed Andy for his loyalty, his pragmatism, and his ability to dig deep when the going gets tough. Andy ran nineteen countries with me on my 2018–19 Running the World expedition, and we bonded further. Run Britain would bond us like brothers. We just didn't know it yet.

With only about two weeks until Go Day – Saturday, 17 April – I'd got in touch with Andy and asked if he'd be my right-hand man for the attempt to run around the British coast in a hundred days. I needed someone to drive the van, our portable HQ, which was to be our support vehicle as well as our home during the expedition. I knew I would also need help with both the physical and mental struggles of the trip,

as well as with logistics and basic supply concerns like food, water and suitable places to rest and sleep along the way.

My childhood bedroom at my parents' house, as well as somewhere I still occasionally sleep, has become home to my running collection, and there, surrounded by medals and mementos from countless marathons and running events, books by the runners and adventurers who have inspired me, piles of running kit, and souvenirs from all over the world, I sat down to call Andy. He answered, and once he'd removed his dust mask, unmuffling his voice, I could hear that he was in an echoey room – a sign that he was at work in a half-renovated building. Once he'd finished coughing up some of the building dust he likes to inhale to keep his lungs in tip-top running condition, we covered pleasantries, then I got to the real reason for my call. Once I'd finished running through what would be involved, there was a pause while Andy took on board the extent of what I was asking of him. He said he was interested in principle, but would have to think it over before deciding.

If I'm totally honest, I didn't expect Andy to say yes to supporting Run Britain. I could offer him only a pittance for his time, and it meant him giving up his normal duties, turning down work, being away from his partner for over three months and, most foolishly, looking after me. I desperately wanted him to say yes, and if I could have afforded more I would have offered it, but funds were tight. They always are on these kinds of hastily arranged expeditions.

Andy called me back a day later and confirmed he would indeed be there as my right-hand man. I was over the moon. I played it cool on the phone, but I knew what it meant. I had the best person in my corner to see this through. It gave me a huge boost of confidence.

Throughout this book are snippets of Andy's diary, which he wrote daily while on the road. Andy must have a voice in this book – and not just out of some polite sense of inclusion: this journey was truly felt and experienced by both of us. Everything I felt, he felt. The physical side perhaps differed, but this was without a doubt as much of a suffer-fest for him as it was for me. Without his heart, soul and dedication, the challenge would have fallen apart within days. That is not an exaggeration. He really did suffer, as you'll read.

Start Line: T Minus 96 Hours

Andy made the short train ride from Bristol to Salisbury, where I met him at the station. As he walked out through the doors, we exchanged a familiar look: here we go again. We were some steps away from each other, but from the curl at the corners of his mouth I could tell he was smiling. We were excited. So many times I'd met him in far-flung countries and seen on his face the same eager anticipation to share a mini adventure together, but also knowing that misadventure was inevitable. It would be joyous, but naturally there would be unavoidable challenges too. This is, of course, what adventure, and indeed life, is all about. And we knew it. But whatever happened, to be able to embark on this journey was a privilege.

My crow's-feet wrinkles and weathered face mean that, side by side, Andy and I look roughly the same age. If anything, I look a few years his senior. In reality, as frustrating as it is, Andy is forty-six and I'm only thirty-two. (Needless to say, I've started moisturizing now.) He's a little shorter than me, just, about 6 feet, with a slight build that's kept in shape through decent running mileage. He has a narrow face and floppy, nonchalant brown hair. They say the eyes are the windows to the soul – this is true with Andy. He does a good job at keeping a lid on his outward-facing mood, but get to know him well and his eyes betray him, letting slip his true feelings. Andy grew up in Devon, by the sea, and this is evident in his slow saunter and relaxed dress sense. Jumper, jeans, shoes with laces undone. Not untidy, but not smart either.

It should also be noted that Andy is a notoriously light packer – he only ever travels with a small backpack. Whatever size you're thinking, think smaller – the kind of bag Ryanair would allow you to carry three of, in an overhead locker, on a standard ticket. Even though this was a hundred-day challenge, he still only had the one small bag draped over his shoulder, plus a lightweight waterproof, and old scruffy shoes without laces. Classic Andy.

