Paul: This is the Paul Kirtley Podcast, Episode 9.

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Announcer: The Paul Kirtley Podcast. Wilderness bushcraft, survival skills, and outdoor life.

Paul: In this episode, Tom Allen and Leon McCarron join me to talk about making independent, long-distance, human-powered journeys off the beaten track. Both are fellows of the Royal Geographical Society. Both have made seriously long bicycle journeys, taking them through countries and terrain many wouldn't even consider visiting, never mind cycling through.

Tom continues to explore the potential of bicycle travel as a tool for making personal, meaningful journeys, while Leon has made some unusual walking journeys in recent years. In 2012, he and friend Rob Lilwall walked from Mongolia to Hong Kong, a 3500 mile hike, which featured in a four-part National Geographic series about the journey.

Leon's also known for the thousand mile journey through the Empty Quarter Desert, retracing the steps of Wilford Thessiger. Pulling their equipment and supplies in a specially designed four-wheel cart, his companion for this journey was Alistair Humphries, pioneer of the concept of microadventures.

Both Tom and Leon's big trips have involved film-making, or films being made about the trips. They recently teamed up to make a couple of adventurous journeys together, one in Patagonia and one in Iran, both with a purpose and important messages. Video footage from these trips is now being made into two feature-length films.

And I caught up with Tom and Leon in a north London park not far from their editing room. It was a lovely sunny afternoon, which made for a pleasant sit on the grass chatting with these guys, but also a somewhat challenging recording environment, with children playing, barbecues being cooked, people chatting, and various impromptu ball games going on all around us.

Good, so I would like to welcome Tom and Leon to my podcast. How are you guys? How are you doing today?

Leon: Very good, thank you.

Tom: Yeah, very good. Thanks.

Paul: Good. And as we were just saying, very nice to be sitting outside for a change. Particularly for an outdoors podcast. That would make sense. To be outside.

Leon: Fitting.

Paul: Yeah, yeah. So you guys are . . . you're in London temporarily, working on editing your latest project at the moment. Is that right?

Tom: Yeah, that's right. We're almost to the end.

Paul: Um-hum.

Tom: And we've only got a few days left in the two film projects that we've been working on.

Paul: And can you tell me a little bit about those? So they're quite big projects. Each one would be a fairly hefty project, wouldn't it? Both in terms of the journey and the actual film-making afterwards. You know, the editing process. A lot of people don't realize how much is involved with editing. I mean, it's more involved than actual filming in the first place, really, isn't it?

Tom: Um-hum.

Paul: And so you've got two on the go. You're juggling two at the moment. How's it all going?

Leon: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. Slightly ambitious, perhaps.

Leon: I think it's going well, mostly.

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: It's taking up a lot of our time.

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: And it's strange, because we do these sorts of things because we like the creative side, and we like to be able to share it. But the reason we started going on these kinds of journeys was to go on these kinds of journeys . . .

Tom: Yes.

Leon: . . . and to go out into the wilds, and all that kind of thing. Which is what we spent much of last year doing, which was wonderful. And now this year has mostly been spent in a basement in the dark, sitting in front of a computer, trying to put all that together. So it goes from one extreme to the other. But this is, as you say, the necessary part of it.

And so we've got two feature-length films that we've been working on conceptually. We shot one in spring of last year and one in autumn/winter.

Tom: Um-hum.

Leon: And now we've been putting together a Kickstarter project to get money for them in the first quarter of the year, and then April and May has been nicely in the editing room, and we're just coming to an end with both projects.

Paul: Um-hum. So one was filmed in Iran?

Leon: Yeah.

Paul: And the other one in Patagonia.

Leon: Um-hum.

Paul: Tell me a bit about the Iranian trip to start off with. How did that come about, and what were the goals there?

Tom: Well, I guess what's interesting about the two, the both projects, is that each of us was the driving force behind one of them. But they had quite a lot of similarities. They were both following . . . both journeys were following rivers in fairly untraveled . . . relatively untraveled parts of the world, at least by foreigners.

And the Iran one came about because, to cut a very, very long, complicated story short, I married an Iranian girl a few years back. Still married, just to

clarify. And I've been going to Iran every year, pretty much, since we got married, but I'd never really done a real wilderness journey in Iran. I'd only ever been to visit her and her family, and kind of hanging out in cities, and that kind of stuff.

