

by Jessica Michael

Last year, we received an email from Jessica Michaels stating:

“Last year, I interviewed the Swedish runner Kristina Paltén, the first woman to run solo across Iran. Her 1,144-mile journey traversed not only a country we've been taught to see as an enemy, but her own fears, biases, and preconceived limitations. Ms. Paltén completed a physically and emotionally arduous feat, while engaging with a kind and vital people. Her story is remarkable, humanizing, and unique. With the threat of increasing hostility with Iran, it's become even more relevant today. I believe this story would be a wonderful fit for your magazine. Please let me know if you are interested, and I will send it as well as the photo portfolio for your review.”

We couldn't agree more. Kristina Paltén's experience is worthy of sharing as far and wide as possible. It's taken us a while, but here finally, is that interview.

“I'm the most scared person in the world. I like fear because it's so complex. When I challenge myself to go outside my comfort zone, I'm afraid. Then fear shows me I'm on the right path. Then fear is a sign.”

This is how Kristina Paltén broke down how she ran solo across Iran for 58 days.

She isn't talking about physical hardship, the kind that gripped her in 50° C heat as she loped along the glitter of the Caspian Sea, or the hunger that closed in between gaps in the Alborz Mountains. Paltén is speaking about something far darker.

“I was afraid of being raped, of being beaten. I was afraid of being thrown in prison, or that people would be angry and throw rocks at me. I thought terrorists were everywhere in the Muslim world, that they were dangerous to me.”

It's a list of formidable boogeymen, a cacophony of demons that Paltén attempted to pin down in black ink. Before the 2015 journey that made her the first woman to run solo across Iran, she wrote a list.

“I sat down and listed all of my fears because it felt like a giant mountain. When I wrote it out, it was 22 separate things I was afraid of. Only 22!”

She rated each from 1 to 100 and then attempted to reason with herself over each one.

“My plan was to jog with a baby stroller and sleep in a tent, but I felt very vulnerable that way. What if someone followed me?”

“So I realized, ‘Ok, don't sleep in a tent! Sleep in a hotel if it's available. Or ask people if you can sleep in their yard. And if you do sleep in a tent, don't sleep in the orange tent, it's too noticeable. Sleep in the green one.’”

Paltén has run from Istanbul, Turkey, to Tenala, Finland, then paddled 306 miles from Tenala to Stockholm.

She has climbed Aconcagua, a beast of a mountain in the Andes, the highest peak outside of Asia. She kayaked from Stockholm to Gothenburg in winter and holds two world records on the treadmill—one for 322.93 km completed in 48 hours, and the other 107.49 km in 12 hours. She's spent her adult life wrestling physical and mental challenges, but it's her 1,144 miles in Iran that catapulted her into a battle with her own biases.

"The media gives me one picture, which is the politics of a country. But this is only one small part. Iran is 82 million people. I thought they were all the same. My prejudices told me that ISIS was a big deal there. But Iran is predominantly Shiite Muslim, ISIS is Sunni Muslim. There is no ISIS in Iran. There are 1.5 billion Muslims in the world. Not all of them are terrorists."

Unspoken is that Paltén is a Western woman traversing a country portrayed by global media as the epitome of an anti-democratic, misogynistic terror state. The very image of her slight Swedish figure running through streets crowded with men in salwars is enough to send shivers down the spines of conservative pundits.

It was enough to shake Paltén herself as she prepared to depart.



“Right before I left, I panicked. There is always an irrational aspect of fear. Sometimes you just have to jump into the cold water and do what you want to do.”

In a run where she averaged 37 km a day, Paltén's first steps flattened her. The unknown ahead, filled with the potential for hostility and confrontation, shadowed her decision to do this

unsupported. With no written or verbal understanding of the language, her alarm heightened into terror. So she did what she came to do. She set her soles to pavement and continued. Instead of a wall of anti-European sentiment, Paltén discovered that an insular theocracy was far from her experience.

“People fed me, ran next to me, gave me lunch to take with me. Hospitality is extremely important there. Iranians are enormously friendly. To them, a guest is a friend of the future, and you don't leave a friend alone. There were times when I had people sleeping next to me. It got to the point that I would take smaller roads away from the main routes just to have some time to myself.”





The tent she brought for shelter never got used. “The intention was to be alone. In reality, there were so many people around me, including a group consisting of 50 Iranians all connected by Telegraph (similar to Messenger). There was always someone who knew someone, who knew someone, who lived where I was running. I was sleeping at all these different families’ homes.”

Staggered by the reception she received, she was even more shocked that the country itself opened its arms to her. Newspaper articles and interviews brought knowledge of the trek to the public.

