

INTERVIEW

Anatomy of a Roar

What does it feel like to finish a 5500-mile walk across Europe? Like this...

WORDS: HANNAH ENGELKAMP

AS URSULA MARTIN took the last steps of her European odyssey, I was filming her on my phone to send to ITV News. I'd been walking with her for the last five days into the middle of Mid-Wales, and on this last afternoon she was buoyed up by her welcome party, striding beneath a strand of bunting two friends carried on sticks. I was poised to catch a frothy whoop, maybe a fist in the air, the cheering of the crowds in her adopted hometown.

She rounded the last corner, emerging from beneath Llanidloes's elevated black and white market hall like a bride turning at the top of the aisle, and started gasping as all the feelings hit her. Then it came: not a whoop, but a roar. A fantastic, coarse roar that came from the very depths of her. It described her last few years better than any subsequent soundbites.

That roar was born in Kyiv where in September 2018 Ursula climbed out of the last lift of five days of trans-continental hitching and began her walk, sleeping amongst yellow peas on the Ukrainian plains, leaving off the outer sheet of her tent to better be part of her surroundings, autumnal ice crystals freezing on the mesh.

She navigated at first with 1:250000 maps, 1cm showing 2.5km, no contour lines or footpaths, across flatlands with no signposts, using a compass and a lot of guesswork. Into the Romanian Carpathians and then Bulgaria in midwinter, while the bears slept. She walked through Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia, Croatia and Slovenia in 2019, and then



across Italy, France and Spain in the pandemic, marooned in holiday homes during lockdowns.

It gave her a privileged overview of the continent. As we walked through the summery villages of Herefordshire and Powys she commented how different the very landscape felt in a country without recent history of revolutions. Walking towards home meant each step became more familiar, out of Cyrillic and into Latin, through currencies, flavours, and national temperaments. She felt comfortable, she said, in this exact arrangement of British hedgerow flowers. She gazed in all directions from the top of the Radnor hills and felt another wave of arrival, recognising peaks in all directions as old friends.

The Roar really began long before she hitched away, her mettle tested by two years of low-wage

▲ Ursula arrives back in Wales after 5500 miles through 14 countries, and up to heights almost 10,000 feet above sea level.

▼ Ursula wore through eight pairs of shoes; this is farewell to pair seven.

▲ Celebrating a huge milestone, Italy, Jan 2020.

“Take a deep breath and do the thing that scares you, even just the beginning of it like buying a tent. Then take another deep breath and do the next small thing towards your goal.”



jobs, baking bread before dawn, bartending into the night, house-sitting and living in a van to save up. She and the idea wouldn't let each other go, but without sponsorship or private means, there's nothing footloose about the single-minded drive to reach the carefully calculated figure needed for such a journey.

The drill was familiar. After a cancer diagnosis in 2011, Ursula walked 3700 miles all over Wales, raising money for ovarian cancer charities while circling back to her obstetrician for check-ups. The trick, as she says in her advice to anyone wanting a more adventurous life, is to take the first step, however small, and then the next one, and the next one. There is no other way.

Perhaps most of all The Roar came in response to Ursula's lingering sense of impostor syndrome – the feeling she has of being slow and unathletic. Someone else, someone lithe, could do this in half the time. She describes herself as a lifelong outsider but sees the benefits: “It's much harder to be on the inside of your life and feel something's wrong, not exciting enough, and be struggling to get out,” she said. She dropped out of A-levels, didn't go to university, has a patchwork background of work as a carer, in a homeless shelter, as a kitchen porter – thankless but interesting, full of human stories.

No surprise probably, then, that she's built a life that prioritises human interaction, and that she's a brilliant, incisive writer. Her Wales walk became a book, *One Woman Walks Wales*, and this Europe walk will too – follow her on social media or pledge support via her Patreon micro-patronage page.

The Roar. It was a sort of battle cry of utter, unimpeachable triumph. “Yes!” she bellowed, and then “TENACITY!” It began to rain on the delighted crowd, and we all flinched and put up umbrellas, indoor creatures that we are. But Ursula has been out in all of it.

Will she make peace with settling? I don't hold out much hope. She's already planning John O'Groats to Land's End for next spring, to mark 10 years since the cancer, and then the 'Stans of Central Asia are calling her, and they're really vast. Reckon I won't evict her modest belongings from my attic any time soon. When I'm shouting at my unruly children, broken boiler or parking ticket, it's a small price to pay for having insight into a whole different route.

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I can't wait to...

...SALUTE A HOBBY

I feel bad nicking the hobby, as it's the favourite bird of CW photographer Tom Bailey. But it's thanks to his appreciation of the hobby that I've come to love it myself. At the end of this month they'll be heading south for Africa, so this is the hobby's last hurrah over our fields. These are incredibly agile birds, so skilful in flight that they can eat their prey on the wing. But I also love their Latin name. In 1946, Peter Adolph designed a tabletop football game and wanted to call it Hobby, after his favourite bird. When the trademark was refused, he simply used the Latin name: *falco Subbuteo*. Great game, great bird. **Nick Hallissey**, Deputy Editor



...PICK SLOES

Blackthorn is often the first tree to blossom in spring. We say it's a 'blackthorn winter' when its frothy bloom coincides with unseasonal snow. But the floral confetti is merely a curtain-raiser for the crop of plump, blue-black berries which signal autumn is near. I am of course talking about sloes – best picked for gin-making after the first frost. With a sharp-sour flavour to match the barbs giving this shrubby tree its Latin name (*prunus spinosa*), it's no wonder blackthorn has a dark reputation in folklore – the wood of choice for witches' staffs. Yet it's a tart tang I've learned to relish, giving sloe gin its warming potency come winter. **Philip Thomas**, Features Writer



...WATCH HAWKERS

As a kid I was terrified of dragonflies: so big, so fast. And hawkers are the biggest and fastest of them all: the jewelled body of this migrant variety is 2½ inches long and its four twinkling wings can push it to speeds up to 30mph, and get it flying sideways or even backwards. Typically, migrant hawkers appear on the wing in late summer across the southern half of Britain, numbers swelled by arrivals from the continent, and they can be seen right through to November. I used to run from them; now I love to watch them whirring by water, using their exceptional eyesight to 'hawk' for their insect-supper. **Jenny Walters**, Features Editor

