

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Pallas Hupé Trekking Home

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Under the veneer of conviviality, and a fairly universal state of “chillax,” as they say here in New Zealand, you might be surprised to find at the core of an average Kiwi, a steely edge of what some might call insanity. Or at least a desire to test the boundaries of sanity.

This is, after all, the land of settlers from the British Isles who willingly sailed for months in life-threatening conditions in the 1800s, leaving family behind forever, to travel halfway across the world for an uncertain future. They relocated in the last large land mass ever to be colonized, populated only by Maori tribes—*island* settlers who preceded the British by several hundred years and lived fairly primitive lives.

In some ways, I guess you could draw a few parallels with the first settlers of America. But New Zealand is different. It's at the very edge of the world, as close to Antarctica as the West Coast is to the East Coast of the United States. No surprise, maybe, that New Zealand today has emerged as the land of “extreme sport”: a nation which, as [one blogsite author](#) phrased it, “has an adept way of not simply showing you their country, but making you use it.” A country where earning a badge of toughness seems to be a rite of passage.



To be sure, die-hard extreme sport fans who live for the thrill of thumbing their nose at injury, or worse, come from all over the world. But they come here—to the land where bungee jumping was invented and where children as young as 6 are trained en masse to become surf lifesavers in the bone-chilling waters of the Tasman, Pacific or Cook Strait.

I didn't really comprehend this rough and ready reality until I moved to New Zealand, just about a year and a half ago, motivated in part by the love of adventure and testing the boundaries of my comfort zone. And so it really isn't so far-fetched that I found myself agreeing, not long after settling in, to do something rather extreme (for me): attempt to walk 100 kilometers in 36 hours. No sleep, and not even stopping for more than 30 minutes at a time.

Mind you this is just walking. I didn't sign up for the Ironman. <http://www.ironman.co.nz> The walk, to raise funds for [Oxfam](#), does happen to be held in the same place where Ironman competitors test their mettle: Lake Taupo. Aside from that, I think it's safe to say the events are worlds apart. Except for one thing. The common desire to test one's own endurance.

I have never considered myself even the same species as those who swim for 3.8k, bike for 180k and run for 42.2k. However, I have always been able to endure high levels of stress, and even pain. I gave birth to two 9-pound boys without epidurals—fending off repeated suggestions every twenty minutes (or so it seemed) by one doctor on duty to give in to medication “to take the edge off”. I wanted to experience what generations of women experienced before me. To know the truth. To

know myself. And I knew the pain would end.

One thing I also know I can do is put one foot in front of the other...until something mechanical breaks down. To prevent that, I've trained hard for a year. Here in Wellington, I trek up the ubiquitous hills and countless steps every chance I get. And I keep my core strong because I have a back that can disable me for days if it goes "out".

When my father learned of my outlandish-sounding goal, he cautioned me "don't let your ego write a check your body can't cash." It made me stop and think. Was it ego that was pushing me? Why did I feel a need to prove myself? Was it just my own goals I was trying to achieve? Or was it something about the challenge of moving to this hard-charging country?

If I managed to walk the full distance, I knew I'd feel like I'd earned the right to live in the capital of extreme sport. New Zealanders place value on this kind of accomplishment, and I would relish that respect. But if ego was what was motivating me, then it better be prepared for a big setback if I did anything less than finish. I have heard people here ask silver or bronze medal winners (Olympic or otherwise) how big a "disappointment" it was not to come first. Even the organizer of my walking group considered she "failed" at the Oxfam walk last year when blisters prevented her from going beyond 54 kilometers.

Ego's Achilles heel happens to be fear. The only doubt I had throughout all the training and preparation was the nagging question: would it be enough? There would be only one way to find out.

As the weeks dwindled to days before the event, I madly packed. Two backpacks: one for checkpoints with fresh socks, clothes and shoes. The other, for the trail, kitted out with raingear, a first aid kit, salty snacks and the decidedly odd sounding "gu chomps" for electrolyte balance. I'd invested in a strong headlamp, walking stick and special hoodies with our team name, "Middle Earth Mothers." I was ready as anyone could be for this challenge.



And then the unexpected happened. Something I'd never considered in all my plans and preparation. An insidious sinus infection started a week before our departure. I tried to keep positive, and fought back with every trick I knew, but it refused to let go. I couldn't walk 10k let alone 100. My big challenge ended before it even started. Devastated doesn't describe how I felt. "Gutted," a local phrase, is a far better description of my emotional state.

My team, tough from training, and in true British and Kiwi fashion, kept calm and carried on without me. They made it in 26 hours and 40 minutes. I rooted for them via text and bundled up at home, nursing my deep disappointment as much as my poor health.

That's when I realized...this wasn't about my ego. This was a desire for an out-of-the-ordinary experience. What I might even admit was the lure of the milder end of extreme. The challenge offered all the elements of something lofty. Not least, the desire to support a worthy cause not just by writing a check, but by feeling just a tiny fraction of the pain people do who have to fight to survive.

[Our team](#) raised more than \$3,000 to help Oxfam's beneficiaries. My training took me further than I ever imagined. I even walked a marathon in a respectable 7 hours before I'd hit my fitness peak. I can now point to Wellington's many mountaintops and know I've hiked the majority of them, earning the right to enjoy the breathtaking views below.

I will keep on training and setting my goals high. But I will treasure this past year as an accomplishment in itself. To consider it anything less would be not just ego-driven but also very un-Kiwi. It would mean I cared more about how others perceive me than doing something out of a pure desire and thrill of experiencing a life-changing experience...be it truly extreme, or not. Call me crazy, maybe...but maybe that's why I feel so at home here now.

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