



Go your own way

EVERYONE'S IDEA OF A CHALLENGE IS DIFFERENT. THESE WOMEN PUSH THE BOUNDARIES OF WHAT ADVENTURE IS, AND WHO THE OUTDOORS IS FOR. BE INSPIRED TO JOIN THEM IN TAKING THE OPPORTUNITY TO TRY SOMETHING NEW

Words: CELIA WOOLFREY

THE CHANNEL SWIMMER

“Swimming was what led me to being able to love my body, because of all it can do. Not because I can swim channels, but because I can feel”

“You literally have to be where you are present, without judgment, to deal with the here and now,” explains Beth French. In order to be able to swim for 20-odd hours, she not only trains in the gym and the pool, but also trains her mind through Vipassana meditation. “You adjust your stroke as you start to get tired, you notice you’re tired, but you

don’t react, then go back to your stroke because that’s what you’re focusing on,” she says.

Beth had a severe form of myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME) after getting glandular fever at 10. By 17 she was in a wheelchair. But it took years of being told there was nothing wrong before she got a diagnosis.

“A turning point was when a therapist said: ‘It doesn’t matter how you got to where you are, you’re the only person who can change it.’ By putting that power in my hands I was able to stop feeling victimised,” she says.

Through swimming, Beth built a new relationship with her body, focusing on

what she could do rather than what she couldn’t. In *Tough Women Adventure Stories* (Summersdale), she tells how this developed into her first big swim across the Channel to France. She subsequently became the first woman to swim the three-metre-high ocean swells of the Ka’iwi (the Channel of Bones) in Hawaii twice and the first person ever to swim from Cornwall to the Isles of Scilly.

She’s driven by the feeling of liberation she gets from being a tiny speck in the deep blue. “Swimming was what led me to being able to love my body, because of all it can do. Not because I can swim channels, but



THE HIKER FOR CHANGE

“You can meet on a walk and the next thing you know, you’re having this deep and meaningful conversation”

“I was on a train through the Peak District, watching groups of walkers getting on and off, and I decided: ‘I’m going to take up hiking. I’m going to go and explore,’” says Rhiane Fatinikun.

In 2019, she posted on Instagram with the hashtag #BlackGirlsHike and invited others to join her. Fourteen people turned up and Black Girls Hike UK took off, first with a group in Manchester, followed by chapters in the Midlands and London, and a further 10 new groups are opening this summer.

“A 2019 study showed that Black and Asian people make up just 1% of visitors to National Parks,” says Rhiane. “I wanted to create a safe space where people can explore the outdoors and reconnect with nature.”

Part peer group, part sisterhood, Black Girls Hike is about adventure and being your authentic self. “You can meet someone on a walk and the next thing you know, you’re having this deep and

meaningful conversation,” says Rhiane. “I love it when we have sixty-something women. I don’t think they even realise the wisdom they’re imparting.”

One of the things Black Girls Hike aims to do is shift the narrative about who belongs in outdoor spaces. “The outdoors is for everyone,” says Rhiane, “But a member once posted about how a white couple came over and accused her of drug dealing simply because she was in a park. Another time, a group of us were walking on moorland and a woman confronted us with: ‘What’s going on here?’ as if we were trespassing.”

“In the US, they use the term Racial Battle Fatigue to describe the long-term psychological effects of dealing with racism,” says Rhiane. She plans to counter this with mental-health-friendly, country house retreats, with forest bathing and creative sessions.

Her aim is also to support members to get outdoor activity and leadership qualifications, saying that organisations can’t diversify if there isn’t a candidate pool to draw from.

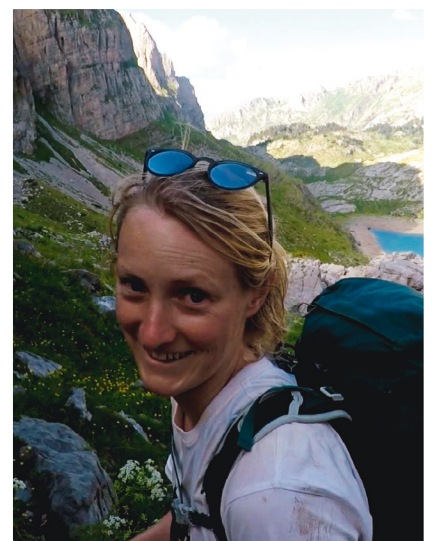
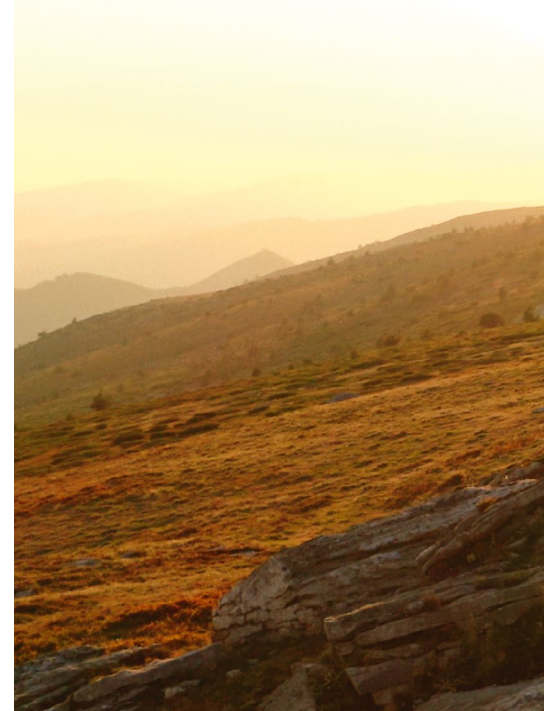
She’s keen to broaden the very definition of adventure too, as well as who it’s seen as being for. “People expect adventure to be running up and down hills and stuff, whereas Black Girls Hike is not like that,” says Rhiane, who quit her civil service job to run it full time. “On our hikes, you can take it all in. It’s about normalising Black people being visible in these kinds of spaces.” bghuk.com; Insta: @bgh_uk; Twitter: @UkBgh »



