

BEAU MILES

‘This guy probably uses a trident and sword for a knife and fork.’

Roko’s Basilisk, YouTube subscriber

THE BACKYARD ADVENTURER

Meaningful and pointless expeditions, self-experiments and the value of other people’s junk

THE BACKYARD ADVENTURER



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BACKSTORY, OR PRE-BEARD

Day 62 of 135. Africa,
2007. Offshore. Alone.

The world around me looks like a mouldy sponge cake. One that's been left uncovered on a kitchen table for 26 days of stale summer air, enduring two heatwaves and four storms. A cake that had once been freshly creamed, passionfruit drizzled and frosty-topped, but is now a blotched, fuzzy fusion of bacteria and mould; its clearly defined layers, once perky as new mattresses, are now sagging.

The view over the bow of my kayak, my view for seven to ten hours a day, currently due south, would usually be a perfectly clear version of myself silhouetted by the midday sun, but today I cast no shadow. The layers of sea, air and sky are several shades of grey. Sea is mossy green and whorls of grey dot the skyline, like the cake's bacteria, which would be fit to kill a dog if I was to eat what I see, although they could be thought of as passionfruit seeds – I presume the whorls are storms, or squalls, or a distant flock of birds. I take it that I should avoid the dark bits, which is useless to think from a kayak at sea, wind at my back, land that won't have me, and a sky that moves. The benign breeze that usually blows a little stiffer in the afternoons is no longer playing out.

At 45 degrees to my right is a view of borderlands between South Africa and Mozambique – if I squint. I assume the official line of sovereignty is a triangular cardinal marker built on the highpoint of a reddish headland, but it might be a house, or a fused droplet of water on my sunglasses. There's no border marker on my charts, which are from the 1970s and fast becoming useless, destined to be toilet paper instead of navigation aids. I'm eight kilometres from shore, although it could be ten, or five. Distance and scale are gummed up and hard to fathom in moody conditions, and I dare not turn on my GPS because I've learnt my lesson. You come to rely on gadgets and digital numbers like grease on lips and milk on cereal, and I don't like the feeling when batteries die, as if you've lost part of your brain.

To distract myself, I return to my vision of the cake on the table. I imagine no one has come or gone from the house to disturb things in those 26 days. Sweaty funk emanates into the room, combining with the essence of four white terriers that live almost permanently in the house. The cake has sat there for four weekends and three working weeks, awaiting swearing and howls of disgust from the

returned troop of sandcastle-building, trash-novel-reading, overeating family of seven.

I see Jack, the most lovable of the family, youngest of five, irresponsible because he's ten and has been allowed to be carefree. It's Jack who forgot the cake. Jack's dad, Henry, who people – including his kids – call Hen, is really to blame, having given Jack two jobs instead of one. Keeping the dogs happy while the car was being packed is where the boy's responsibilities should have stopped. It was a stupid idea for Jack to have to get the cake from the kitchen table when the dogs had been shut in the back of the car, as his eldest sister Kate knew all along. Hammering home the injustice, she had made the cake.

Jack remembered he'd forgotten the cake not far from home, only about 20 minutes into the six-hour drive to the coast, but thought best not to tell his mum, which to Jack was a sure sign of good decision-making. So, there the cake was, moulding away beautifully in a semi-controlled state, as if the new science teacher, overeager and wasteful by nature, had set up an experiment to impress the kids on day one of the school year.

Storytelling fills my thoughts to the beat of 50 unthinking strokes per minute because I have all the time in the world. It's unsurprising there's a mouldy funk to my thinking, as life at sea – particularly sea kayaking, where your backside sits below the waterline – is a life of moisture and festering. Even when your pruned hands get a chance to dry out in the evening, you're still damp, as are your tent, sleeping bag, spare clothes, your oats and your book. My own sweat, ambient humidity and constant variation of temperature cook and stew everything. Salt holds on to water like an infant holds on to a grub they've found on the lawn, and is equally greasy, applying a sheen of glistening slip to everything from toothpaste to eyelids. Water infuses you and your being, and will not leave until you leave the coast. Even

your subconscious, sleeping self is watery, tuning in to last night's tide without being asked, knowing how far up the beach it got because your own outer layer of nerves and follicles never stop listening.

There is a beauty in the unexplainable passage of time when you're by yourself at sea because time seems to operate so differently. Humanity seems to drown after a while, streaks of aircraft and the odd boat becoming no different from birds or flotsam, coming in and out of your orbit without touching you, so they disappear at the same rate they came into view.

On I plug, imagining abstract life inspired by whatever speaks to me from the chromatic layers of due south panorama. Taken over, I become a daydreaming animal. Leaking at regular intervals – which for the long-range trucker and the expeditionary sea kayaker is our cue to take our eyes off the horizon and focus on the teeth of a zipper – brings me back to reality. I aim badly into a crude, sharp-edged plastic sports bottle with the top third cut off. It's a dangerous activity given all the moving about, chancing a nick followed by an infinite supply of stinging salt. On rough days I question why I only brought one penis, having never thought to bring a spare. It could sit in a Tupperware container in the day hatch, all greased up, with the spare set of allen keys and fishing tackle. I've brought the worthless pee bottle from Australia, the kind you can pick up from any roadside in the world. It's here because it never leaves the kayak, stowed with another dozen essential items in the front hatch. It flew halfway across the world to be used constantly, multiple times a day, far more useful than the satellite phone that's only really useful when it's too late.