And it's such a huge country, with so much diversity, that I really wanted to . . . I really thought I was missing out by not doing, you know, a real exploration of the place. It's always been the thing I love doing, is traveling around countries and just getting off the beaten track, and meeting people, and all that stuff. But I've never done it in this one country where it made the most sense to do it.

So yeah, I started dreaming up ideas, and these ideas gradually evolved over the course of a few years. And then last year suddenly seemed like the right time to do it, and I asked Leon to come along, having recently got to know him, and realizing that we had similar interests in terms of the outdoors.

And yeah, it just kind of went, really. It wasn't an awful lot of planning to it, other than that we would follow the longest river in the country from one end to the other, and just see what happened on the way.

Paul: So what did you know about the river before you set off? Was it . . . did you even have maps? Did you have an idea of where it went?

Tom: We had . . . so we had a little bit of info. I mean, Google Earth, obviously, these days is your best friend when it comes to planning back country stuff. Assuming the imagery is relatively recent. Because what we did find is that the photography was taken before a few dams had been built. But actually, what looked like a really nice kind of whitewater river through the mountains, and large parts of it was just giant man-made reservoirs by the time we got there.

But apart from that, there was no detailed mapping. We got the old Soviet military maps for our topographical information. Google Maps was totally blank for the whole region. And no one seemed to have done it before, or at least not in the last couple of decades. There was a team of hikers who tried to descend the river 20 years ago or something, but there's nothing written up about that, and we couldn't get hold of them. So, yeah, we were kind of winging it a lot of the time.

Paul: And what mode of transport did you use? Did you kayak, or how did you travel?

Tom: It was meant to be a pack rafting trip.

Leon: Right.

Tom: So the inflatable whitewater kayaks, essentially, which are portable enough that you can stow them in your pack and go on foot. So that was the plan, but in reality, that was only maybe a quarter of the journey, and the rest of it was variously trekking. And we ended up doing some cycling, and then, quite ludicrously, we decided to try and run a leg of it, as well, which . . . with limited success.

So it was really free-form in the end. The boats were portable, and that allowed us to mix it up. Flexible.

Paul: So it was a real sort of adventure as it unfolded, as you went, then. Unscripted, completely unwritten.

Tom: Yeah. We tried our best to keep it on track to start with, but fairly quickly realized that Iran's not like that. You get swept along by the way of life there, and it'd be better just to be a little flexible.

Paul: Now, I've seen the short version of the film, so I'm going to have some idea of what happened. You lost your paddle, Leon, at one point.

Leon: Yeah. That was a low point.

Paul: Right.

Leon: And that . . . the pack rafting was, I think, a lot more challenging than either of us expected, and that's just symptomatic of not having been able to find out much about the river before we went. So a lot of it, we knew roughly what was up ahead in terms of where there might be a gorge beginning, and where it might end, and so on. But we really knew nothing of what it would be like once we entered a gorge, for example.

And I hadn't done much pack rafting before. I don't think either of us had done much, but I'd done next to nothing. So once I . . . once we got into the slightly wilder parts, it was definitely a challenge.

And . . . although, ironically, falling out and losing my paddle felt like a bit of a turning point in the trip, because before that we'd been very stressed about trying to get everything right, and not fall out, and not have all these terrible things happen. And that was kind of a worst . . . well, a worst case scenario would have been losing me in the water, as well. But once I came out fine, we

kind of realized that everything had gone wrong, and we just needed to find a solution.

And that's where Iran is a really exciting place, because within a few hours, we'd found some guy who reckoned he could get us another paddle, and just took us off into this whole other whirlwind of adventure.

Looking back on it, it was all of those unplanned bits of the trip that were by far the most fun. All the things that went wrong made it even better.

Paul: So you found the Iranian people to be very helpful, then, did you overall? Like, I got that impression from watching the short film, and just from hearing you say that again about the guy who offered to find you a paddle. And were they at all suspicious of you, or were they generally just very helpful.

Leon: I suppose that's a funny one. And Tom knows a lot more about it, having been more times. As a first-timer to Iran, I found that in general, I was with most people in the world, and especially in . . . I'd say the wider Middle East region, people are incredibly generous and hospitable, especially to strangers. And so most people were very kind to us, and were going out of their way to make sure we had everything we needed.

There was a fair amount of suspicion about us, as well, just because of two factors, really. One, we were in a place where tourists don't normally go, and the other was that we had big, hulking video cameras with us. And so people would often be reasonably suspicious, but also hospitable at the same time. And generally, that was our experience. We did have to go into a few police stations now and again. A little bit more than now and again, actually, but generally, just to explain what we were doing, and then we were on our way.