Once back at the ranch, we sat around my parents' kitchen table, caught up a little, and began to talk shop. We had a couple of days till the drive from Dorset to Cornwall, which had become our start/finish

line following a series of phone calls with Sky News and the Eden Project. This was a small piece of the massive puzzle we'd had to assemble in a matter of weeks, having decided to embark on this voyage at the very last minute once we had some confidence that Covid restrictions would be lifted.

In my folks' rustic kitchen, we were gathered around a casserole prepared brilliantly by my mum, who seems to be able to rustle up a feast as if from nowhere. I was averagely grateful at the time, but am so much more so in hindsight: it turned out to be one of my last great meals for months.

At the table, with dogs roaming around under our feet, the doors open to the garden and the gentle breeze swaying distant trees, we were in good spirits, my dad cracking bad jokes, Mum playing referee to control our mutual father-son jibes. The project had kind of started without us noticing – this is how all great journeys begin – but the planning phase for this one was now nearing its end. The running was scarily close. Every so often, as chatter around the table continued without me, my mind would wander to the start line, and imagine what lay beyond it. My hands and fingertips would tingle with an eager nervousness that felt like it had bubbled up from my feet. Nobody noticed – I simply let the butterflies subside and took another mouthful of food. I'd be back in the conversation, my mind gently and slowly prepping me in some subconscious way.

We chatted through all the things Andy would need to know. He now would not see his own bed or his own home for what turned out to be four months: things were starting to get real. Up to this point, there hadn't been much discussion on the matter – I knew Andy could handle anything – but it was probably time to explain roughly how the next hundred days would work, or at least how I thought they'd work. I approached the subject of Everything Andy Needed to Know with some hesitation – after all, he still had time to run away in fear, and I was conscious not to scare him off before the trip had even begun.

However, Nikki, my girlfriend, who was naturally with us at my parents' house, had been in Andy's position before, and she didn't hold back in telling him the realities of life in a van with me running mile

after mile, day after day. Of all the people in the world, Nikki knew me totally – and not just regular me, but expedition-mode me too.

Nikki started to list off the various princess-like traits that Andy would become subjected to. Andy laughed some of them off, but I could tell he knew there were hard realities behind Nikki's semi-humorous comments. Andy bravely (or foolishly, perhaps) stayed seated. I was between him and the door anyway, should he have tried to bolt.

Run Britain – The Origin

The evening before Christmas Eve in 2020, I reached the southernmost point of Sicily, having successfully run from the border with Austria – Italy's most northerly point, high in the Italian Alps. That concluded what was a hundred-day journey covering 2,620 miles, zigzagging down the country, taking in all the best bits Italy had to offer. And yes, you guessed it, I was running a marathon a day, every day.

Hitting the self-imposed finish line in the dark at about 10 p.m. on a scrubland-style beach, I was chaperoned diligently by Nikki, driving the van with the side door open up a very bumpy single-track road that led to the beach and rocks, just before the water's edge. She was driving with the side door open because there was a hefty dog aggressively barking and getting ever closer: I could jump into safety at the last moment, should the beast decide to go for me. A bumpy road, in the dark, just before Christmas Eve, after 2,620 miles of running, in the middle of a pandemic . . . and now a dog chasing me right to the finish line.

The last few weeks of Italy had been brutal, and I'd earned that finish line – we both had – so I wasn't about to let a grumpy dog stop me. Once I reached the end of the sandy bit of the beach with the light of my head torch swaying in front of me, I braved the last bit and scooted, on my bum, down the few erosion-stopping boulders, to touch the water. The waterline, at the most southerly point, had to be my finish line, a kind of proof there was no more land to run.