Tannin-rich wee gets emptied over the side. I remind myself to drink more, so often finding myself dehydrated in places of water. You forget to drink when you're always wet, or looking at a vast desert of liquid. I bob about for a few minutes, maybe five, sipping

water, stringing things out for as long as possible. My rule of thumb is to start paddling again when the boat finally gives in to the business of waves, which is to be neatly and without fail parallel-parked at the mercy of waves. Being at sea without steerage or power, which is the kayaker's state whenever you pull your paddle from the water, is to be subject to the world's largest, endless, lines of infantry, pushed along by the forces of swell, chop and wind. Swell is the big stuff that rolls in from the deep, a Swiss-ball equivalent to the tennis-ball chop that skips across the surface, while wind is air trying to be somewhere else. Both swell and chop are bound for shore, naturally, but not always in the same direction since swell is driven by gigantic currents that are dictated by everything from week-ago storms to the spin of the earth, and chop comes namely from the day-to-day direction of wind. In this way, two forces, big and old, young and small, dictated by wind, pushing and dragging and roiling beneath you. When your paddle makes it back into the water and you get up enough speed to determine your own direction, you counter these forces with ruddering and edging in a particular way to head where you want to go, trying not to comply with the giant carpet beneath, which is nothing less than colossal forces moving in a particular direction by the laws of horizontal gravity.

I think, not for the first time, how strange it is that humans piss and drink an almost identical amount of fluid. Buying a lemony-orange-flavoured sports drink, downing it, and leaking the same-coloured mix of electrolytes and minerals is a little bonkers, and amazing. But I like pondering these mammalian ins and outs because it's a non-sea-based thing to think about, and I'm lost for a few moments to thoughts of primates becoming upright, the production of sports drinks, and the remarkable expansion of human evolution that's taken place between those two events.

My paddle lies across the cockpit, sitting in the vee between my

knees. A small wave flops from the side into the open cockpit, folding neatly into my lap and ending my break. I sponge out a few handfuls while swearing, which is part of the routine, then reseal my spray-skirt. I scan my sponge-cake world. No longer rustling along to the unheard sounds of paddling, or the relative focus of a fly and zipper, I start to feel what I'm seeing, breaking myself out of the autopilot bubble of slippery time and make-believe. Are conditions worse than an hour ago? I ask myself. No. Hmmm, I don't know. Yes, but not a lot.

Given it has taken some time for the day to get so smudgy, I'm surprised when things start to shift quickly. Not unlike a walk to the train station that cuts things a little too close, the walking air has morphed into a jogging breeze. Wind, which can be seen in its distinct speeds in how it interacts with the water, is all of a sudden in a hurry to be somewhere else, more decisive in the way it smears and licks.

I take up the paddle and continue south. Africa, to my right, remains indifferent to the pressure shift and the impact it will have on my situation at sea. Land life always seems firm and unchangeable compared to the fickle trends of a life aquatic. It's land where my jealousies and yearnings often reside, like the way I view birds so easily flying amid turbulent winds. Land masses don't think as a human does; it exists in all of its immensity as a self-contained universe. We humans do the thinking, making choices and stuffing things up. Like my decision to be at sea today, which I considered not doing as I packed my things this morning, watching the sea – always watching, pottering about, systematising.

In truth I'm getting into the habit of looking for excuses not to go to sea, but I'm running out of time on this trip and the reasons for not going are becoming harder to find as days run out. Near-misses come and go, so you harden up a little and learn as only fools and

experts can. When I watched the sea this morning, clouds were built and fluffed up in the north-east, but so be it: today was a paddle day because the shore break wasn't all bad, meaning I could launch, meaning I could paddle. So, there it sits on the eastern horizon – a visible slice of continent, red, firm ground, yet for now an unreachable place. Reefed and rocked and protected from a landing for another 20 km, the giant landmass remains a distant pariah. I must stay at sea, beyond reach.

In a matter of minutes, waves begin to crease and lump in strange ways. No longer does the moving world seem a predictable layer of lines and suggestions of movement. Clouds descend even more, as if great arms of the sky are embracing, gently squeezing the air around me. Something is happening.

I see power, as godly as I can fathom, when I look over my left shoulder in the direction of Madagascar. At 300 m away, closing in and steepening, bound for the continent, is an enormous rogue wave. Caught in the act of surviving, or dying, I am instantly, profoundly scared. The situation becomes staggeringly real. I explode into action, toeing hard on the left rudder and leaning aggressively forward as I slip my knees into the bracing. Fingers claw and yank on the grip as I stab the water. Everything buckles under the torque, bending and tensioning, madness against sea, as the wave's face continues to rise and froth. A hiss emanates from the horrid uprising.

‘What the fuck?’ I spit. ‘A breaker, so far out?!’