Paul: So how do you go about . . . you said you didn't do a lot of planning, and you didn't . . . hadn't done much pack rafting before. But, you know, it's not the first place people think of doing a trip in Iran. And obviously you have family connections, Tom. What did you actually need to do to get into Iran to make a trip like that? Were there visas and permits and things required to do it? And you clearly had to speak to the police as you went along. How would you characterize what you had to do to prepare, to get into doing that trip?

Tom: In terms of the practicalities of getting into Iran and doing some of that, it boiled down to getting visas, and not an awful lot else. It's really inexpensive to get to in terms of flying, because Turkish Airlines via Istanbul is [inaudible 00:12:15] return.

Paul: Right.

Tom: And the visa's a bit more tricky, but with the help of a visa agency . . . we had a really good visa agent in London. We did it all by post and courier. So we just got the passports back in the post after sending them off a few days previously, with the sticker in the passport for a month's visit. Once we got there, we extended it at another police station to stay for longer. That's sort of quite standard.

But that was it. Because kayaking and canoeing in Iran, it doesn't really exist, so it's not like there's a . . . I mean, there is an association of Iranian paddlers, but it's very small, and there's definitely no kind of rules surrounding who can paddle and where, and, you know, kind of land ownership and access rights, it's all irrelevant there, because it's . . . it's just different. They just don't have that idea that every little scrap of land should be accounted for, and, you know, monitored and protected, owned and restricted, and all that kind of stuff. It's just not like that at all.

So we just had to really negotiate with the local people and with the authorities, the local authorities, that we met along the way, and so just kind of explaining what we were doing as simply as possible, and . . . yeah, I think the police thought we were pretty insane, really.

Leon: Yeah.

Tom: They also couldn't really stop us, because there was no law saying that we couldn't do what we were doing.

Leon: And it's . . . yeah, it's worth saying we didn't get a filming permit or anything like that, but then, we were not a professional film crew going out. We were basically two blokes on a slightly strange holiday.

Tom: Yes.

Leon: And we brought along video cameras.

But what I found amazing was for this whole journey that, I think we were away five and a half, six weeks, something like that, in total, the total cost of everything for us was I think about £750, £800 each. And that's including flights, and on the ground costs, and everything else. And I think my flights were actually cheaper than Tom's, because I booked them in advance. So that, you know, £250, £300 return for that sort of adventure is an amazing price.

Paul: It is.

Leon: And £300 cash for five weeks, and then we went through the Visa Machine to get our visas sorted, and like Tom said it was really handy.

I think people like the Visa Machine are the best people to go through for this kind of thing, wherever you're from. Now it's a little bit more difficult, and it seems to fluctuate, for British citizens as to whether it's reasonably easy to get in, or whether it's one of the slightly more complicated periods. And I think right now, the Iranian government are insisting that any British citizens coming to the country have to go through an organized tour group.

And those only . . . it only applies to Brits. But it was like that before we went, in a period where they were letting anyone in. It'll go back to that again at some point. I think that seems to be the pattern, anyway.

Paul: Um-hum. And you've done various journeys in the Middle East, Leon. Your Empty Quarter trip, as well. Would you characterize that that's sort of generally the best way to go about traveling in that part of the world, is to go through a visa agency? Or is it really just a case by case basis?

Leon: I think it's case by case. I mean, some places . . . for instance, if you wanted to go to the UAE, it's incredibly easy just to get a, you know, one-month visa when you arrive at the airport, or by land, or whatever it is. I went through the same visa agency for my Empty Quarter journey, simply because I wanted to be there slightly longer than the normal one month they give to tourists, and the Visa Machine were able to get me two months through their contacts. So things like that, it's really useful if you want to be slightly outside the normal guidelines.

And to be honest, a lot of the times, it depends what your budget is, but visas can be a lot of hassle and a lot of work, and you can sink a lot of time into it. So sometimes it can be worth just paying someone a little bit of money to take care of it.

But then there's other countries that, really no need to at all, because you just get a stamp when you turn up.

Tom: Actually, a lot of the Middle East is a lot simpler than Iran, visa-wise. A few years ago, I did a big bike trip around that area. I think Iran and Sudan were the only two places I needed a visa in advance. Everything else, it was just kind of rock up and get your passport stamped at the border, possibly pay some money, and there you are. If you're flying in, it's usually even easier from that.