After stumbling into the van, Nikki handed the driving reins back to

me. She was done. She'd driven every mile with me, waiting, supporting, and ultimately sacrificing months of her time to dedicate her efforts to me and my goal . . . to run Italy. We called it the Italian Grand Tour. It was grand, it was in Italy, and it was a tour of the country. However, the name hid the realities of what turned out to be an exceptionally hard emotional journey for us both. We did not know it then, but this trip sadly marked the beginning of the end for our relationship.

As positive-thinking humans, we romanticized running Italy. When we discussed the expedition, I blindly ignored the potential conflicts that might arise. I thought of the stunning mirror lakes of the north, the white sandy beaches of the Amalfi coast, the vast jutting peaks of the Dolomite mountain range, the endless pastel-coloured cities, and the food, naturally. We were touring a beautiful country, we were young and in love, we enjoyed living out of a van, and we were on the road with our virtually newborn puppy (Poppy, my Hungarian vizsla). What could go wrong?

And so, once the miles were done and the mission was complete, we could now finally rest, reset and rebuild. We were both elated to be finished. We were proud of each other, we hugged, we cried, and we both sat in relieved silence, taking it in – not just the accomplishment, but the fact that it was now finally over. But just two hours after finishing, the calendar ticked over to 24 December, and our minds mutually wandered to 'What now?' We immediately thought of our planned and long-awaited reward: Christmas in the French Alps. We had arranged to finish a week earlier and then slowly drive north to the mountains for a few weeks, skiing over the festive period. Obviously it was now too late for that. Or was it?

After removing the layers of crusty hundred-day-old clothes and turning the van around in a heavily potholed gravel car park, we chatted for a few minutes. The clock was ticking, so we hastily made a plan. Maybe we could make Christmas happen after all.

For the last few days, Nikki had been driving behind me at running pace. She didn't always do this, but that had become unavoidable towards the end, thanks to a stupid mistake on my part. On day 92, just eight days from the end of the journey, I'd dropped my phone and

it was now broken and unusable. This was significant because I used it to navigate while Nikki would usually drive ahead 5 or 10 miles, prep food, take Poppy for toilet breaks, catch up with her business, look for sleeping spots and then wait for me. But with no phone, we devised a terrible plan where I'd look at the map, know roughly where I was going, and she'd drive as close as possible to me to navigate. We also couldn't lose each other because we had no alternative way of keeping in contact. This was all made more stressful by some very sketchy highways and underpass interchange sections that were hard to understand while she drove on the wrong side of the road and I ran into the traffic on the opposite side. Think slipways, motorway speeding traffic, hopping over central reservations, and shouting instructions to one another across traffic, all the while trying to hide our individual and collective frustrations and fatigue.

Taking the last few days into consideration, our new plan was simple; we could, if we drove constantly, still make Christmas happen, but we'd have to take shifts. I'd do my best to get us as far north as possible – up to northern Sicily, back over to mainland Italy on the ferry, and then hopefully between us we'd reach our beloved skiing village, St Martin-de-Belleville, in time for Christmas morning. The journey that had just taken us three and a half months, we were now attempting to retrace in less than twenty-four hours. Easy in a van without any running, right? Think again. We were both totally and utterly devoid of energy. But our thinking was, what's one more day of brutal exhaustion when we've already had a hundred? And so, with the van turned to face north, and after a hundred days of back-to-back marathons, we started to drive.

Google Maps said 1,836 kilometres, a drive time of twenty hours and three minutes with tolls and ferries. Factor in stopping for fuel maybe three times and it was going to be close; and we had no idea of Covid testing rules, red areas of Italy that we couldn't drive through, or if the ferry times were going to work in our favour.

I'd like to say that I heroically drove all the way and made it in time for Christmas. That, however, would be only half true. I lasted about ninety minutes and had to pull over. I reluctantly woke Nikki up and

explained that I couldn't drive any longer without falling asleep. All credit to Nikki – who gave me a look of 'Seriously?' – without flinching, she swapped seats and started to drive. I stayed awake for about fifteen minutes and tried to google the new and ever-changing Covid laws regarding Brits travelling from Sicily to the mainland and from Italy into France. I learnt nothing and fell asleep.