—

It took 27 years of life to lead me to that point of high adventure and extreme risk. Knowing that fear deep in my bones, I've tried ever since not to repeat it. Not fully perhaps, as I always seem to have a perverse attraction to chaos, and a toothache-like appetite for

occasional misadventure. Sure, I don't like rotten teeth, but if I have one, I play with the spectrum of pain it provides because it tells me I have a galaxy of nerves in my mouth – a universe that was dormant until the rot set in. Misadventure is a toothache – to be avoided, but embraced if it comes along because there's no other choice. In short, I made it over the wave, just, before the full spectacle of terrifying force exploded beyond my stern. Twelve years later, here I sit twirling a pale-gold ring on my wedding finger, heart rate slightly raised at the thought of a wave that spoiled a perfectly good story.

It's said the ring represents a bond to a special nerve that goes all the way to the heart. It doesn't, of course, but it does say something of the socially constructed power of symbolism: that a small band around my finger will dictate where I go from this point on, and in fact will outweigh the experience of a wave that has altered where I now go in a sea kayak. When she handed me the ring during our wedding, Helen joked, 'This wedding ring is fitted with a GPS tracker so that I'll always know where you are.' She wasn't talking about infidelity, but instead my appetite for thick mountains and remote coastlines.

Let me be present for a moment. Reflection and reality are blurring the older I get, likely from all my time spent alone, which gets mighty confusing and a little lonely after a while. Here I'm propped, typing, sitting in my small house at a pine, drop-side kitchen table, which could equally be called a living-room table, desk, dumping ground. My third cup of coffee for the day sits on a stained notepad by the open window. I'm not fussy about coffee; white-brown-warm is just fine. I drink it ritualistically, not fanatically. Birdsong crackles, and there's a wash of peripheral green light from a springtime five-acre block. On the property are four buildings I've mostly or fully built: big barn, small barn, small house, small cabin, each with unfinished business. Jobs are everywhere, including a wonky leg of

this table; I cursed it just moments ago for spilling my coffee for the second time in as many minutes.

My immediate surrounds, the insides of the house, contain the stuff I've accumulated as much as the things I've not kept. Around me is a hand-picked world: wardrobe of woolly knits; kitchen full of sharp knives and copper pots; bookshelf of books that are mostly read; and walls of artworks that are inviting, evocative or simple enough to be anything. I spend money on things that should last and not a lot else. A friend told me once that the rooms in my home were masculine, which made sense at the time for a single white male who mostly slept, and not dwelled, in the house. When Helen started frequenting the farm a sympathetic touch started to creep in, hanging blinds, unpacking things a little, and generally making the place seem less angular or a retreat from the outside world of work and play. Looking out the window now reveals a cultivated, and in so many ways unnatural, world. Regardless of how practical I think of my existence is, just as the wave on day 62 of my Africa trip altered how and when I have departed land ever since, my small farm is filled with storied objects that are totems for how I live.

But as I sit and contemplate, sipping and stirring, it occurs to me that this is only half true. While I have worked over these five acres of West Gippsland, Gurnaikurnai country, a culmination of my 13,870 days on planet Earth, I have come to know that very little, if anything, of my surroundings – layered with 4.5 billion years of evolution – is unique to me. I am surrounded by copies and blueprints of animals coming and going, promoting, or cutting short, survival. People, of course, with their innovative minds and tools, at war or conspiring with the neighbours, have a lot to do with how and why I sit in this place. Outside are gigantic trees that regrow after an incinerating bushfire, and oak trees that are magnificent and grand and look as though they belong, but don't. Perhaps I'm the perfect

candidate for white-man's folly, somewhere between gumtree and oak, born here but with the wrong kind of bark.

You see, I've recently started to question everything. In the process of writing a PhD about adventuring and filmmaking, which emerged into a Freudian crosscheck of my ego, a certain form of antagonism arose, meaning I trust less, including myself. I started exploring new ways of thinking, questioning what to do, why, when to do it, and really, Beau, what's the bloody point to all this questioning? What a bore. Go back to doing something, anything, silencing the self-talk while digging, or cutting wood, or wielding a hand slasher as though you're a medieval warrior. Either way, do something intense enough to stop thinking about anything other than what you're doing.

Deep within thesis writing, wallowing in vats of coffee and a growing waistline, I was motionless for long enough to think about the life-affirming wonders of calloused hands and sore feet. Bleary-eyed, screenified, lumped in a chair, mostly static, I missed the outside world more than ever. Yet at the same time I knew that sedentary lockdown was a condition for such slow and steady thinking, giving me a place to ponder what I like most about being human.

In the wash-up of the PhD, 2018 was the first year of my adult life that I didn't leave my home continent, domesticating myself instead of crossing a large patch of water to be somewhere else. While on one hand there's been a palpable sense of arrival (married, financially stable, healthy enough, fit enough, happy enough) in this period of my life, there's still an overriding question of why and what's next. Not just the annoying midlife religion of being present, local, and loved up enough to have kids and grow vegetables – although these aspects of the good life are playing out as I write – but starting to emerge was my new understanding of both the insignificance and the great importance of my so-called adventures.

To think at a deeper level about my irritable state of play, being

unsure of this thing I've come to call adventure, I make toast. As I stand eating at the sink, crumbs going everywhere, it occurs to me that, in a horrible stroke of symmetry, I've lived roughly the same number of days as adult and non-adult. This is a somewhat arbitrary statistic, other than to say the physical meat of me is no longer prime. Lamb is turning to mutton. I can no longer, for example, share a birthday with the winner of the Tour de France. My bell curve is on the way down, starting to mirror the ascent of the first 38 years. Indeed, it was after the last few years of teenage life, as I became adult Beau via a car, alcohol, and girls, that my independent outdoor life kickstarted my identity. Of course, you need some semblance of an identity to have an identity crisis, and it seems that the first years of being grown up laid good enough foundations to now pull apart.

