

LET'S GET LOST

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Mist curls across the valley floor. The red-blue shift of dawn glows at the horizon as you open your eyes, blink slowly and remember where you are. You sit up, the frosted grass crunching beneath your bivvy bag. Silence.

The night before you'd left work as normal, but instead of riding home, you rode north out of the city as dusk fell and the lights began to come on. You cycled out into open countryside, the hedgerows rising and dipping alongside. After a hot meal and a few fortifying pints in a pub, you left quietly, then made a beeline for a hill-top, fairly remote, three large fields from the nearest road. As the stars began to pinprick the inky blue above, you swung your bike over a gate, pushed it across the hill's broad shoulder and found a spot to stop. And there you lay down to sleep, as the constellations shifted slowly a million miles overhead.

Now, eight short hours later, you're awake, packing up, riding back through fields, suburbs, city. Back to your familiar desk, and cup of hot coffee. You smile quietly to yourself, feeling glowingly alive.

"You do not need to fly to the other side of the planet to find wilderness and beauty," says Alastair Humphreys, and he's right. Alastair has been to the other side of the planet several times. Among his many expeditions, he's cycled 46,000 miles around the world, rowed the Atlantic, walked across India and run a 150-mile marathon across the Sahara desert. But such escapades are beyond the reach of most people.

They're too far-flung, too time-consuming, too expensive. So, two years ago, he began a concerted effort to simplify adventure, to break it down to what it really means, to demonstrate how all of us – even those with families, jobs and beer-bellies – can have adventures.



“Adventure is a loose word, a spirit of trying something new, something difficult. Above all, adventure is about enthusiasm, ambition, open-mindedness and curiosity,” he says. “If this is true then ‘adventure’ is not only rowing oceans, climbing mountains or cycling round the world; adventure is everywhere, every day and it is up to us to seek it out.”

Always one to lead by example, Alastair himself started small, riding coast to coast across England when he was 15.

“We did the classic Whitehaven to Sunderland route, but we somehow got so lost that we ended up going over the summit of Great Gable (a 3000ft mountain in the Lake District) with me crying on the way down. But it was an amazing trip – my first proper bike journey and my first microadventure.”

‘Microadventure’ may be a familiar term - known in the States as an S24O (sub-24hr overnight), it is “an adventure that is close to home, cheap, simple, short, and yet very effective,” says Alastair. “A couple of weeks ago I walked a circle around my house. You could just as easily do it by bicycle too – the radius of the circle determines how long the journey will be. You head out along the radius line to the circumference, ride the circle, and then head back home down the radius again. I wanted to do it so I had just one night away, but only a three-mile radius makes quite a long walk. If you did a 6 or 7 mile radius circle on a bike that would be quite a decent ride [49.7 or 57.98 miles respectively, maths fans]. It was fantastic, just for discovering so many things in a three-mile circle of my home that I’d never seen before. You can do it as accurately or as vaguely as you choose; my three-mile walking circle fitted quite nicely with leaving my desk at 5pm and getting back at nine the following morning.”

The ‘5-9’ thing is key – the idea is that such adventures can fit around ‘real’ life. Although many of Alastair’s microadventures have been a little more involved – travelling the length of the Shetland Isles by Brompton and pack-raft, for example – lots more have meant only one night away. This summer he decided to ride the route of the first stage of next year’s Tour de France. “It’s starting in Yorkshire; I’m from Yorkshire so I’m very chuffed about that, but it also seems absolutely ridiculous, and not something that’s likely to happen again, so I decided to go and ride the first stage of it. I did it as minimally as I could. I wanted to go fast and pretend I was Bradley Wiggins, so I took my racing bike, a bivvy bag and a credit card and that was about it.

“Adventure
is all around us,
at all times.”





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It was great. The stage was 120 miles, but because I took the train up from London where I live now, I didn’t begin cycling until lunch time, starting out up the dales. Unlike the actual Tour riders, I had fish and chips for supper and a few pints in a pub, then slept on a hilltop, and did the rest the next day. When I first woke up it was drizzly and I thought ‘this isn’t part of the script’ so I rolled over and went back to sleep for a couple of hours. When I resurfaced there were clear skies and a rainbow, right up in the dales, with all the different greens of the fields laid out in squares, and I was there, high on a hilltop with the whole valley laid out before me, and the road I was about to ride snaking away into the distance. That was a great start to the day.”

Another one-nighter saw Alastair and his Brompton taking the ferry to the Isle of Wight, then riding the island’s edge back to where he started. “I did it with no map, no planning, no idea how far it was or what I’d find along the way. So I had no idea of what stage of the ride I was at, and I never knew where the next food stop might be. I knew it would take roughly two days, with an overnight stop somewhere, so I took a bivvy bag and slept up on the cliffs. From the setting of the sun I could work out I was on the south coast of the island, so I knew I was roughly half way round, but that was my only way of estimating how far I’d have to ride the next day. I deliberately didn’t take any food with me; it was just a case of ride until you reach a shop or café, which added a little bit of spice to the trip.” Keeping things simple and deliberately not over-planning are important tenets in the microadventurer’s creed. There’s a tendency these days to obsess about kit, checking the weight and the technical spec of everything, fretting that your ultra-lightweight tent or super-packable jacket might not perform as well as the marketing wonks said they would.