Twenty-two hours and fifty minutes later we drove into the sleepy, snowy village of St Martin-de-Belleville. A place I've been coming to all my life, but this time, arriving here was extra sweet.

St M-de-B is the epitome of a French alpine village. Traditional church, small town hall and basic wooden-clad homes. The skiing industry, with all its glamour and glitz, has crept into this valley but St M-de-B has cleverly embraced it without losing its essential identity and character.

While everyone was waiting for Santa, tucked up tight, we drove through the village to a small parking spot next to the ski slopes. It was a dark night, and thick white snowflakes were falling as the tyres crunched through the fresh snow. It was an unbelievable feeling to be there. We'd worked in four-hour shifts, with me taking the wheel for the final ascent up the mountain roads I'd driven many times. I pressed the brake pedal, pulled the handbrake on, turned the key, and the engine shuddered to a halt. Nikki woke up, Poppy woke up, and all three of us almost immediately closed our eyes with smiles on our faces as we slumped into our seats. Nikki held out her hand, squeezed mine, and held it tight. We'd made it. We slept in the front seats as the clock on the dash showed 23:10. When we woke up it would be Christmas morning.

Britain and France went into another lockdown shortly after. This left Nikki, Poppy and me with an unexpected reward for our efforts: we ended up having over three months in the Alps. The mountains were empty, barring a few locals, and we had the place to ourselves for the first and, most likely, the last time in our lives. Everything was shut, but we were still allowed out and about, to ski, to explore, to build igloos. And to make things extra special, our good family friend Colin and his wife Pip offered us their chalet for the entire time we were there.

After all, they couldn't get out to use it, and nor could anyone else. It turned into one of the best periods of my life. A bubble of fourteen weeks with heavy snow and sunny blue skies.

As just the three of us, those weeks passed in mountainous bliss: daily ski touring and 'skinning up' (hiking up hills on skis because the lifts were all closed, thanks to the pandemic), exploring in the snow together, and generally reconnecting with each other over lazy French breakfasts and evenings playing cards. It wasn't long, though, before I began to crave a new challenge. All the turmoil of Italy had faded, for me at least. And so I started to speak of potential ideas for the next running trip. It was here, in post-expedition bliss, surrounded by empty, snowy mountains, in a strange Covid time warp, that running around the coast of Britain was dreamt up.

It was, however, probably a bad idea. Even with all the issues Italy had thrown at us, I went ahead and started planning something twice as difficult just a few months later. In hindsight, project Run Britain was a bloody stupid idea, all things considered.

Pre-Covid, I had dreamt up three other challenges that I felt were possible and would keep me busy in the foreseeable future. But they all involved running abroad, and with travel restrictions and border closures becoming increasingly unpredictable I knew something British-based would have to satisfy my addiction for adventure . . . something fun and hard enough to grab my attention.

There were plenty of options. I thought of Land's End to John O'Groats, but experience told me that running down the middle of an island is far less enjoyable than being by the coast. And so circumnavigating Britain seemed the better option. There was just the minor factor of the distance – over 5,000 miles, even following the most efficient route and sticking to the mainland only. And frankly I didn't want to run for more than a hundred days because I had other things to be doing. So there it was: a double marathon every day would mean I could get the job done and we would be finished in time for our birthdays in August (Nikki's falls within a day of mine). This became our deadline, with enough time built in for a few setbacks along the way.

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The rumour was that Britain was unlocking from 15 April. We heard

this news around the middle of March. Not long, but maybe long enough to put together a mission.

I ran the idea past Nikki.

‘What if . . .’ I started tentatively.

‘No!’ she said with some firm eye contact and an unspoken plea.

She knew what was coming. At that point I promised she would have no duties, no responsibilities, no need even to be present. I would find a crew, so she could come and go as she pleased. This seemed to reassure her a little, but Nikki is smart and knows me well – she was dubious. Nikki would never stop me doing expeditions – she knew it was my passion and always supported my crazy ideas – but she had just broken her arm and had had surgery to pin it into place. She couldn’t drive the van for the next 3 months whilst she recovered, and knew I would require both a support driver again and our home to be used as a base for the next challenge, which was now due to start in one month’s time.