Go away, young man

I stumbled into early adulthood with an overpowering sense of entitlement to be somewhere else, adventuring, fornicating, drinking, socialising. My instincts were to do things cheaply in backwaters, setting off with ad-hoc gear following a vague itinerary based on cheap flights and cheap places to sleep. I had with me an emerging skill set familiar to outdoor types; I knew how to peg down a tent in high winds, fix it when it ripped, and dig holes to crap into. The skill set was a default of living on a small farm with parents who were makers and doers: Dad the landscape artist-cum-truck driver, maker of things, and Mum the nurse, gardener, matron. Having been scolded all my life for being in the house during the day, the outdoors became my natural habitat.

Mum and Dad spent my childhood bent over a shovel, rotary hoe,

or bale of hay, sweating their heads off. I've never seen people work so hard, sweat so much, before cooling off momentarily with a chunk of fruit in the shade and going back to work as if someone had a gun to their head. I have long recognised that my work ethic has been built on my willingness to take up a shovel like they did. My bastard freckled skin continues to give me away as a redhead born to outdoor parents in a country with a hole in the sky.

After high school, I took on a gap year as an outdoor education trainee, spending every second week helping to lead hiking and canoe camps. With a new set of wheels in the form of an old brown car and flush with an apprentice's wage, I moved into a share house with two PE teachers and a farmer. Having run out of rooms in the house, myself and great mate Marco painted out the garage workshop, laid down a chunk of carpet and bolted a padlock to the door. My desk was a card table, louvre windows let in air when opened or closed, water ran down the walls when it rained hard enough, which made me and my things musty, and asbestos lining meant I couldn't wrestle anyone in the fear of breaking through the walls. I never once used the lock. It was perfect.

I made pizzas on weeknights, helped my big sister Jade's boyfriend build houses, and pretended I was twenty on weekends when I hung out with Jade's friends. I lost my virginity in their midst, drank cheap port and crashed my car into a tree. I grew a novelty beard and took up reading, which surprised me as much as when I took up Scrabble a decade later. Within a few months of starting a double degree in outdoor recreation and education at Monash University, I knew I'd found my people.

As I transitioned from school to work and university life, I toyed with the idea of being an elite soldier. An accepted application lay in a drawer, but after watching *Saving Private Ryan* I was saved, not unlike the fourth Ryan brother. I remember walking out of the cinema and

being disturbed at the barbarism of men killing boys, the vivid, loud scenes strewn with body parts. While I was attracted to the idea of hard-nosed expeditions, eating scant provisions and never having to shower, killing others didn't interest me. More than that – it frightened me.

Although the film didn't inspire me vocationally, the exploits of Tom Hank's 2nd Ranger Battalion did move me creatively. Twenty years later I can still hear the squelch of mud under the soldiers' feet, sense the cruel coldness of having to hold a rifle gloveless when it snowed, and how a scene set in a yellow cornfield made me feel hot. I remember thinking how remarkable it is that sounds and vision can symbiotically inform the rest of my senses. I screwed up my military papers, borrowed a video camera, set off and pushed record every so often.

Lugging a camera about

My first attempt at filmmaking was walking the 1953 Everest expedition route, following the footsteps of the first official party to make the summit. The month-long walk took me from the outskirts of Kathmandu to Everest base camp. Inspired and shocked by Jon Krakauer's bestselling book *Into Thin Air*, I had written 'Everest by age 20' on the title page, scripting a date with the iconic mountain for my birthday. On my last day as a teenager, I watched the sun set over the famous mountain.

After the sun went down, I left my camera and went higher on Everest's flank, guided by moonlight as the temperature plummeted. Looking up at the iconic triangular summit was a life-changing moment. I had never before immersed myself in a place with such

grand scale and terrifying beauty. The grinding echoes of the glacier, diluted by thin, cold air, were remarkable. Under yellow torchlight I stumbled back to my tent by the edge of the glacier. I awoke as a 20-year-old, riddled with altitude sickness. None of this subtext, or footage of these moments, was translated to the meagre 32 minutes of film I recorded. Lacking personality, reality, chronology and creativity, the footage didn't make it past my living room when I returned.

As much as I loved the idea of filmmaking, it was a pain in the arse. I had thought that pretty, wide, spectacular scenery and human action were the core of a travel story. This is true in part, but to capture the wide and spectacular, you need to run the tape over the incidental and everyday. My first obvious flaw was that I was allergic to the idea of stopping, always thinking that a better view or story was around the corner, which is also true enough, but a trap of poor filmmaking. When I did make time for shots, I didn't give them the energy or insight they deserved.

Embracing shot-making took time. To slow down ever so slightly, realising that a story needs purpose, and purpose is built on the everyday and ordinary, is harder than it sounds given there's so much of it. Shooting this way means that smaller tales build within the bigger picture, like muscle supported by bone.