Paul: Yeah. Because I think that's one of the things that . . . you've mentioned money and phones, and we'll come back to that in a second, but also, I think that paperwork is what puts some people off, you know, making journeys to slightly less obvious spots on the planet. They think it's just going to be too difficult, that . . . you know, they fancy an adventure, they want to do something off the beaten track, but they think, you know, that they're put off almost before looking. They think, "That would just be too hard."

And I guess the money side of things is difficult, as well, for people. Taking time off work, I guess, is a consideration. But also, I was talking to somebody recently who was saying he wanted to travel more, but he was . . . he just thought it would cost too much. And I think people maybe just see it as an open-ended sort of liability. They don't know how much it's going to cost, and therefore they're, again, put off doing it, because they'd rather pay a fixed amount that they know is . . . you know, even if it's more expensive, they'd rather go with a tour group, for example, or an organized adventure travel company, and say, "Right, I'm going to . . . I want to go do that, that part of the world."

And they'll pay probably more than they would do if they traveled independently, because at least they know how much it's going to cost. So it's interesting to hear how little it cost for your Iranian trip, in particular. And were you trying to be particularly frugal, or was it just literally, that's what it cost you in terms of you were just buying stuff as you needed it, food and what have you? Or did you really try and keep the cost down?

Leon: I think just out of practice from having traveled . . .

Tom: Um-hum.

Leon: Having always traveled this way.

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: We're reasonably frugal. But we certainly didn't want for anything, you know? We weren't starving ourselves, or doing ourselves out of things that we actually needed. It's just using a little bit of common sense.

And, yeah, I mean, I think what you said is absolutely right. Most people who listen to this will probably be from the UK, or somewhere else in Europe, or the US, and we're all then in ownership of the most powerful passports in the world. You know, we can get just about anywhere. There's very few countries

that we can't get into. And it'll either be very simple to get into, or perhaps there'll be a little bit of paperwork and a little bit of money involved.

But generally, you know, we've just got this wonderful gift in life of being able to go wherever we please. And things are always much cheaper on the ground than they might seem when you're researching it from home, you know? Because anything that's advertised online is going to be organized by someone who's trying to make money out of it.

If you turn up somewhere with a vague plan of where you want to go, but a lot of flexibility as to how to get there, you can inevitably do it for very little money. And I haven't found anywhere that that's not applicable to.

Tom: It is daunting, though, if you don't do it regularly, or you've done a little before, it's . . . it really is. Because, like you say, you're used to you pay a fixed amount for everything, and that's that. You know, then you have just pocket money on top. So all your travel transfers, your accommodation, your food, your activities, it's all just one amount of money. And it's difficult to imagine how it could be any different.

And I remember, you know, having that, being in that place, and thinking that way, and I compensated for it by massively, massively overplanning my first big trip, and then trying to get all this information. And you really have to change your attitude completely to one of, well, what's the worst that could possibly happen?

If it's an outdoor event, the worst that happens is you put your tent up somewhere a bit crap, and go to sleep a little bit hungry. But really, that's such an unlikely scenario, you really have to start thinking about ingratiating yourself with the place you're in a lot more. You know, talking to people and just, yeah, using people's knowledge and their networks, and to get the information you need to find a place to sleep, or to find the nearest place to get food, or anything like that. And just be really, really flexible.

And I can't imagine . . . I can't remember how it feels to plan more than a day ahead on a journey, you know? It's like, why'd I even try to . . . why would I even bother trying to guess where I'm going to end up tomorrow night . . .

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: . . . when I don't even know how far I'm going to get today? It's, yeah, it's a massive . . . yeah, paradigm shift, I guess.

Leon: And that is the hardest thing to get used to. Not knowing where you're going to sleep every night, for example. And, like Tom said, I can also really appreciate that. But with a little bit of practice, once you get it, it's the best feeling, because then nothing else really stresses you out, you know? You know that things will generally work out okay, and . . .

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah, that becomes the least of your worries. Like, where am I going to sleep? Well, I'll find . . . you know, I'll find somewhere. Of course. When have I ever not found somewhere?

Leon: Yeah. And you know that if . . . I mean, what I always find is because I travel so cheaply, and I'm saving so much money on a regular basis, if something does go terribly wrong and I suddenly think, well, it's either sleep in this, you know, puddle under a tree tonight or pay for this hotel for one night, at least I've got that choice.

Paul: Yes.

