



# weekend

Food & drink Country Wellbeing Family & education Puzzles

**Hannah Betts**  
*Something of the night*  
Page 5

**Stevie Parle**  
*Crunch time for salads*  
Pages 8&9

**Shooting match**  
*Love and the country*  
Page 12



The Daily Telegraph



## NO STILETTOS REQUIRED

Looking to break out of her metropolitan comfort zone, **Bryony Gordon** fancied a challenge. But was she really cut out for a trip to the Arctic Circle in a glorified dinghy?

I'd like to tell you how I came to be floating in the North Sea, halfway between the Shetland Isles and Norway, at midnight, in the shadow of oil rigs. It started, as these things so often do, with a phone call. I was in a shop on the King's Road in London, trying on a dress that I didn't need but wanted - yet another addition to all the frocks and high heels and frivolities that already make up much of my life - when my BlackBerry rang.

It was a man called Hugo Montgomery-Swan, whom I had never spoken to before. He wanted to know what I was doing at the end of June. I looked in my diary. I had three parties, two dinners, and a plan to see Take That. "Well, I was just wondering," said Hugo, who by now had informed me he was the editor of a boating magazine, "if you would like to join myself and six men on a trip to the Arctic Circle by rib."

I had a picture of me and seven blokes travelling to a world of polar bears on a bone. "By rib?" I asked.

"Yes, a rigid inflatable boat. R-I-B. It will be the first time it's been done."

"Would you mind if I called you back?"

I left the fitting room, bought the dress and then went to Google a picture of an RIB. It looked like a glorified dinghy.

Now, as a Telegraph writer, you are often invited to do ridiculous things. I



Bryony and the boys: top, from left, Hugo Montgomery-Swan, Julian Hutson-Saxby and Andy Warrender

have spent a day in the penguin enclosure at London Zoo, and recently I had to wear a hat resembling a picnic set on my head. But I felt that this probably topped them all. My boating experience extended no further than trips on ferries and the occasional go on a pedalo in the Serpentine, so it didn't seem wise to agree to travel to the Arctic in a motor boat you could not swing a cat on.

I called Hugo. "It's a very kind offer," I said, "but I'm not sure I'm the girl for you."

"Think about it over the weekend," he ventured.

"OK," I lied, "I will."

The weekend passed in its usual blur of sleeping, drinking and more sleeping. On Monday, Hugo called again, and again I told him that I didn't think this was an adventure for me. Everything about it seemed wrong: the fact I would be the only woman; my lack of experience; the small issue that the furthest north I had ever travelled was Edinburgh. Why did they want to do it? "Because such a big journey has never been done in such small boats," he said. This didn't encourage me.

And then I realised that the very reasons I didn't want to take part were precisely the reasons I had to. My life was good, but it had entered a predictable pattern of boozed-up nothingness, sitting in pubs with mates, going to bed, getting up and going to work, and so on and so on. What I needed was a challenge.

I told Hugo I would do it. The trip would start in Wick, one of the northernmost points of mainland Britain, and end some 1,000 nautical miles away in Svolvær, a Norwegian town well within the Arctic Circle. It would take about six days to complete, weather permitting, and we would probably finish it on what just happened to be my 31st birthday (I told myself this was a sign).

We would not all be in the same boat, either figuratively or literally, for there would be two craft, both only 20ft (6m) long, half of us in each. The first day would take us to Lerwick in Shetland, a journey of five or so hours.

Continued overleaf

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Cover story

Home thoughts from a broad Bryony's North Sea diary [blogs.telegraph.co.uk](http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk)

Inside

Page 7



**Harry Eyres**  
A louche and lovely Tuscan wine

Page 10



**Xanthe Clay**  
Know your chump from your chops

And don't miss...



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◀ Continued from page 1

Easy, I told myself. It was day two that filled me with dread – going all the way across the North Sea to a place called Maloy in Norway, a trip that could take up to 15 hours, with nowhere to stop should things go wrong. I tried not to think about it, even when my friends warned me it could be like the film *The Perfect Storm*, “except without George Clooney or Mark Wahlberg”. Then we would travel up the coast of Norway, “hopefully seeing whales and seals and dolphins”, said Hugo. Now my heart was set on it. The prospect of seeing these creatures balanced out the horror of a day on choppy seas, vomiting over the side of a boat (did I get sea sick? asked Hugo, a question I was unable to answer given my utter lack of experience).

I had a few questions myself. Where would we sleep? How would we go to the loo? The answer to the first question was simple, given the diminutive dimensions of the boat: on land, in various hostels. The



**Hands on deck: above, Mark Beeley, Ed Gould, Julian, Paul Lemmer, Pete Goss, Andy, Bryony and Hugo. Top: wildlife encounters**

second question was not so easy to answer, for there was no “we” about it – there wasn't a lavatory on board, as the anatomical design of the male made it easy for them to

simply go overboard. I must do the same, despite the obvious differences.