It's taken years to figure this out, and I'm only just learning how to shoot the mundane, bad, routine and odd. One guiding credo rules my storytelling now: when you don't feel like shooting or writing, you need to shoot and write. Not that I was there yet. As a young twenty-something I was still nibbling at the edges of what it means to be a narrator, but surfacing was the idea that good storytelling is authenticity in the face of reality.

Camp

At about the same time I was entertaining the idea of being a filmmaker, I got horribly sidetracked by a cult. I was hungover on a beach one day in Thailand when a wayward frisbee hit my foot. I picked up the disk then scanned the direction of travel for the owner and found Jed, the son of a camp director in the U.S. Based on Jed's bad throw or a gust of wind, I spent ten summers at the alternative and exceptional Camp Sangamon in central Vermont, five hours north of New York City by train. Through largely positive human experiences in a seasonally intense identity-building time of life, a decade of northern hemisphere summers provided a counterpoint to Australia, the rest of the world, and my path within it. If I am now the sum of three parts: they are Mum, Dad and camp.

What it did was make fear of missing out disappear, which is a powerful measure of decision-making for any young adult. All manner of social, cultural, environmental and economic ramifications in life, even if only for three or four months each year, seemed to come from the same 100-acre property at the end of a lane on the other side of the world. Seasonal hothousing bred year-round simplification, which at its core is an expression of complexity. Take, for example, the use of an old pink towel that was left by a camper. When I first came across the towel, cleaning out cabins at the end of the summer, a small fray near the centre of the rectangle had me quickly, and without much thought, ripping it in half. A pet love of mine is old towels that are thin and almost worn out, and the pink was a salmon colour that made me think of the insides of smoked fish, so I took it on as my towel. It verged on being not quite enough to do the full job of drying me, leaving a leg or arms to air-dry, which for me felt like a perfect compromise.

The other half of the towel was used as padding for two bars on the canoe trailer, oiled and non-oiled rags for cleaning travel stoves, and a scarf-sized section was nailed to a post next to the basketball court to wipe my brow during three-on-three. One towel, spread across camp in meaningful ways, was the kind of message we hoped to share with the boys, which by default taught us staff how to be multifaceted, getting on with things because tasks and emotions don't need a lot of ingredients if there's always something else to do, person to see, or place to be.

'Camp with the Pioneer Spirit' was a motto carried forward with no power in simple timber cabins, no mobile reception and no screens. Camp Sangamon was founded in the Depression to teach boys how to grow vegetables, care for animals and build community through games and hikes, and set on once cleared land, now mostly forest, with a lake (the Pond, Burr Pond). For the modern camper it was like stepping back in time.

I introduced the place to my best mate Rowy and my sisters, who fell in the love with it too. I would run in the woods and dip in the pond most mornings, hike the local trails three days a week with the eight-to-14-year-old campers, and rouse about doing an assortment of everything and nothing in particular the rest of the time. I spent seven years with a great woman who was the head of horse-riding, a vet, learning how to ride and how to inject glorious-sounding drugs into flanks of animals with wonderfully large needles.

Meanwhile, the American landscape, which for me had been shaped by Hollywood, full of myth and imagination, made me appreciate that I wasn't the centre of things, nor was my social and emotional life. It dawned on me that there's no such thing as cleanly divided states of social, economic and environmental factors of our world. The fabric of the planet, I came to realise, is much like an old pink towel, made of a crude yet orderly state of dissonance taking



form in every rock, carpet, grub, drug and shoelace. Everything is the environment.

When the newness of another continent started to become familiar, I slowly become interested in local history. Unlike in Australia, where I learnt to run and eat and talk, my born-again years in another continent marked my 2.0 learning phase. Schoolbook history in Australia was taught as white folks making tea among the ‘primitive blacks’, in a harsh backwater to the rest of the world. The U.S. seemed altogether more pissed off with the idea of a one-dimensional history, and was infinitely more fascinating because truth seemed to be questioned by a broader set of people with louder voices. As a young Australian who liked the idea of history but was too busy creating my own future, wrapped up in ego, it was nice to notice that I was starting to think backwards a little. Every rock wall I’d pass in the staggering green mountains of Vermont was a wonderful reminder that a boom and bust agriculture movement had taken place. Such obvious equivalents in Australia are harder to see, so I would have to look elsewhere for clues about a place I thought I knew. I now know this change in mindset to be a typical experience when we live day to day in new places that make us question our homelands, which you might say unearths natural curiosities. A lot of folks call this perspective.