Leon: And I can just go and sleep in a hotel and blow, you know, whatever, 30 quid in local currency on it. And I don't really mind, because I know that the next couple of weeks will be back to not spending that much.

So I don't think it has to be a . . . I did used to think it had to be a misery fest, but it doesn't. It can just be living cheaply.

Paul: Yeah.

Leon: Separately.

Tom: Definitely doing an outdoor adventure helps keep it cheap.

Leon: Yeah.

Tom: Just by its very nature. You're not necessarily hooked into all of these things that cost money a lot of the time. So you get the benefit of being outdoors and not spending a lot of money, either.

Paul: Do you both . . . I mean, Tom, your first big adventure, was that your round the world, or what started off as your round the world bike trip?

Tom: Yeah, it was the totally confused bike tour, as I now like to call it. Which lasted three and a half years, and ended up with me getting married.

Paul: Right.

Tom: Yeah, so I was . . .

Leon: That wasn't in the original plan?

Tom: No, I . . . no.

Leon: No.

Tom: Sorry. But I think all in all, it was about two years of riding, and about a year and a half of hanging out in different cities and countries around the world on the way, with a route that looked like a load of spaghetti thrown on a wall in the end, rather than a kind of round the world.

Paul: And was that something that started off being very planned, and ended up being very organic? Is that how that happened?

Tom: Yeah, that . . . it was about a year's worth of planning that went into getting to the start line, and then about two weeks before, I kind of threw all that out a window and ended up doing something totally different. So, yeah, that was a learning experience.

Paul: And what were some of those learning points? You know, if you were . . . so if you were giving yourself advice now, if you were setting out and not having done that before, what advice would you give yourself, if any?

Tom: Definitely, for that kind of thing, I mean, I was planning a trip that was going to be years long. Just, yeah, don't do too much planning. I mean, it's good to have some way that you're vaguely aiming to get to, so if you're starting a bike trip in the UK, it might be good to aim for, like, Istanbul, for example, just a continent away.

But I think the mistake I made was planning to cycle round the world, the whole world, before I'd ever done any cycle adventure before.

Paul: Right.

Tom: So what happens if I change my mind after a year, realized I wanted to do something else? And I told all these people, and made all this big hoohah about

my plans. And really, the whole point was just going and seeing what the alternatives were, living a life on the road, and being flexible.

But again, like I said before, you don't, you can't envisage that working if you come from a traditional orthodox upbringing, where everything is based around planning and structure. It's very difficult to think suddenly, "Oh, I'm just going to leave today and see what happens."

Paul: Um-hum. I see, yeah. But you started off with a long bike journey, as well, didn't you? Or at least you had a long bike journey. Was it a four-year journey?

Leon: Well, again, similar to Tom, I had went off with a sort of plan, and then that turned into no plan, and then quite a long time later, I was . . . I finished off in Hong Kong, having left from New York. But it . . . another wandering bike journey.

But I think with both the journeys that Tom and I made, they are very different from what we do now in that they . . . certainly mine became a way of life, and I just happened to travel around by bicycle, but that felt like a way of life. Whereas now, it feels like the things I do, I have a home, and I have a base, and I go off and do a reasonably short journey, probably closer to what we'd call an expedition, and then I come back and, you know, back to my home.

Paul: Yes.

Leon: And I quite like that differentiation, because at the time, it was the perfect thing for me. When I was quite young, I just wanted to keep traveling and keep moving. Whereas now, I quite like being cemented in one place a little bit more.

Paul: So you both travel by bicycle, and it is . . . it's a lovely way to travel. You . . . I always feel, when I cycle, I feel quite connected to the environment that I'm traveling through. There's nothing . . . there's no separation between you and where you are.

But do you also feel quite exposed, or is that just part of it? You just feel part of . . . you're much more, as you said yourself, ingratiated, integrated into where you're traveling, traveling through?

Tom: Yeah, it's a nice balance for me. It's . . . I think if you do a walking journey, then you really are at the mercy of anything and everyone that might come your way. Usually it's good, you know, but . . . you don't have an awful

lot of choice. You're moving at walking speed, and you're never going to go an awful lot faster than that.

Whereas on a bicycle, you have that, but you also have the ability to just kind of free wheel past or through, as well, and go a bit faster and, you know, cover a much bigger distance in a day, if you feel like it. So lots and lots of flexibility.

But at the same time, you're never fully . . . you know, you're never going to become completely isolated from the elements, and from people you meet, because you're on a bike, and you're . . .

