

A LIFE LESS ORDINARY

Kicking the Bucket List



Always wanted to visit the North Pole, be a rally driver or write a novel? Then just do it, reckons Paula Reid—her life's been one long adventure to prove it

A South Atlantic wave crashed over Paula Reid's head, knocking her off her feet and rolling her yacht onto its side. The vessel didn't right properly, and water started coming into the cabin through the vents. Disorientated and terrified, Paula clung to a winch. She was clipped onto the deck by a harness, but knew that she could be swept overboard at any moment. Her crew mates on the submerged side of the boat were up to their chests in water. The 30-foot spinnaker pole had snapped in two, and the sail was ripped and dragging in the water.

Paula—then a 37-year-old internal communications worker from Clapham, London—only had two months' ▶

BY RUTH ADDICOTT

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
LIONEL DERIMAS

◀ sailing experience, yet here she was, deep in trouble, just 16 days into Team Stelmar's attempt at the 2004-5 Global Challenge round-the-world yacht race. Eventually the boat righted, the sail was repaired, and Team Stelmar reached the race's finish at Portsmouth in a respectable sixth place. But that was nine very tough months later. So why had yachting novice Paula let herself in for such a gruelling, terrifying ordeal?

"Moments like that [the boat turning over] is when the adrenalin kicks in and I feel alive," she says. "That's when I know I'm living life to the full."

For the last 28 years, Paula has dedicated much of her life to completing 99 of an ever-expanding list of 130 adventures and lifetime ambitions that she started compiling as a teenager. So far, she's climbed a Javan volcano, travelled in a hot-air balloon, kayaked the length of the Thames, dived with sharks, swum with dolphins, been to Kathmandu and Las Vegas, and climbed the Alps.

In person, Paula, 45, is quietly spoken and doesn't look like your usual adventurer. But she talks passionately about her extraordinary and sometimes inexplicable need to take in as many new experiences as possible. "It's just an internal drive," she says.

Paula grew up in the solidly normal village of Copthorne, West Sussex. But, even as a small child, her inherent need for thrills was apparent—she had a fascination for wandering into fields where there were bulls, for instance. And her love of adventure began in earnest when she was 15.

"I went on a school trip to an Indian ▶



SO MUCH TO DO, SO LITTLE TIME...

As well as the ones we've pictured, Paula's exploits so far include:

- ▶ Climbing a 95-foot mast
- ▶ Touring the Grand Canyon in a helicopter
- ▶ Visiting Hiroshima
- ▶ Having a poem published
- ▶ Stroking a cheetah
- ▶ Going to Wimbledon
- ▶ Attending five Grand Prix
- ▶ Visiting the Great Barrier Reef
- ▶ Seeing an opera in Sydney and Prague

And on Paula's to-do list:

- ▶ Take part in the Gumball 3000 Rally
- ▶ Go storm chasing
- ▶ Learn to whistle
- ▶ Pass her motorbike test
- ▶ Go on a TV show
- ▶ Ride a manta ray
- ▶ Follow the Silk Route
- ▶ Take part in a flash mob
- ▶ Stay in the Ice Hotel, Sweden

For the full bucket list, visit paulareid.com/bucket-list.php

◀ village to renovate an old well and build a community centre,” she recalls. “It was a huge experience at that age. We slept in tents, and were woken up one night to be told that there were tigers close by and to keep an ear out. I remember thinking, *This is so exciting!*”

She began her bucket list when she was 17 and, after leaving school, took every job she could lay her hands on—chambermaid, landscape gardener and travel agent—to try to fund some of her ambitions. By February 1990 she was in Malaysia fighting a cobra. This hadn’t been the first thing on the 23-year-old’s list—it happened during a nine-month trip around the world—but the six-foot snake had been spotted outside a guest house and the owners were scared to kill it in case it contained “spirits”. Attempts to pull it to the nearest temple simply resulted in the cobra getting angry and spitting a venom that can cause blindness, so Paula grabbed a kitchen knife and dispatched it.

“I was mortified,” she says. “It was such a beautiful creature. But it was the best I could do in the circumstances. And I’d set out to collect experiences, so this was just added to the list.”

Paula spent most of the next four years doing a teacher-training course, but then took more temporary jobs to fund fresh adventures, including a skydive in August 1996 and riding a death slide



“I’ve got to live life to the full,” says Paula Reid

down a New Zealand mountain the following year.

One of Paula’s philosophies is “do what the locals do”. So when she found people swim-

ming in the piranha-infested waters of the Amazon during a trek up Peru’s Inca Trail in late 1999, she jumped in, too. “The piranhas looked like they do on TV, with big teeth,” she says. “They’re not dangerous...as long as you’re not bleeding.”

She was somewhat less nonchalant during a dive into the 400-foot Great Blue Hole off the coast of Belize. She got a nose bleed, and surfaced to find bull sharks circling and people shouting at her to get back in the boat.