Adventure, the self-fulfilling con

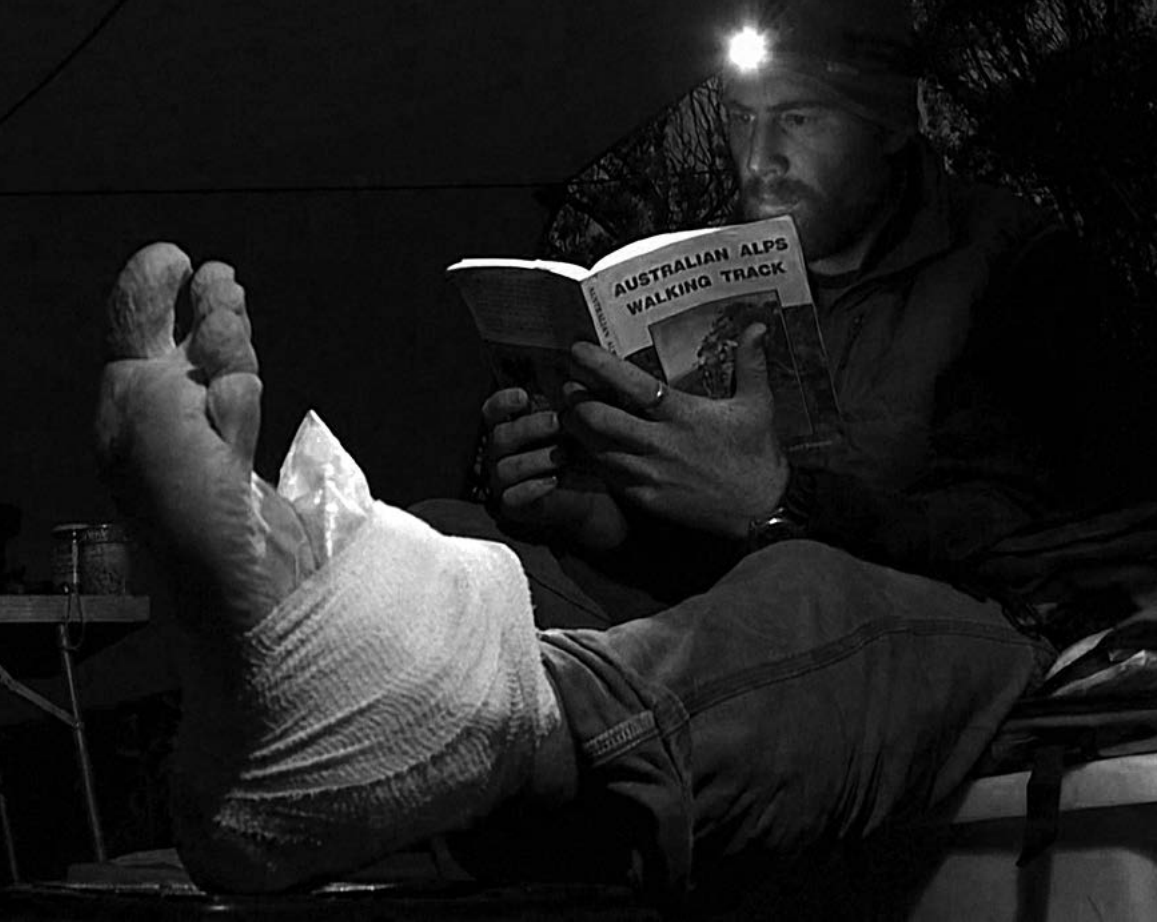
Filmmaking finally won back my attention, enabled through a return to university, teaching into the course where I had previously been a student. Not that I made much in the way of films during my early time at Monash, but it meant I had a day job – teaching and guiding

future outdoor educators – which meant sticking around. And sticking around meant fewer distractions, which for me meant a project or two could bubble away in the background and actually get finished. My job was to be an informal pathway to get young thinkers enrolled in post-graduate studies, although in truth I was hired because I was able to herd people at sea and carry an overburden of stuff on my back, which freed up the established minds for the important work of research and writing.

I learnt an awful lot tripping about with students from all corners of the world – several of the classes were made up of only exchange students. They saw Australia as a wonderland of awkward trees and funny-looking animals that wanted to kill them. It was excellent work because they, and my American affair, moved my sense of Australia from one of background noise – largely cockies and magpies – to a dreamland of eucalyptus, home to ancient cultures and a vastness that is staggering when you see it over the bow of a kayak or the shoulder of a bushwalking buddy. Such work led to a full-time contract, which led to a PhD, which led to being tenured, which was to be one part industrialised and one-part freedom thinker. It was the perfect place to make films.

In 2011 I was the first to run the 680-km Australian Alps Walking Track end to end (some people clock it at 650 km but the version I take is 680 km). The track, which is the oldest formal long-distance bushwalking track in Australia – saying nothing of the millennia-old walking lines that First Nations people have taken – had been attempted for a bunch of years by better runners than myself, burning away on the Australian ultra-running scene. I didn't know this until I decided to run it, online searches revealing years' worth of attempts. Friendly chatter of the ultra community was hedging bets on the next bunny rabbit.

I penned in a date, and signed up my brother-in-law Charlie



Showers to be camp manager and pick-me-upper and cameraman Brett Campbell to film. Off we set across the mountains of Australia, bingeing on a stupendous number of calories to get the job done. My insights about food were profound, as I turned peanut butter and figs and whatever Charlie cooked into an all-day distance. I barely crapped and leaked a lot, even when I didn't need to because it meant I could stop, and came way too close to stepping on sticks that were in fact snakes. Thirteen days and ten hours later I rolled into Walhalla in Gippsland with a fat, overused left leg (the right was just fine), thinking about Oprah, which was odd, and a shower, which made sense. The film of the run was the first I'd been involved with that predominantly used footage from another person's eyes, which was a

breakthrough as it revealed moments I would never have been able to capture myself. *Trials of Miles* made me realise that humans are – that I am – fallible, and this is an essential plotline to any adventure tale.