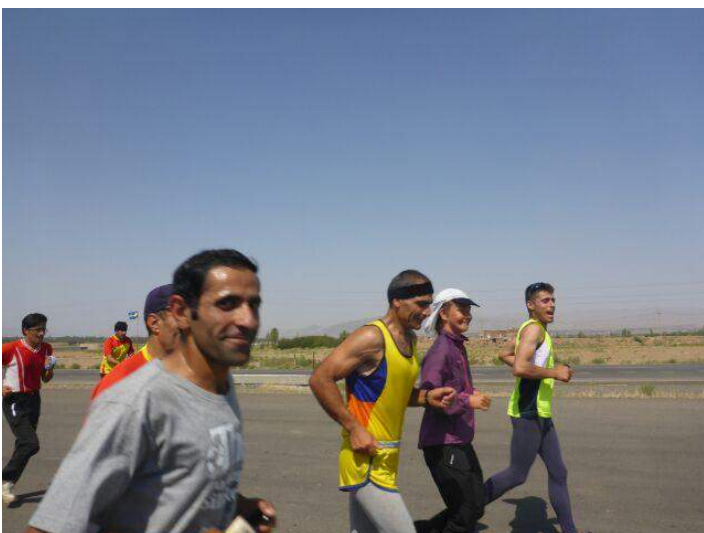


“They were very proud that I wanted to run in their country because they know that people in the West seem to see them as terrorists, and I was challenging that belief.”

She was also in the process of changing all of her own convictions.

“I would check back in weekly on those original 22 fears and rate them again. The fears that I would be raped, beaten—those went down from 80 on a scale of 100 to only a 10.”

She also witnessed sacrifice that gave the discomfort of sweat and foot sores an entirely new context.



“Families gave me food even when there wasn’t enough for them. That is extremely beautiful and painful. The first time this happened, I cried because I didn’t understand what was happening. I had money for food, money even to buy them food, but that would have been an insult to them.”

Eating what was intended for the starving gave an immediacy to helping out while honouring the tradition of hospitality.

"In this case, the man in the family was a runner. His shoes were full of holes and had been repaired many times. I was able to find out his size and favourite kind of running shoe. Before I left the country, we were able to make sure he got a pair."

She settled into the embrace of the people, their quick and inherent reflex to offer succour. Her muscles found rhythm between coastal plains and foothills as she dodged the vehicular insanity that plagues the country's roads. She met Turkish, Kurdish, Arabic, and Persian people. Later, Gilaki and Balochi joined that list, a growing mosaic of culture that transformed her perception of homogeneity.

"We are individuals. It was pure lack of knowledge that made me think all of these people were similar."

She stresses how easy it is to assign blame to entire groups whose members seem too foreign from our own.

A night on an unlit stretch of highway flung Paltén into just such complexities of prejudice.

"I was running a long distance, and it became dark. I was in the middle of a forest, no lights, nothing.

There were three men ahead of me, and one of them grabbed my baby jogger. He wanted me to come over for tea, but he was acting strangely. He must've been high on drugs.

It was late; I didn't want to drink tea, I wanted to carry on. He insisted.

I was holding onto the jogger and trying to pry his fingers off, but he wouldn't let go.

I didn't like that, so I hit him. He let go, and I started running, and he ran after me and hit me, too.





I just kept running. Then, he got on his motorbike and came driving after me, screaming. He passed me and then vanished. I was really scared. I

thought, 'He's going to get his friends now. Will they attack me somewhere?' I realized I had a monopod, and I put it on top of the jogger and thought, 'If you come back, I will hit you. I will hit the shit out of you.' He never did."

The incident ignited the loneliness that she'd avoided for much of the trip, and it embodied every phantasm our collective paranoia creates: a lone white woman