We’ve become so anxious about getting lost or a bit damp that every expedition is meticulously planned, with routes pre-programmed into GPS and a space-age techno gadget for every eventuality. But endless fretting about kit and what might go wrong is not healthy. Microadventures, by their very nature, are much simpler than big expeditions. You can risk it. Sure, you could go through the kind of logical thinking most of us do, which, Alastair reckons, goes something like this: “There is an X% chance of something going wrong.

If that happens then I am Y% confident of being able to deal with it. Which leaves only a Z% chance of something really bad happening. And ‘Z’ is sufficiently small to be worth risking against the reward of success.” But normal people probably just articulate their decision by shouting “fuck it – let’s do it!”

If it’s only one night and you’re only two hours from home, pack light. Throw away the map. Get lost for a bit. It’s about letting go, uncoiling the spring of anxiety inside. That in itself takes effort. Most of us have a tendency to be cautious which it takes a force of will to override – even Alastair:

“My nature is to be quite careful and worried, to have maps and plan everything, so I try to force myself not to be like that and to just go with the flow a little bit. Recently I did a one-day trip that was just to take a train to somewhere about fifty miles from my house, somewhere I’d never been to before, and then cycle home. I deliberately didn’t take a map, I just used a compass so I knew I was heading in roughly the right direction, but at each junction I had to go left or right and hope for the best. I had to relax and go with the flow, dealing with a few wrong turns, just seeing whatever came my way. If my philosophy on life is ‘pragmatic idealism’, my philosophy on adventure is ‘pragmatic recklessness’. As Mallory said, “The greatest danger in life is not to take the adventure.”



Above: Alastair (far right) aged 15, on his first micro-adventure.

Alastair doesn’t fetishize kit; he’s utterly no-nonsense and down-to-earth. His gentle humour and clear-eyed enthusiasm are infectious. It’s been two years since the microadventure phenomenon first took hold of the public imagination in the UK. Since then it’s been bandied across the papers and entered the lexicon, not least because it seems within reach of ‘ordinary’ folk. “The thing that really resonates with people is not so much the ‘epic’ little trips like the Shetlands but the really simple, tiny ones which you can do mid-week, leaving at five and being back at your desk for nine the next morning - which of course is not a new idea, I’m just trying to re-encourage people to do it.



What’s been really enjoyable this year has been seeing social media spread the idea - the #microadventure hashtag meaning that people online can see what other people have done and realise that it’s not just super-fit professional adventure guys doing it – it’s novices, on crap bikes, with big bellies. That’s really been key to getting lots of people out and trying stuff, seeing lots of ‘people like us’ doing it first.”

Many of Boneshaker’s readers may already have encountered the concept, seen the hashtag, watched the beautiful short films Alastair posts on his blog. But have they actually done it? It’s so easy to make excuses about time, family commitments, the usual guff.

“If you are too busy, too stressed, too broke, too tired or too unfit for an adventure, then you definitely would benefit from a microadventure”, Alastair says.

“This is a call to action. Do it by yourself or with friends. Do it with your parents or children or colleagues from the office.”

Be unambitious. “Get a map and pick somewhere you’ve never been before that’s a suitably unambitious distance away. If you’re

going to leave after work you only want maybe 10 or 20 miles away. If you cycle 10 miles in a straight line from where you live, you can be in the countryside, wherever you start out. I tested this recently by just walking north from the centre of London, just trusting that I would end up in beautiful countryside. And I did, in less than ten miles. If you can do it from London, you can do it anywhere.”

Travel light. “For one night away you can just eat in a pub, so all you need is a sleeping mat, a sleeping bag and a bivvy bag - for your first time you can use one of those orange survival bags, which cost less than a sandwich.”

Pick a spot away from people. “Sleep on a hill or in the woods or wherever you like, once you’ve had a hot meal in the pub and however many beers you need to get your courage up to sleep outside in the middle of nowhere. Assuming you’re somewhere where you’re comfortable to sleep out in the open, it’s probably not somewhere that’s overrun with bike thieves, so you can probably leave your bike beside you. I actually take a tiny little bike lock – a token gesture really, but you’d need to cut it to make off with the bike; I think it’s ample for the middle of nowhere.” Smell the earth. Watch the stars shift silently overhead, hear an owl, a fox, the susurrant of wind in trees. Wake with the dawn, the dew shining diamonds in every cobweb. Then pack up and cycle back for work.

You can add in bolder variations as you get the hang of it. Swim in a river, cook over a driftwood fire. Don’t worry that you’re behind the curve, that others have done it first and now you’re copying them. The whole point is that each adventure will mean experiencing something absolutely new. Every adventure’s different; each one is fresh. Each first-timer will get that giddy rush as they wake somewhere completely unfamiliar, hear the frost crunch beneath their bivvy bag and watch the dawn mist curling across the valley floor.

