

**PART 1 |**  
**LIFE ON LAND**  
**(*BEFORE***  
**THE SWIM)**



## CHAPTER 1 | WHY DID I DO IT?



**LOCATION:** Margate

**DISTANCE COVERED:** 0 miles

**DAYS AT SEA:** 0

It's 7.00 a.m. on 1 June 2018 in the small coastal town of Margate. Tucked away on England's southeast coast, this seaside resort has down the years served as a magnet for Londoners, with its sandy beaches less than 80 miles away from the capital. In fact, Margate has an old-world charm that makes the ice cream parlours, pie and mash shops and amusement arcades seem almost timeless. Yet the town's history is also closely tied to the sea and the absence of their once great Victorian pier, destroyed after a storm in 1978, is a constant reminder to the locals (and all who visit) of the ocean's power.

This is why the British coastline was the ideal 'testing ground' to research *The Art of Resilience*. Known around the globe for having some of the world's most dangerous tides, waves and weather, every

menacing whirlpool, rugged headland and North Sea storm would become a tool for me to sharpen my mind and harden my body.

But why Margate to start? When planning for the swim, we decided we needed to swim clockwise around Great Britain because the prevailing winds affecting our island are from the west or southwest. So we would be facing the ‘harder’ half of the journey – if we made it down the south coast, around Cornwall and up the Irish Sea towards western Scotland – during the summer months. The ‘easier’ half of the swim would theoretically be over the top of Scotland and down the east coast of Britain where we would be more sheltered from the southwesterlies by the topography of the coastline. Speed was of the essence, however, in order to complete our mission before the onset of winter.

But this morning, standing on the beach looking out to sea, I had absolutely no idea what lay ahead. Many people considered this ‘swimming suicide’, believing it was an impossible swim that was foolish to even attempt. But to quote the award-winning novelist Pearl S Buck, ‘The young do not know enough to be prudent, and therefore they attempt the impossible – and achieve it, generation after generation.’

Which is why my plan was simple. Using myself as a seawelling, human guinea pig I would attempt to complete the first 1,780-mile swim in history all the way around Great Britain, while putting to test the science behind strength, stoicism and fortitude. As I researched the intricacies of resilience on this swim, my goal was to fully understand what makes the human spirit so unbreakable.

The regulations governing the swim were pretty straightforward too. It would be classed as ‘the world’s longest staged sea swim’ (where the distance of the individual stages can vary each day, and the start point of each stage begins at the finish point of the previous stage) and would abide by the rules of the World Open Water Swimming Association (WOWSA) and the *Guinness Book of World Records*. I would be fitted with an electronic GPS tracker and my

location recorded with WOWSA at the end of each day's swim. I would also tow an inflatable buoy during every swim for safety (especially at night, since it contained a flashing light so I could be seen). I myself insisted that I would not set foot on land during the entire swim, but would take my rest periods out on the water on a support boat.

Of course, this wasn't a solo endeavour. To even contemplate a swim of this magnitude I needed a boat captain equipped with iron-clad fortitude and years of experience sailing in the most adverse conditions Mother Nature could conjure up. Then I needed a crew with unwavering faith who would sail day and night alongside me, through hell and high water, to make this mission a success.

But instead of finding a team, I found something far better. I found a family.

The Knight family were a committed band of sailors and big-wave surfers who had the (joint) dream of sailing around Great Britain for many years. With a love of adventure and penchant for the impossible, dad, husband and captain Matt Knight was recommended to me by a mutual friend as the ideal man to lead my crew. When we first met down in Torquay to discuss the mission, he was struck by my enthusiasm and didn't need much convincing to adopt an utterly naive and wildly optimistic swimmer and mastermind the first circumnavigation swim around this big rock we call Great Britain.

As a personality and a character Matt's hard to explain, but let me try. Standing just over six foot, he was 60 years old but had a physique that resembled an elite triathlete. With not an ounce of body fat, he had giant, cartoon-like forearms that rivalled Popeye's and skin like hardened leather from years of battling wind, waves and salt water. But these features were purely a physical representation of his deep connection with the sea, which all began in the 1980s when, as a young boy, he left his hometown in search of adventure and sailed across the Atlantic employed as a deckhand.

Hardworking and with an insatiable love of the sea, he moved through the ranks; years later he gained his Yachtmaster qualification and skippered boats across the Atlantic, Pacific and Indian oceans.

Which is when he met mum, wife and chief cook, Suzanne, a petite, blonde Devonshire lady whose maternal instinct only seemed to be fulfilled when cooking for the family and crew while battling 20-ft waves somewhere across the high seas. In tandem with Matt, they sailed the coastlines of France, Cornwall, Devon, Wales, Ireland, Portugal and Madeira and explored some of the most remote islands in the South Pacific and Indonesia.