After a few days of discussion, and Nikki laying down some ground rules, my mind was made up. Running around Britain was happening, albeit with a whole heap of planning left to do. Run Britain was just an idea at this point, but Nikki knows that when I work at something I become completely, relentlessly focused on making it happen, even to the point of forgetting to eat. It’s complete tunnel vision, which has its pros and cons but mainly makes me rather difficult to reason with.

By about 20 March, the plan was set. I would run a double marathon every day, covering over 5,000 miles around the mainland coast. With a few tweaks to the route, I could bring the total to 5,240 miles, or two lots of 26.2 miles per day for a hundred days. Simple. I had, however, never run 370-mile weeks back to back before, let alone run marathon after marathon on some of the most famously steep coastlines in Europe. I’d run close to 72,000 miles in my life, with nearly seven hundred marathons under my belt, but double marathons back to back for months on end would be a whole different kettle of fish. That, though, at the time, was not the main problem on my mind.

I had less than a month to find some people to help, drum up some media, find some cash to pay for it, and iron out the ‘little things’ like where I’d start and finish, satisfying Covid rules in Wales and Scotland,

deciding on a route (even whether to run clockwise or anti-clockwise), and of course thinking about a contingency plan if it all went to shit or the world went back into yet another lockdown.

With my manager and assistant Yas, plus some volunteers on the end of the phone or on blurry Zoom calls, I spent the last couple of weeks of our time in the Alps with constant meetings and time behind the laptop. Yas and I met over five years ago when she was working for Pro Direct, supporting various brand photo shoots I happened to be involved with. We had minimal contact at the time, but when I was in the final stages of a previous adventure I was keen to find someone who could support me with brand partnerships, and to help organize a speaking tour following the journey. I happened to know that Yas had left Pro Direct to start her own business, and I reached out to see if she was willing to work with me. I was delighted to hear she was. The rest is history, as they say. Our temporary arrangement morphed into something more permanent, and Yas subsequently became my manager.

And so with the best of the snow melting, we eventually navigated the numerous and ever-changing laws and regulations and returned to the UK. Once back, I had just a fortnight to finalize plans, maybe go for a run (a little thing called training), and then gather the troops and head to the start line – a start line whose location at this point hadn't even been decided.

Start Line: T Minus 72 Hours

Just three days from the off, and the day after Andy's arrival, he and I spent the entire day loading the van that would be our home for the expedition, talking a lot about how things might unfold, and generally fizzing with excitable nervous energy. There was lots of packing and repacking, cramming large bags into small spaces, lugging stuff to and from the house, and trying, but mainly failing, to do everything logically and efficiently. Andy and I thought similarly in terms of space and access, but with the amount of stuff we were attempting to cram into a small area, we were fighting a losing battle.

The sleeping arrangements for the hundred days were simple. Accommodation would be the van. Not the van that took Nikki and me around Italy, but instead my parents' smaller, purpose-built camper-van, my dad's pride and joy. (Yes – what could go wrong?) Nikki would live in our van (which quickly became renamed 'Nikki's van', or later 'the Palace Van', for clarity), along with Poppy. Andy and I would stay in my dad's van. This was in accordance with the 'No Responsibilities' clause stipulated by Nikki and me during the post-Italy turmoil. It was also her home, after all. This meant Andy was looking after me – totally looking after me – and Nikki was free to come and go as she pleased. All great in principle, right?