I wondered: who were these men with whom I would have to share the most intimate of experiences? There was Hugo, who I now knew had circumnavigated Britain in a RIB three times, and his chum Julian Hutson-Saxby, a musician and speed-freak who was hoping for big waves. Paul Lemmer had designed, built and tested RIBs in the “most severe conditions”. Gulp. Andy Warrender's idea of fun was taking his kayak out on the sea for miles and miles. Mark Beeley, a former member of the armed forces, was a Suzuki engineer who had once travelled 2,000 miles on a RIB. And then there was Pete Goss MBE, who once sailed into a hurricane to save a French sailor whose yacht had sunk, sacrificing his own chances of winning the solo round-the-world race the Vendée Globe (but bagging a Légion d'honneur).

The only person as clueless as me was Ed Gould, a photographer who fancied a “great adventure”. Judging by the email Hugo sent me just before we set off, he was going to get one. “Just a reminder to make sure you have your personal liability, injury and death insurance cover sorted,” it read. I set off to the airport with my waterproof rucksack on my back. It contained not a single dress or pair of high heels, just warm clothes and trainers. At Gatwick, boarding my flight to Scotland, I realised that for the first time in years, my fear of flying had vanished. I had bigger things to worry about.

In Wick, we were given our kit, and the seriousness of the undertaking hit me. There were thermals and salopettes, a jacket, a fleece and a dry suit, this being the critical bit of equipment that would keep us warm and enable us to float should we fall out of the boats. Then there was a life jacket and a helmet. An actual helmet. I shovelled back seasickness pills and struggled into all the gear, a massive effort in itself. Fully dressed, I looked like a Day-Glo Michelin Man.

I think, at this point, it is important to make clear how a RIB moves. It can travel at more than 30 knots, and when the seas are calm it skims the top of the water. Any change and it jumps out, slamming back down with an almighty thud that leaves your tummy in your mouth and your bones rattling as you cling on for dear life. I was slightly alarmed when, making the simple crossing from Wick to Lerwick, I had to ask for the boat to stop because I thought I was going

The route



I shovelled back seasickness pills and tried to struggle into all the gear



**We made it: Bryony celebrates her arrival in the land of the midnight sun, where the waters are a clear, turquoise blue**

to be sick. How was I going to survive the big day if I couldn't handle this? Hugo cut the engines and found me an apple to eat. And then a seal bobbed up on the other side.

I immediately felt better, cheered by the sight of this curious creature. We were just off the coast of Fair Isle, human population: 71; bird population: several trillion, and it was then I realised the sky was full of puffins and gannets and gulls, flying around above us like dandelion seeds blowing in the wind. Mark and Pete noticed there was a cave, and demanded we all jump in; we

floated through, a puffin eyeing us all the way.

That night, full of fresh air, I collapsed into bed at 9pm to prepare myself for the 6am start to Norway.

When I rose the next day I was told the crossing was off, at least for now. “The weather is simply too bad,” said Paul. I was agitated; I just wanted to get the whole thing out the way. Instead I found myself visiting a Viking museum (the Vikings being the only other group of people to have made the trip in similar size boats) and eating fish and chips in Lerwick Harbour. At 3pm we got the call – we were good to go in an hour. “But we can't

The wind stung my face but at least the rain hid my tears

go overnight!” I pleaded. “You forget,” said Pete, slinging his kit over his manly shoulders. “It's the land of the midnight sun.”

And this is how I came to be floating in the middle of the North Sea at midnight. The crossing, far from being tough, was remarkably smooth, the sea like glass. Half-way through, we jumped in for a swim, oil rigs twinkling like Christmas trees in the background. I smiled and smiled, and as we went on our way again we watched as a four-hour sunset bled into a sunrise.

We arrived in Norway jubilant but tired. The boys drank a celebratory beer – at 6AM – while I attempted a glass of milk. We were allowed two hours of sleep before setting off again, but I told myself the worst was behind us. I was wrong. The air smelled like pine and the fjords were beautiful, but within a couple of hours the weather had turned. The boats were jumping 8ft out of the sea; the wind stung my face but at least the rain hid my tears. I was fractious and snapped; when the day was over I wasn't sure I could do another one. I had blisters all over and my body ached.

I trudged to the boat the next day. The loo issue wasn't an issue any longer: I couldn't care less. Then Mark, Andy and Pete had an idea: they would get me to drive the boat. “It will give you something to focus on,” said Mark, who spent the next few hours navigating as I steered us in and out of islands like a maniac. I loved it. By the end of the next day I was speeding along, able to drive a powerboat before I could a car.

The sun came out eventually – at 11.45pm. By now I was well into the swing of things; I hadn't looked in a mirror or worn make-up for days, and I was sleeping like a baby despite the permanent daylight. When we set off the next morning, the brightness gave Norway a new dimension. It showed up snow-capped mountains and water so turquoise you could see jellyfish in it. Then came the killer whales, which swam beside the boats for hours. I cried, and I'm sure one or two of the boys did too.

How I grew to love my “boat boys”, who looked after me like a sister, putting up with my snapping and telling me I was a “gutsy bird, Brian” (they had taken to calling me this). By the time we had arrived in the Arctic Circle, I didn't want to say goodbye.

We sat in the harbour of Svolvær, in shorts and T-shirts and sunglasses at 10PM. We toasted each other with a beer, and marvelled at how warm it was. I knew, then, that this was the best decision I had ever made; that this would be the start of something new.

“Fancy Africa next year?” said Hugo, who, this time, would not have to ask twice. When the clock struck midnight and they produced the birthday cake and candles that had come with them all the way from Scotland, I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

The joy of Tex

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