They even found time to produce four incredible children along the way, who would become the crew and my newly adopted brother and sisters: Taz, Harriet, Peony and Jemima. With no hierarchy, each one of my 'sea siblings' would do anything and everything possible to ensure we could continue making progress around the coast, from guiding me past lobster pots, jagged rocks and dangerous shipping lanes to guarding me from sharks, killer whales and seals during mating season.

Finally, I must mention my 'home' for 157 days. *Hecate* was a 53-ft (16-m) long and 23-ft (7-m) wide specially designed catamaran (known as a Wharram after its designer). Comprised of two parallel hulls that are essentially held together by rope and rigging, the entire boat bends, moves and contorts with the waves thanks to this form of traditional Polynesian boat-building that's remained unchanged for thousands of years.

The idea for us on the swim was for *Hecate* to progress under sail as often as possible, but there would be times when travelling through rough seas or difficult tides that we would have to rely on her engine.

But the best part of *Hecate*? The galley. Serving as the kitchen and library, it was where most of this book was written. After swimming up to 12 hours per day, the remaining time I would spend eating, sleeping (dreaming) and writing about theories and philosophies in

resilience that I'd been thinking about when staring at the bottom of the seabed. In fact, during the entire 157-day swim, we calculated I spent over 1,500 hours (over 60 days) swimming with my face down looking into the dark blue abyss, writing the chapters of this book in my own head before the words ever appeared on paper.

This is why the contents of this book have become a blend of:

- Real-life events from the swim.
- Stories from my past that influenced the swim.
- Tales from the strange world of sensory deprivation that occurred in my head.

The one common theme that runs throughout is resilience. This was also inspired by research in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* which found, "The importance of intellectual talent to achievement in all professional domains is well established, but less is known about the importance of resilience. Defined as perseverance and passion for long-term goals ... resilience did not relate positively to IQ, but demonstrated incremental predictive validity of success measures over and beyond IQ. These findings suggest that the achievement of difficult goals entails not only talent but also the sustained and focused application of talent over time."<sup>1</sup>

Essentially, intelligence is great and being genetically gifted physically is an advantage. But one of the most underrated, yet powerful virtues a human can possess is resilience – which is exactly why I wanted to embark on this swim.

I wanted to follow in the footsteps of my hero Captain Matthew Webb, who, on 25 August 1875 achieved what many believed was impossible: the first crossing of the English Channel (swimming 21 miles from Dover in England to Calais in France). At the time, sailors claimed this was swimming suicide because the tides were too strong and the water too cold. But Captain Webb, in a woollen wetsuit and on a diet of brandy and beef broth, swam breaststroke

(because front crawl was considered ‘ungentlemanly-like’ at the time) and battled waves for over 20 hours to make history.

I loved this story. It was one of grit, resilience and defying all odds as his dogged persistence and self-belief captured the spirit of the times and cemented Webb as a hero of the Victorian age.

Therefore, for me, circumnavigating Great Britain would serve as a way of reconnecting with these powerful and primitive human traits. Looking at the anthropology of us humans (and earth’s 4.5 billion-year history), it’s the reason we’re all here today sitting firmly at the top of the food chain, as we compete in the game that Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer referred to as the survival of the fittest.

How did we do that? Well, our strategy has been simple. Around 100,000 years ago our ancestors developed these huge brains and amazing ability for endurance and physical labour and ever since have been able to outsmart, outhunt and outlast the bigger, stronger and faster members of the animal kingdom.

To them, bravery and tenacity weren’t rare and respected virtues. They were daily habits that people possessed solely in order to survive when everything outside of the comfort of their cave wanted to eat them.

Fast-forward to the era of modern (civilised) man and the same attributes of grit, determination and fortitude that saw us survive, now see us thrive. From the first ascent of Everest by Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay in 1953 to Captain Matthew Webb’s first crossing of the English Channel, it seems this idea of persistence, valour and intestinal fortitude is what bonds great feats of human endeavour throughout history.

But today we are in danger. We are ignoring these key attributes that made us great as a species and are losing our ancient, age-old abilities for mental and physical robustness. Living between our desks at work and sofas at home, we would be almost unrecognisable to our intrepid forefathers who 70,000 years ago had dreams

beyond their horizons as they left East Africa to explore the world. Which is exactly why I decided to swim around Great Britain and to write this book.

To show that we modern humans are capable of the same super-human resilience as our intrepid ancestors.