After ticking off the Tomatina Tomato Throwing Festival in Buñol, Spain (wearing a white wedding dress), and paddling the Mekong River in Cambodia in a dug-out canoe, by 2004 Paula was looking for an even bigger challenge.

By now, Paula was in her permanent internal communications job—which she loved—but she was stuck in a rut. So that’s when she decided to enter the 35,000-mile Global Challenge, which began that October, with Team Stelmar even though her only previous sailing experience was a trip with her uncle when she was ten that made her seasick.

“It was the size and scale of it that appealed,” she says. “That feeling of racing and performing 24 hours a day, every day, for ten months.

She had to fund the £27,000 cost of entering and training for the event—which allowed ordinary people to join one of the 12 crews—by borrowing money from her parents and remortgaging her flat. And, three weeks before she was due to leave, she nearly pulled out.

“I was really scared and dreaded making a mistake. Then my father took me aside and said my mother was really worried and wasn’t sleeping. The whole thing was a huge decision. My mum is important to me, I love her, but I knew if I didn’t do it, I’d regret it for the rest of my life.”

Paula was seasick as soon as the race started, but that was the least of the crew’s worries. Team Stelmar encountered

a force-ten gale and had a man overboard just ten hours after leaving Portsmouth. Two weeks later came the storm that almost sank the yacht, while the frigid Southern Ocean brought 70-foot waves and broken ribs and arms for her crew members.

“It was the toughest thing I’ve done, but also the most amazing. When you’re on the peak of a wave with albatrosses above and the Milky Way lighting up the sky, it’s just incredible.”

For a few months after returning, Paula

found curling up with a cup of tea was bliss. She wrote a corporate-advice book, *Boat to Boardroom* (£24.99), and started doing motivational talks. But it wasn’t long before her bucket list came calling. In 2007, she entered the World Bodypainting

Festival, and was an extra in *The Bourne Ultimatum*. In 2008, she climbed Mont Blanc and, in 2009, did the 191-mile Coast to Coast Walk in northern England and spent Christmas in Lapland.

By July 2011 Paula had been to 50 countries, but had a hankering to go to the remote jungles of West Papua, New Guinea. She organised the trip herself, and her ad hoc guide was a tribesman—wearing nothing but a penis gourd—who she met on a mountain path.

At the end of this adventure, Paula contracted a tropical sore and had to go to hospital. “I was put in a bed next to a woman with an axe in her head—still alive,” she says.

Paula is now preparing to do a wing ▶

“Don’t limit yourself. If you give yourself labels, you’ll live by them”

◀ walk, recently stayed in the Beachy Head lighthouse, and is trekking to the North Pole next year.

Paula admits that much of what she does is purely for self-satisfaction, but her bucket list has also included volunteering for Trinity, a local hospice, and the RNLI. She's raised thousands of pounds for charity. As an author, motivational speaker and leadership coach, she's also used her experiences to inspire workers at companies such as RBS, Barclays and Unilever.

She encourages everyone to write a list of things they want to do before they die—however modest.

“It could be sleeping under the stars or reuniting with your long-lost father.

As long as you want it, anything goes. Don't limit yourself with labels: 'I'm not good in the mornings'; 'I'm not ambitious'; 'I'm not very sporty'; 'I can't sail'. So? Learn! If you give yourself labels, you'll live by them.

“I've learned I can cope in some very tough, unusual situations. I think we're much more capable, strong and resilient than everyday life allows us to be.”

She's never married or had kids, but says, “I love my life as it is. I don't have a surround-sound stereo, quality jewellery or furnishings, but I do have incredible memories. When I'm drawing my last breath, it'll be with no regrets.” ■

» *World's Most Dangerous Jobs* by Paula Reid (£9.99) is out now.

THE OBSESSIONS OF THE RICH AND FAMOUS

The recent news that US rapper Snoop Dogg is weighing up an investment in Celtic Football Club may have raised a few eyebrows, but it's far from being the least likely celebrity sideline

Veteran film critic **Barry Norman** never intended to share his delicious home-made **pickled onions** with the general public, but a marketing friend apparently persuaded him otherwise. You can find out more at the, erm, Pickleodeon website.



Much like **Heidi Klum** and her “Fruit Flirtations”, tennis pro **Maria Sharapova** launched her own line of sweets called **Sugarpova**. A terrible pun, of course, and not exactly the first product you associate with a grand-slam champion.

Many Hollywood stars have decent houses, but **Kim Basinger** purchased the entire town of **Braselton** in Georgia, with the intention of turning it into a tourist attraction. It wasn't the smartest investment—she eventually sold it at a huge loss and filed for bankruptcy.

MC Hammer, of “U Can't Touch This” fame, is now planning to take on Google with his new “deep search” engine **WireDoo**. “If you want to swing the bat, why not swing for the fences?” is his answer to charges of insane ambition.