My dad's van was very quickly nicknamed 'the Council Van' (I'm sorry, Dad), purely due to it being more basic than the relatively palatial quarters of Nikki's van. To put it into context, Nikki's van had dimming lights, solar power, three-pin charging points, a freezer that could be adjusted from a phone, a luxury fixed double bed with memory foam mattress, and, well, just about everything you need. Dad's van . . . had wheels. The Council Van was 6 metres long, with a normal high driving position, small cab and snub-nosed bonnet, and looked like a bread bin on wheels. It was boxy, but at least it was constructed to make good use of the available space. There was a narrow single bed behind the driver, and an identical one behind the passenger. These of course could all be folded away to form a seated area around a small slot-in table. This we didn't need, and so under Dad's close supervision we constructed a permanent bed set-up; Dad even found two mattresses from an old sofa bed to replace the precious cushions in the van. This was a stroke of genius, as it gave us much more comfortable sleeping arrangements, and without the need to waste time and, importantly, energy making and unmaking the bed set-up. A small gap amounting to a couple of feet was our galley space between the beds – the only standing space in the van that wasn't next to the toilet or kitchen area, both of which were at the back. When in a sleeping position, my head was against the reversed and swivelled passenger seat with my feet against the wall of the toilet cubicle; Andy slept with his head the other end, next to the small panel separating the cooking area from the bed set-up. This came in handy because he could turn the hob

on in the morning by reaching behind his head and finding the dial by feel, to begin our cup of tea ritual without getting up – a feat he became rather proud of. Needless to say, ‘cosy’ was an understatement. The small stowaway cabinets above us held everything we needed: food, medical supplies, clothes, cables and chargers, and miscellaneous sponsor-provided items. Bar a small upright cabinet towards the rear, the remaining storage was under the beds – good to have, but a pain to get to.

At last neatly packed and parked on the driveway of my parents’ house, the van was tidy, things stowed where we thought best. We had jiggled and rejiggled more or less everything at least twice to cram in as many of our supplies as possible, but it felt organized, and all based around one priority: enabling me to run 52.4 miles every day. I wanted easy access to what I needed when I needed it, to avoid using more energy than necessary on anything other than running. This was crucial. Little did we know quite how much everything would change and evolve over our time on the road: the state of the van, how we’d live, how we’d sleep, how we’d eat. More or less all of our preconceived thoughts about our initial set-up changed at least once.

The following morning, turning the key in the van, Andy’s eyes were focused and concentrated. He had the unenviable task of driving this precious box on wheels out of my parents’ narrow wooden gates, down the 250-metre drive that led to the village, and onward around the entire country. His knuckles were white and his eyes wide as Dad ushered him out of the drive with the precision of airport ground staff, though he waved his hands in a way that made no sense to the rest of us. And just like that, the expedition was under way, and the van miles had begun.

From my parents’ home in Dorset to the Eden Project is about three and a half hours by car, in a van about four and a half. With fuel, food and supply stops, it turned into six. Our convoy of family and friends meandered down the A roads until we eventually reached the Travelodge in St Austell at around 4 p.m., just a few miles from the Eden Project. The Eden start line had come about from a Sky News interview I’d done about a year earlier, after which I’d stayed in touch with the

producer, James. On the same day I'd called Andy to ask for his support, I had a call with James and a chap called David, the media manager at the Eden Project. They were working together already and so James suggested I start and finish there – an iconic venue, with potential for Sky to get behind the media coverage. We settled on the start date of 17 April because we had a chance of making some big headlines. Two days post-lockdown we would pitch the run as a celebration of the return to freedom for much of the country. And it felt like just that, as if we were being released into the world again. We had discussed starting on 15 April, 'freedom day' – the actual day Britain came out of lockdown – but it was decided that all the headlines would be about lockdown rules being relaxed and we might get lost in the mix. So it seemed sensible to go for the slightly later date of 17 April to share our positive story about freedom, nature (with the biggest indoor rainforest anywhere in the world, the Eden Project certainly offered a fitting start) and Britain being united.

It was a good plan. However, as with all adventures, there's always so much out of sight, so much you can't plan for. On 9 April, Prince Philip died. His funeral took place on 17 April, and coverage of it dominated the news. We received virtually no media at all.

But back to the small car park, our now numerous vans and vehicles hogging the Travelodge's allocation, and in puffa jackets, bobble hats, and with bags of all shapes and sizes hanging off us, the team gathered. A pizza and some drinks down by a local harbour that evening was our brief but useful bonding time. A meeting in the hotel followed where expenses cash was dispensed, and roles and responsibilities were confirmed. I spoke a little about contingencies, and tried my best to show my gratitude once more.