My PhD made a bumbling start in 2012, scripted loosely around the idea of investigating the essences of adventure, the phases of expeditionary life, and existential flag-raising in place of mountaintops and new lands. Although I initially wanted to write and film a study of other expeditionary sea kayakers who cross and circumnavigate large chunks of water in much the same unnerving capacity that mountaineers scale high, steep and remote peaks, mid-candidature scrutiny made me turn the lens on myself. The issue, picked up by my panel of examiners, was that I didn't trust myself to inspect others when I was still so hung up on the so-what of my own life. Ethnography – a study of others – switched to autoethnography – a study of the self – and how I, ultimately, am a mirrorball of a thousand shining squares reflecting the world around me.

While I was still in the self-inspection hot seat, I cooked up a shared sea kayaking expedition: paddling from mainland Australia to Tasmania, hopping between islands of the famous Bass Strait. Fellow paddlers were a known and unknown quantity in the form of Matt, who I'd worked with at Monash, and Dan, whom I'd met in Hong Kong at a sea kayaking event. Putting the three of us into an intimate relationship for a up to a month was a risk I'd never taken before, especially given Matt and Dan didn't meet until several hours before departure.

Taking a punt on a long and stable weather window, we set off a week earlier than scheduled. By the first night I suspected our trio would do just fine. More than that, we were a wonderful mix of odd, direct, and zigzag. I've never enjoyed a sea kayaking expedition more, playing third wheel to a developing friendship, later describing Matt and Dan as a watch of exceptional quality (Matt) connected

to a velcro wristband (Dan): this made for a mechanism that was functional, funny to look at, and told us when to leave.

At the same time another great friendship was emerging between ex-student Mitch Drummond, who was becoming my filmmaking companion, helping shoot the expedition as its ghostly fourth member. The three-week expedition went on to become a six-part YouTube series *Bass by Kayak*, which was poked and prodded into shape as the backbone to my doctoral thesis, titled *The Secret Life of the Sea Kayaker*.

Crossing Bass Strait, a series of island-hops, is a handsome metaphor for people teleporting into another world. Much like the way that great ascents or descents on land and rivers stretch out people to become new versions of themselves, losing sight of land before a new slice emerges from the horizon makes you evaluate why going places, particularly new places, is so powerful. Yet new lines of travel that I make, often in search of a new me, is one of the great and likable cons of adventure. These lines – the course of a river, a bearing at sea or a deep crack up the steepest face of a cliff – have existed in their own way, and to others, for millennia. Whether we actually follow those same lines or not is another matter, but they were known about, and if they weren't it's likely because the line is arbitrary, and that a more common, easier, less adventurous way exists. Everest, for example, was not climbed by the locals because the summit didn't offer anything of substance other than a place of spiritual reverence and a perfectly good seasonal pass was available for passage around its flanks. The summit of Everest, as with all adventure, is about invisible meanings we conjure, then pursue with single-minded desire, often with a reduced regard for our own life, which to many is because they want to live.

Bass by Kayak was not all that adventurous, not really, because we took our time. It was merely a specific set of skills being played out in

a specific place by lucky white blokes with fancy phones and expensive kayaks. We were attached to an umbilical cord of satellites and long-range weather forecasting the entire time, as well as pulsating spot beacons, and were loaded up with half a dozen forms of mayday comms if things went further south than we intended. Meanwhile, HD cameras the size of our eyeballs recorded the fifteen-day expedition, as well as the six months that had led up to the first paddle stroke, at a rate of 24–100 frames per second.

The result was a visual diary of mostly good choices and fleeting dumbarsery in blue sea and wide sky, uploaded to YouTube. Yet the making of that film still entailed a process of tripping over myself, presenting to the world via pictures and metaphors and Beauisms my bent form of reality. It felt close to authentic, but not quite.

Nut job

Back at the kitchen table I shift in my seat, flexing my lower back and bum to redirect what seems to be dim-witted blood with no inspiration whatsoever to discover hard to reach places. Still, it feels good sitting here because it's an ideal place to dwell and write, drinking tea and coffee all day. Glancing out the window, I daydream about running.

'Mate, you're a nut job,' I heard conversationally, not loudly, from the close-by window of a slow-moving car, said as if I were riding shotgun in the car itself. What an insightful thing to say, fella, I thought, you dick. Oblivious to how my choice of unlikely places to run gets judged by others, I've tended to own my billowing-hat, odd-socked ways for a good while now, and I don't realise things are off kilter unless I stray too close to the highway or run through town.

That is, I'm oblivious until I'm called on it by a concreter travelling between jobs in stinking high-vis, window down, about to light up.

A few kilometres later, the highway traffic slowed again to walking pace due to another batch of roadworks. I passed nut-job man at a steady 14 km an hour and said conversationally, 'Good luck with the traffic, fella. Nice ute.' Which meant nothing, other than to say I was chuffed that my ancient form of transport was doing a better job of getting somewhere than his was.

Coming through the front gates after yesterday's run was an arrival home in more ways than one. It was a longish run – being Sunday, my sabbath for going a little further – hitting up country roads made of dirt, which are rare in my parts now, so I end up joining them together with chunks of highway. It seems something about my interaction with high-vis dick set me off thinking about the oddities of humanity, as well as thoughts of making things, breaking things, road signs, roadkill, bad underpants and what I'd eat, in what order, when I walked in the door. Individual things that are ordinary in their own right seemed extraordinary as a collection. Long run, billowing hat, variations of temperature, crossing the road every other minute to get maximum shade, perhaps like so many runs before it, was a portal to an immensely interesting world. Other than the depreciated cost of a pair of running shoes, and the scant dollars spent on second-hand shirts and lost-and-found shorts, my experience was almost free, easy and forever accessible in some form or another.