because I can feel.”

Beth says, “There’s no set way to be adventurous. It’s about being curious and playful, and it can change as you go.” In fact, it’s all about taking it one step – or stroke – at a time. “Take one little step and you realise there’s another you could take,” she says. “We’re all pioneers because tomorrow isn’t yet written. We’ve all got to walk into the unknown.” bethfrench.co.uk; Insta: @bethfrenchlives

I love sixty-something women – they don’t even realise the wisdom they’re imparting



THE EXPLORER

“We see adventure as nice-to-have, when it’s actually essential to our wellbeing. We need adversity.”

“Adventure opened the door to my life,” says explorer Belinda Kirk, who has walked across Nicaragua, searched for camels in China’s ‘Desert of Death’ and got into the *Guinness Book of Records* by rowing non-stop around Britain. It’s a far cry from her first trip to Africa aged 18, when she did fieldwork in Tanzania. “I was meek and low in confidence at the time, but I was empowered by that first big risk I took,” she says. “The first step is the hardest but also the most important.”

Belinda enjoyed a successful career in TV production, working with David Attenborough, Bear Grylls and Ray Mears, but it was seeing how people transformed on expeditions that made her want to support others to find themselves through adventure.

She started Wild Night Out in 2016, a boost each summer to try something

Every single person has got an explorer inside them. Take on small fears first

new outdoors and under the stars: “Some people just need a push, others are converted. The night is about getting someone who doesn’t normally come along to come out with us,” she says. She also teaches expedition leadership and founded Explorers Connect, an online community for knowledge sharing and connecting adventurers.

Going on an adventure often involves hardships that are worth it for the magic – watching the sunrise or chatting around a campfire. What drives Belinda is the belief that by avoiding adversity and making life about convenience, we’re missing out on the best bits. “We see adventure as nice-to-have, when it’s actually essential to our wellbeing,” she says. “We need adversity.”

Those missing out most are kids who have lost their autonomy outdoors. “Children’s ‘roaming radius’ from home has shrunk by 90% in 30 years,” says Belinda, whose new book *Adventure Revolution* (Piatkus) is a manifesto for what adventure does for our resilience. “Every single person has got an explorer inside them,” she says. “The fear of failing is as strong as the fear of pain or dying. So break big challenges down and take on small fears first. Then build on that. You just have to start.”

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THE CROSS-CONTINENT RUNNER

“Some of the most enjoyable things wouldn’t have happened if I’d planned more and had more money”

Many of us dream of traversing the world. Rosie Watson is doing it – relying on her own two feet. In August 2019, she set off from her home in the Lake District to run to Mongolia, aiming to meet people who are finding new ways of living in a time of climate crisis.

Rosie had previously worked at the



forefront of climate change, however she felt unfulfilled. “I felt that sitting in an office all day was missing something vital, and it wasn’t the way I wanted to live,” she explains. She was inspired by something that adventure activist Kate Rawles said: “You have to tackle sustainability in the way that makes you feel most alive’ – this adventure is exactly that.”

A mountain runner since she was 11, Rosie often covers 20-30km in a day. Along the way, she interviews pioneers rethinking our place in the web of life, relating their stories on her *New Story Run* blog.


Her run has taken her across the Alps and the Balkans. “A lot of places just aren’t mapped,” she says. “You look on Google Earth, see there’s a possible

path, then just go and hope you find it.”

At night, Rosie camps. However, often, just asking if it’s ok to pitch her tent leads to offers of accommodation. In fact, staying with different people has been one of the most enjoyable parts of her trip. “It wouldn’t have happened as much if I’d planned more and had more money,” she admits. “You open yourself to those experiences if you aren’t being overly independent all the time.”

Rosie made it to the Black Sea in September 2020 before Covid paused her trip, but she’ll resume in 2022. This gives her time to plan the tough section across Kazakhstan. “There can be hundreds of kilometres between settlements so I’m going to have to carry 10L of water or more in a running buggy,” she says. For now, she’s back

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home and satisfying her desire for adventure with a microadventures jar*. For this, you – and a friend to make it more of a surprise – write down small things you can do indoors or outdoors. “Microadventures don’t have to be adventurous, just things you don’t normally do or have never tried,” says Rosie. “They are just enough to push the edges of your comfort zone, or see things differently. It’s a little jar of positivity.” newstoryrun.wordpress.com; 

*See *The Simple Things* April 2021 for more ideas from microadventure pioneer Alastair Humphreys