



One Man & His Dog

Rowing across the Atlantic, swimming with snakes and barbecuing maggots are all just part of a day's work for Ben Fogle. *HANNAH LEMON* talks to the modern day Marco Polo

Picture the scene: on Westbourne Grove, nestled in between Daylesford and 202 by Nicole Farhi, another eatery has opened. It boasts high-quality and ecologically-sourced ingredients and is frequented by the usual Notting Hill set of young mothers, models, artists and entrepreneurs. However, this café serves only insects. Fancy it? Probably not, but Ben Fogle does. "I'm thinking of setting up a little grub shop in Notting Hill," he says over the phone to me one weekday afternoon. "I think it might have legs. Ha!" I have finally managed to pin down the busiest man in England. Between filming a new series, publishing a book, and checking up on his wife and kids, there doesn't seem to be much time for Fogle to chat. But despite his busy schedule, Fogle, who turns 42 this month, comes across as every bit the lively, charming man from our TV screens.

"My favourite, incidentally," he continues, referring back to insects, "which you always see on shows like *I'm a Celebrity...Get Me Out of Here!* are dried maggots. They look disgusting, I'll give you that, but they're probably one of the tastiest things I've ever had. They taste exactly like melted cheese on toast." I don't believe this for a second but Fogle is adamant and begins to describe the best way to eat them as if I could pop down to Waitrose and purchase a few myself. "Cooked, though, not raw," he continues. "Just blanch it like a marshmallow over the fire – delicious!"

It's not just his taste buds that he has tested. Ben Fogle has pushed his mind and body to extreme limits and a quick look over his CV has me hooked. A seven-day 200km race across the Sahara desert; a swim ►



Ben Fogle and Storm

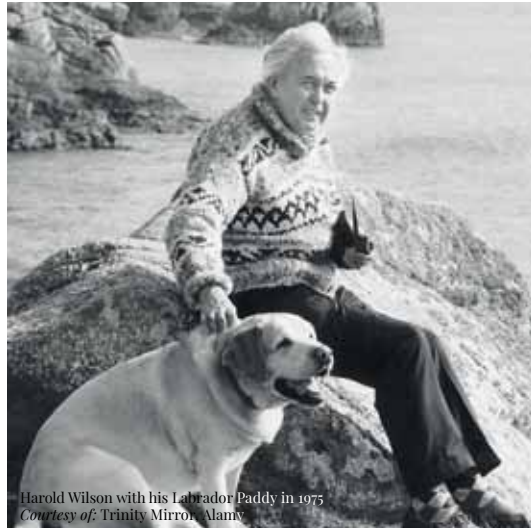


Ernest Hemingway in Idaho, 1939
Courtesy of Bridgeman Images

► from Alcatraz to San Francisco; a marathon in the Italian Dolomites; a journey in a 21ft plywood boat from La Gomera to Antigua. You would be forgiven for thinking I was referring to the plot of a Daniel Defoe novel.

It all sounds very exhilarating, but between the highs there have been some desperate lows. How does he get through them? “If I’m really struggling, if I’m racing across a desert, up the mountain, or the cold is really getting to me, I try to think of the worst scenario I could be in. There’s always something worse, whether it’s being stuck in a jungle with a tarantula on your head, or whether you’re soaking and up to your waist in a river with anacondas.” Fogle also puts it down to stubbornness. “I’m pretty determined. I really don’t like failure. It’s the thing I’m most fearful of and that’s because I experienced so much failure when I was a child. I failed all my exams, failed at sports, failed at friendships – everything. I think that’s why I’m probably a bit more driven now.”

A recent series, *New Lives in the Wild*, saw Fogle visit people living off the land in the most remote locations. Most of them had completely shunned ordinary life and were a little wild and woolly. Did he ever get scared meeting them? “Funnily enough, not really. I kind of trust my instincts. Although, I did one a couple of years ago in the same series where I spent time with a Miami taxi driver who lived in the Philippines,” he explains. “I felt uncomfortable enough that I slept with a knife under my bed, let’s put it that way. But I put a huge amount of trust in the production company and I just assume that these people will not be axe murderers who are going to chop me up into little bits. By and large, they have all been amazing characters.” He has just finished a



Harold Wilson with his Labrador Paddy in 1975
Courtesy of Trinity Mirror/Alamy



US President Clinton and his family with Buddy in 1998
Courtesy of White House National Archives, Corbis

new version called *New Lives in the Wild UK*, which airs in October and covers areas closer to home, such as Devon, Scotland and Yorkshire.

Fogle has collected a vast array of memorabilia from his time abroad to decorate his home in Notting Hill, which he shares with his wife Marina and their two children, Ludo and Iona. “I’ve got oars from when I rode across oceans, artwork I’ve picked up from around the world, antique ponchos ... everything in our house has a story behind it.” It must be tough to leave the family behind for each new adventure, I say, does he ever want to throw in the towel? “The children have accompanied me on some of the trips with Marina; they all came out to Tanzania earlier this year. And we’re all going away a bit later this year, so I don’t think I’ll ever tire of it. I might need to reduce the amount of travel; I think I’ve done 24 long-haul trips this year. I’ve almost forgotten what Notting Hill looks like!”

Fogle moved to the area with his parents at the age of eight and now lives only a mile from their house. “When we moved to Notting Hill, I remember my older sister was really embarrassed to be there. She used to pretend to her friends that we lived in Holland Park! But there have been huge changes.” He goes on to list the charming boutiques and cafés that have popped up around him (minus grub shops) and cemented the area as a central part of the London scene. “I could never leave Notting Hill. I love the fact that I go off to all these faraway places and come back to my early morning stroll on Portobello Road. All the market holders set up stalls in the morning, and I know everyone. I feel very comfortable.”

His house is also a stone’s throw from where Fogle met his wife in Hyde Park, while they were both walking their Labradors. Fogle’s obsession with these furry friends dates back further than this walk in the park – his dog Inca was his luxury item of choice on *Castaway*, the reality TV programme that started his career. Although Inca has since passed,

“I have no regrets about my life. I don’t think I could have planned it better if I tried”

Fogle welcomed a black Labrador puppy called Storm to the family at the end of last year. Fogle’s fascination with the breed is being immortalised in a new book. “It is basically the complete history – social and historical – of the Lab and what they do. There’s a chapter on all the politicians who have had Labs, all the Hollywood stars, the rock ‘n’ roll Labs, the working Labs. For anyone who has a Lab, you’re basically going to understand how your friends have evolved.”

This is his seventh book so I assume that the writing process is fairly fluid. “I found it hard to be quite honest,” Fogle admits. “There was a lot of research and I had someone to help me out. Obviously I do a lot of multi-tasking, as I’m filming, travelling, cycling, keeping fit, being a dad, having a family, walking the dogs – so I found it quite difficult. It was written all over the world; parts of it were written in the Serengeti, a part was written in Cuba, another part on Vancouver Island off Canada, and another in Iceland. It was a labour of love.” But this doesn’t stop Fogle wanting to do more. “My father has 50 books to his name, so I’ve got to keep up!” he laughs. His stubbornness never falters and neither does his positivity. “I have no regrets about my life,” he says, answering my final question. “I don’t think I could have planned it better if I tried.” ■

Labrador: The Story of the World’s Favourite Dog by Ben Fogle is out now, published by William Collins (hardback, £20, and ebook)



David Blunkett with Lucy and Sadie ©Stephen Hird, Reuters, Corbis



Downton Abbey’s Pharoah with Hugh Bonneville Courtesy of: AF Archive, Alamy