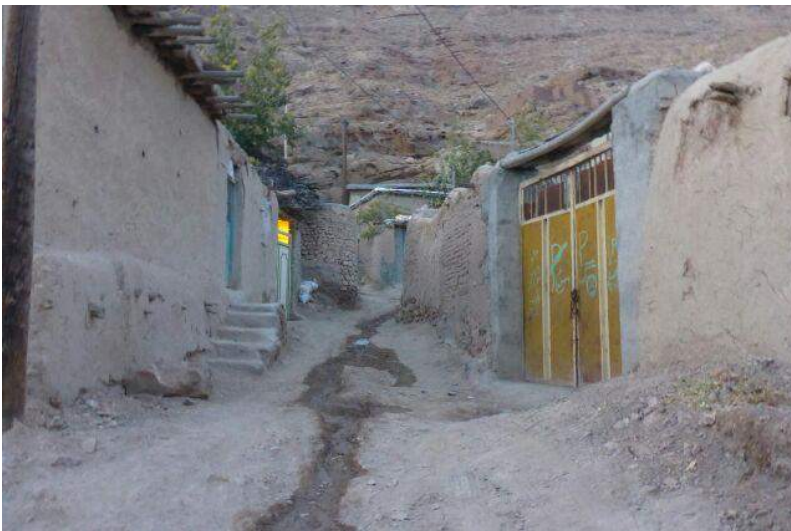


attacked by an enraged Muslim man in an Islamic country. It was a summation of every delicate warning Paltén's friends and family had given her before she left.

"I never told anyone because people would have started to worry about me. They would have tried to put restrictions on what I was doing. And in an Iranian court, the voice of a woman counts for only half the voice of a man."

The reality of women's enfeebled legal status scraped against the positive experiences she'd had so far. "Living in Iran, there is no democracy, no freedom of speech, no fair justice system. And that is terrible as well."

Paltén faced a choice: to collapse back into engrained explanations of Islamic society, or to once more question her fears.



"What if I really am raped? Would that destroy my message? Would that prove that Muslims and the Western world don't belong to each other? But if one man rapes me, it's not a

group, it's not a religion, it's not a people. That guy was a drugged individual who could have been anywhere. It's his responsibility what he does."

The tectonic plates of her mind had shifted. No longer was Iran a terrorist-infested, ethnocentric derelict of an empire. It was a society filled with differences, with minds that ached for recognition, and hearts that both soared and faltered. Stride after stride,

Paltén encountered kindness, generosity, suspicion, aggression, joy. She uncovered a country filled with human beings in all their diversity.

It's a message she wants to seed into world soil.

When she'd decided to embark on this voyage to untangle her own Islamophobia, she was approached by filmmakers André Larsson and Shamim

Berkeh. Both were eager to take the concrete reality of Iranian life to the world. For eight days, she was joined by a local Iranian videographer, but much of the footage she took herself, guarding her original intent of a solo crossing. The result, *Alone Through Iran: 1144 Miles of Trust*, documents the connection of daily kindnesses and the transformation Paltén midwived in her own mind. Scenes of men dancing with



her and women congratulating her pull up the roots of bias that dig their way into our belief systems.

“When I got back home, Sweden had closed its borders to foreigners, and I was so angry. Sweden is one of the richest countries in the world. I had just come from a place where poor people were giving me their food, and our politicians were saying we cannot afford to have our borders open?”

For Paltén, the movie is a technicolour reproach, a reminder of friendship between nations currently so estranged.

The film has been screened in Australia, Greece, the Czech Republic, and Sweden. In Russia, it won a

prize for best documentary debut. Paltén’s book about her journey, *Running Through Fear*, co-written with journalist Desirée Wahren Stattin, has been published in Swedish, Spanish, Czech, and Dutch with German, Slovenian, and Persian translations coming soon. Iranians still hold her close to their hearts, with Iranian TV (IRIB) recently filming a program about the run. What started out as one person’s search for the deceit within her fear has echoed into a global re-examination of our paradigm of Iran.

And Paltén didn’t stop there. She teamed up with Swedish running organization Marathongruppen and Iranian runners, Mahsa Torabi, Susan Mosheni, and Amir Nazari to set up a 10k race for women in Iran.

Torabi took the torch when they ran into resistance and administrative difficulties.

On September 7, 2018, the race was held in Tehran, with both women and men on the starting line, an almost unheard-of occurrence since women were banned from public participation in sports over 40 years ago.

Paltén began her adventure to challenge herself physically and mentally, but it accomplished far more than that. She helped open the gateways of friendship between Iran and the world, turning her fear into global friendship.

Iran’s World Heritage Sites

Did you know that in 2019 Iran had 24 places designated by UNESCO as World Heritage sites?

Hopefully one day, (this being written during the Coronavirus pandemic which has effectively shut down travel and tourism for now), the world will once again be open for us to experience and we’ll be able to travel without fear, or reprisal, wherever we go. Though alas, political, cultural and religious divisions are so enshrined, for safety purposes some nationalities might be unable to, or might be better advised not to visit certain countries (see you government’s travel advice, as to whether travel is not recommended to certain countries given your passport).

Meanwhile, why not take this opportunity to read up on the history and culture of places you would like to visit. After all, surely the more we know about the history, culture and identity of the places we visit, the more we can understand a place and hopefully the more we can get out of and give back during our travels.



Photo courtesy of Soroush Morshedian



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