In the final furlong to home, mashed up in a cross-section of what I saw were ruminations on my so-called adventurous life, which is really an ongoing debate about my sense of perception. Back on the deck at home, half nude as I acclimatised from the heat and movement of running for three hours, I slowly ate chickpeas from the tin, which is a rare speed of eating for me. I'm thinking with scepticism

about being an Adventurer; engaging in daring and risky activities, in unfamiliar places, often with only a hint of the expertise required to be there. Much like my wariness of real estate agents, I've seemed to gloss over the truth with half-truths, pitching stories as audacious, unable to see that so many other people do things tougher, riskier, more challenging and perhaps ever more rewarding in far less publicised ways. There is truth to the idea that I like seeing what lurks in hard-to-reach places, and I might be plucky and enterprising, which fits the bill of adventure, but brave and heroic should never be keywords of my films, in my bio, or anything else associated to me. More than that, these bold terms of adventure should be questioned. I say this because at various stages I've unwittingly bought into that mindset, and looked at maps and charts as if I were a conqueror, out to beat the world.

Day three without showering, in need of haircut and shave, about to leave the house to buy milk, I was in fact on the comfortable side of an identity crisis, having come to terms with the fact that I was not the man I thought I was. Such a breakthrough in thinking is to acknowledge that I have a uniqueness born of influences, which seems a little more scripted than innate, including summer camps and university, stinking male-only share houses, roadside diners, expeditions, films, women, family. I am flawed, and oscillate between being mildly and intensely curious about our world, and that makes me and my newish, ongoing, close-to-home trips interesting.

Rather than loading up with expensive gadgets and upskilling to the point of perfection, I'm setting off in the full knowledge that I'm weighed down with metaphorical baggage so my aim now is to take as little real equipment as possible. Where I go and where I might end up are a little shady, and research from the bottomless pit of Google is often lacking.

Before I begin, let me be clear, as my great flaw is impatience:

this is not a guidebook for the good life, nor will I preach about the importance of challenge and epiphanies, hardship and breakthroughs. Backyard adventuring is about concocting meaningful events and experiments that challenge me, that redefine my childhood sense of the hero's journey, that force me to look intimately in everyday places, and question how I live among others. Ultimately, it's about being pissed off enough to take care of myself, others and non-human life, and happy enough not to let myself, others and non-human things bother me all the time. Balance between firing myself up and wetting myself down is the great act of perception I'm taking on. Quite simply, this book is a set of stories told by a red-headed bloke who has redefined his sense of adventure.

Praise for Beau Miles' YouTube videos

‘ . . . Not a superhuman, but a raw, human, human. He builds things, maintains things, connects easily and wholesomely with others, creates grand dreams and makes them a reality; not only through his execution but the filming and sharing of them with the world, for free . . . ’—Peter Mozuraitis

‘This man is such a good story teller, we are all here voluntarily watching him eat cold beans over and over again.’—JC

‘ . . . love your films, inspired by your adventures, I get the giggles from your wit - you are a wise guy and I dig it . . . ’—thetalkingfly

‘Honestly I think if everyone lived even a bit like Beau this world would be a better place.’—NiklasStøterau

‘ . . . the pure articulation of life and passion of doing that Mr Miles has is extraordinary and inspiring. Taking the simple and making it seem like it's own adventure is a reflection of life and possibly why this is, hands down, my favorite YouTube channel.’—William

‘The films that come out of this channel are absolutely beautiful (Beau-tiful). They completely display the joy of making stuff and adventuring.’—Jamie Kemp

‘‘It's...a bit of fun’’ he says, about to embark on a pointless, bizarre adventure. This is the attitude I want in my life.’—superdeluxesnell

‘The ease with which this guy jumps over fences. Makes me doubt their functionality.’—ARVIND JIJI ANTONY

‘this guy needs a much larger audience.’—Joshua Murray

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After years of adventuring around the globe — running, kayaking, hitchhiking, exploring — Beau Miles came back to his block in country Victoria. Staying put for the first time in years, Beau developed a new kind of lifestyle as the Backyard Adventurer. Whether it was walking 90km to work with no provisions, building a canoe paddle out of scavenged scrap or running a disused railway line through properties, blackberry thickets and past inquiring police officers, Beau has been finding ways to satisfy his adventurous spirit close to home.

This book is about conscious experimentation with adventure, making meaning and inspiration out of tins of beans, bits of rubbish and elbow grease. Beau's Backyard exploits are funny, authentic, insightful and being copied all over the world.

Youtuber, new dad, and self-described oddball who needs to shower more, Beau is what happens when you cross Bear Grylls with Casey Neistat. With a PhD in Outdoor Education, a string of successful films under his belt and a boundless passion for discovery,

Beau is a hell of a storyteller.



'On one hand he is a charming adventurer, on the other hand he is a certified nut-case. There should be more like him.'

Nicholas Janosy, YouTube subscriber



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