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: Yeah. For me, it's a really nice balance, that.
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Leon: Yeah, I agree with you. I think it's definitely probably the . . . I hesitate to say the best, but probably the easiest way to travel . . .

Tom: It's the best.

Leon: . . . using human power. Well, it's the most enjoyable, as well. I think I still keep getting drawn back to walking journeys, because I think the increased vulnerability and immersion that you get from a walking journey can be really difficult, but it also, you know, it connects you a bit more, as Tom said.

But in terms of having fun and, you know, guaranteed enjoyment of what it is that you're doing, there's nothing that beats bicycle travel. And it also, going back to what we were talking about earlier with how to travel cheaply, you know, you think practically the three big things that you spend money on are transport, accommodation, and food. If you travel by bike, you know, that's your transport sorted. Your accommodation is your tent and your paneer bag, and you don't really want to be going into restaurants much, anyway, and leaving your bike outside, so you end up buying food and eating it on the roadside.

So it just, it encourages a really inexpensive and fun, fast lifestyle.

Paul: And what about . . . I guess some people might worry about sort of spares, and spare tires and chains, and links, and . . . did you ever have any trouble with those, finding things as you went or, you know, getting replacement, or fixing things? Did you have any dramas? Was it all fairly straightforward?

Tom: I had no real dramas in that sense, but I also had a bike that was designed to be as cross-compatible, you know, parts-wise, with the majority of bikes and parts around the world as possible. So, you know, if you go on a flashy racing bike with all these high-end technology, then you're probably going to have problems. But something nice and simple, and strong and durable, is a much better choice.

But the other thing is that most bike trips will be on roads. You can do off-road trips, but most people who bike tour go on roads. And when you're on a road and anything goes wrong you can't fix, you can be safe in the knowledge that some car or truck will come along, and if you just stick your thumb out, you can stick your bike in the back and, you know, in an hour or two, you'll be in the next town and find whatever you need there. So that's a really nice get out clause, if anything goes too badly wrong.

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: All of my major incidents, whether mechanical or health-related, have ended in a hitchhiking trip to the next town, essentially, from the previous town.

Paul: You have a . . . Tom, you have a website that gives people advice on making trips by bicycle. Longer trips by bicycle.

Tom: Yeah.

Paul: Cycling seems to . . . certainly the number of cyclists you see around towns like London, and also the amount of cyclists you see out in the countryside, seems to have increased a lot over the last few years. Have you seen an increase in people wanting to make longer trips, as well? Or is that still a bit of a niche interest?

Tom: I think it will always be niche, because it just requires a lot of time, and time is the scarcest resource in our society, really. But I think it . . . well, it's big enough now that me and a couple of mates managed to throw a cycle touring festival a few weekends ago, and 200 people came. And you can see that there's more interest. More manufacturers are bringing out, you know, expedition bikes and all that kind of stuff. And there's definitely a general sense that bicycle travel is having kind of a bit of a renaissance, I think.

Leon: Yeah, well, there certainly seem to be a lot of interest in cycling in general. I mean, the number of sort of middle-aged men you see on racing bikes on country lanes now is more than ever, and, you know, the response to having the Tour de France in the UK last year, there seems to be a lot . . . and of course

or Olympic . . . you know, our Olympic wins in past years, it's all kind of increased interest in cycling.

And I guess an environmental awareness, as well. People want to travel in an environmentally friendly way, as well.

Paul: Yeah.

Leon: I think . . .

Paul: I really have . . . sorry.

Leon: I was going to say, I think that's all true, but it . . . probably the last year of my life is about the first year I would ever have called myself a cyclist, because I now have a road bike which I speed around London on, and occasionally I'll even put on some lycra and go for an 80-mile ride on a Sunday morning.

Previous to that, I'd ridden a bicycle for about 10 years, and done big trips. But it was only ever really a means of transport. I didn't think of myself as a cyclist, because I didn't . . . wasn't the act of cycling that I was going towards. I was just using it to get around. And it's the perfect way to get around.

And I think that's something that'll probably always set cycle touring slightly apart. You can go on a tour as a cyclist, because you enjoy cycling. But also, it's just a good way to travel.

Tom: I echo all of that. So I would never call myself a cyclist. It's not my identity, it's not riding bicycles. It's a tool to do a job.

I mean, it would be nice to see . . . and I know that cycling's a growing thing in the UK. I'd really like it to ultimately become, as in the Netherlands, Germany, just a mode of transport, primarily. You know, something that everybody does because it makes sense. And then you would have your niches of sport cycling and all the rest of it.