The following day was full of photo shoots for supporting brands, last-minute prep, meeting David and James at Eden, buying forgotten items, and generally collectively panicking. On the eve of Go Day we had a final get-together in one of the hotel rooms. Yas hosted, kindly gave out little gifts to the team, and we dispersed from the room in high spirits, ahead of a 4 a.m. wake-up call to make the 6 a.m. start line at Eden. This being April, it was before sunrise, and none of us were

really awake, but the excitable air of pre-adventure crackled in the chill. Sleepy smiles nestled under hats and layers of clothing. Go Day was upon us.

Day 1 – 17 April – 53.02 miles – 7,572ft elevation

The Eden Project, St Austell to Millbrook

5.50 a.m.

With ten minutes to go before the strict start time, the team scrambled to their positions. Cameras ready, a drone high in the air, people dotted around or dashing back to the vehicles.

The strict start time was self-imposed. I knew there would be days when getting out of bed and lacing up my trainers would be the last thing I felt like doing, so I needed to build a mental fortress, an impenetrable and unshakeable structure into which doubts and negativity could not creep. To keep myself going, having basic rules was a must – a framework for success, if you will. So, 6 a.m. every day, without fail, I would be running. No budging. Sure enough, at 5.59 and fifty seconds a few of the team began a countdown.

Ten, nine, eight . . .

My nerves buzzed and fizzed from my feet to my eyes, and my brain thought of all that had been before. Pain and suffering were coming of course, but so was the opportunity of a new challenge, and the chance to accomplish something that felt truly special.

With my friends around me, my family willing me from afar, and with nothing but blind faith in my heart and feet, I primed myself to begin this 5,240-mile run. My longest to date. But one thing stayed the same: I just had to keep putting one foot in front of the other. Over a hundred thousand times a day.

A smattering of applause echoed around the otherwise empty Eden as my left index finger reached to my watch on my right arm in what felt like slow motion, and the beep sounded. Eyes forward, a slight curl at the edge of my mouth, I took my first step. I was smiling, I was focused, and the team beamed back with early morning whoops and cheers. Here we go. I was layered up, buff up to my nose, covering my

mouth, hat on, gloves on, leggings, a jacket, and phone tucked into my running belt. My breath in the cold, still air provided a hazy velvet cloud to run through. I turned, waved, blew a kiss to Nikki, and away up the hill I went.

As I found my stride, Andy was reflecting on the task ahead:

And that's it. With those first few steps past the frost-covered biomes, Run Britain is suddenly under way, and Nick's life for the next three months flashes before me. His Running the World expedition was an extraordinary and unprecedented feat, but this, in terms of physical and mental endurance, is on another level altogether. What Nick is now attempting is pushing the boundaries of what's humanly possible. He's just started his first mile of 5,240, slightly further than the total distance he covered running a marathon in every country in the world, which took him nearly two years. He's now attempting it in just over three months. With Running the World, the main questions I had over whether Nick could do it were around logistics, money, safety and remaining healthy in far-flung places. Now it's simply a question of whether a human can run two marathons a day for a hundred days – and I know Nick wouldn't have been at all offended if I'd voiced my doubts before the start. Obviously I didn't – that's not what mates do.

As we clap Nick up his first hill, heading out of the Eden Project, it's only then that it really sinks in that this is now also my life for the next three months. With all the preparation and focus on the start itself, I've almost forgotten that not only is Nick now running for a hundred days without a break, but I'm now in this too, for a hundred long, intense days, and although dwarfed by the scale of Nick's undertaking, the relentlessness of what I'm about to do suddenly hits me. Goodbye life, goodbye normality. Hello inside of campervan, hello new job, and more importantly, hello adventure. While my preparation has focused on what will be required to support Nick, what that actually entails as a day-to-day routine isn't something I've really set out in my mind yet, and as I climb into the van with all these thoughts flying around in my head, it occurs to me