Paul: [inaudible 00:32:47]

Tom: Yeah. I don't want to go off on one too much, but there's a lot of friction between some of the cycling niches and other groups of road users, and I don't think that's very helpful to anybody.

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: It would be nice if it just became normalized, and just became another option when you want to go somewhere.

Paul: And you had . . . just going back to your Iranian, because I'm sort of intrigued by this Iranian journey. And I've seen the short film. You kind of came to a point where you needed some bikes, and these guys just lent you the bikes.

Leon: Yeah. We just . . . we'd walked quite a distance, and then got our boats out, and paddled quite a distance, and got a new paddle when I lost mine, and then eventually reached a point where there was a lot of dams, and it wasn't going to be practical. And we didn't want to walk again, and were sort of running out of time on our visas, so we just figured, let's go and see if we can get some bikes.

But one of the challenges with Iran is that it's not connected with the rest of the world financially. So you can't go, unless you're an Iranian with an Iranian bank account, you can't go to an ATM and withdraw cash. You've got to take all of your cash into the country at the beginning of your journey. And so we had enough cash to do our trip, but we didn't have enough to go buy, you know, reasonably expensive bikes to go on a tour with.

So that made a bit of a decision for us. But we still expected it to be much more of a challenge than it was. As it happened, we just walked down the street for about 20 minutes, and met a guy who worked in a watch shop who had a whole load of bicycles in the garage, and that was it.

Tom: I don't even . . . I still don't know how we met him. How did we meet him, other than his shop was two doors down from the bike shop that we didn't buy any bikes from?

Leon: Yeah. I vaguely remember that the guys in the bike shop, when we were trying to buy the bike, told us not to bother and to come borrow them off the guy with the garage. Something along those lines. You know, that's the sort of stuff that . . .

Tom: Yeah. But it was a total stranger, and within 20 minutes of meeting this guy, he'd offered us, to lend these two bikes and all the gear for a week, or however long we needed it. And the funny thing was that in a place like Iran, it feels . . . it's brilliant, but it also doesn't . . . it's not that unusual. It doesn't stand out as being this kind of ridiculous act of generosity. Well, it is, but it . . . I don't know how to explain it, really.

Leon: By their standards, it's more normal than it maybe is by our standards, so . . .

Tom: Yeah. Well, just . . . I think in his mind, he saw two people who needed some bicycles, and he had lots of them that weren't being used, so . . .

Paul: It was as simple as that.

Tom: . . . it was only natural that he would lend them to us, and . . . in his mind. Whereas to us, we thought, "What a . . . this guy's taking a risk. You go around lending your bikes to people, how do you know they're going to bring them back?" All that kind of British mentality stuff that we have, Western mentality.

But he was very nonplussed about the whole thing.

Leon: Yeah.

Tom: He just, it was two plus two in his head. Of course you can have these bikes. Why wouldn't I give them to you?

Leon: Yeah. The fundamental difference is that he immediately trusted that we were trustworthy. And I don't think it's quite the same here. You don't automatically trust every stranger you meet, or . . . a lot of the time you wouldn't bother meeting someone because you weren't sure if you could trust them. You would avoid each other in the street, and all that kind of thing.

But it's totally different there. It's one of the brilliant things about traveling there.

Paul: So the film is still being edited at the moment or . . .

Tom: Yeah, the feature-length, or the full-length one.

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: We're almost there with it. Actually, we're going . . . after this, we're going to go and have a look at how it's looking. But yeah, we're within a few days of having that finished. And then later this year, it'll be released to the world. See what people make of Iran, having seen that.

Paul: Yes. Yeah. And the website that you had the shorter version on and the trailer, is that the place to be looking out for it in terms of more details of when it's coming out, and . . .

Tom: Yeah, we'll use that site as the base for . . . as the hub for it all. So the short, the 15-minute version is still there.

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: For people to watch. It's free. And once the full-length one comes out, we'll put that up there, as well, as a download.

Paul: Okay. Fantastic. So I'll put a link to that underneath the podcast on my website so people can . . . they can see the short version, and they can keep an eye out for the longer one. And the people who funded you via Kickstarter, they'll be getting a copy of that, as well.

Tom: Yeah. Hopefully sooner rather than later, yeah.

Leon: Yeah, yeah. They'll be the first to get a hold of it, so . . .

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: Hopefully within the next couple of months. We'll get some good word of mouth, hopefully, then, going out about it.

Tom: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah. Good stuff, good stuff.

So you talked about doing longer trips, both of which . . . you know, both of you have done very long trips. And then you maybe said . . . Leon, you said you had a little bit more of an expedition mentality now, where things are a little bit more defined, and you separate . . . you know, you've got your home life, and you've got your sort of expeditioning life, if you like, your trip.

But you still take quite a lot of time out to do those things, and I guess for a lot of people, that's still quite a lot of time to spend. But you also spent time with Alistair Humphries in the Empty Quarter making that journey, and he's a big proponent of microadventures, as well. He's the one who sort of pioneered the idea in a lot of senses.

Do you guys also take the opportunity to do smaller trips for yourselves that . . . you know, because clearly you do these big trips that, you know, you have to make a bit of a thing out of, because it's sort of part of your professional life, isn't it, and you're sort of making a living, and sort of justifying your existence, in a way, by doing them.

But do you go and do your own smaller things for yourselves just sort of quietly? Is that something that you guys do?

Leon: Yeah, definitely.

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: I mean, I think there's always going to be a slight disparity between the desire most of us have to go and do something, and then the resources available to us, the time or money or energy, or whatever. And so part of me would still like to go away for a couple of years now and again and do some big expedition, but it's not really practical for me now, so I do shorter journeys.

But even within that, when I'm back here and I've got, say, six months so far, more or less, working on something, I can't go off on even a two-week trip, because I can't get the time away. And so the microadventure idea, which, you know, is something that a lot of people have been doing for a long time, just going away for an overnight or a weekend. It's fantastic.

And I think both Tom and I are big fans of doing that, because the reason we do these things isn't necessarily to go to the other side of the world so we can tell people that we've been to some country they've never heard of. It's just because, certainly for me, I like all the adventure stuff. I just like getting away. I like sleeping outside. I like seeing the stars, making a fire, all that kind of thing. And whether that's just for one night outside of London, or whether it's for six weeks in a desert in Arabia, really, it doesn't matter a huge amount.

Tom: Yeah. It's good to get away for the night, basically blow the [inaudible 00:40:06] away and enjoy being outdoors. I don't think it's a replacement for a longer, more immersive journey. And so I'm always going to be wanting to do those, as well, and luckily I can. But it's definitely something that keeps you sane when you're stuck in a basement editing films for a few months. Yeah.

Paul: Now, because the reason I ask is because I think a lot of people . . . you know, the trips that are the bigger trips that, you know, that you're making the film about, like the Karun River in Iran, and you're making a trip about . . . making a film about your trip in Patagonia, and the stuff that you've made

before. You know, the film about the Empty Quarter trip, and the stuff you've made about your long bicycle trip in the past.

And people kind of put . . . they're almost up there as kind of monolithic things, aren't they, for people, that they kind of . . . it's almost like looking at, you know, El Capitano or something, and going, "I could never climb that." You know, people look at it and go, "I could never do that."

And I think it's interesting for people to hear that you go and do . . . you know, it's not doing the monolithic thing, necessarily, in and of itself that is the goal for you. It's the adventure. It's the . . . and we can all have adventures that are shorter or longer than that.

Leon: Yeah. Well, for me, there's two sides to it. There's the kind of self-development side to it that you get through travel and adventure, and I think that's the thing that perhaps you can get to a greater degree when you go away for a long journey. You're learning more about yourself. But that's the thing that you kind of top up by going out for a night on a hill. And that's one of the great reasons to travel, is all of that stuff.

But then the other side of all these things that I do is the storytelling side, and trying to find something that I think is interesting, and that might not have been heard by many people, and give that a platform. And again, that's totally . . . that's not dependent on time or resources or anything else. It's just dependent on a good story. So that could be something that would take two days to go and see and film, or it could be something that would take two years.

But those are the two things that I try and balance out when I'm coming up with something to do.

Paul: You studied film, didn't you?

Leon: Yeah, I did, although it was a very academic course. I didn't . . . and I'm not sure I use any of that in the film-making that I've done.

Paul: Um-hum.

Leon: Most of the learning about film-making that I did was done on my bike trip. I went off with a video camera, and I didn't really know how to use it at that point. And so I just taught myself, and made lots of mistakes, and watched back footage, and got a little bit better every few months, and then started doing things that were watchable.

Paul: So did you set out to be a storyteller, is kind of what I'm getting at, or is it something that kind of came about because you were making journeys, and you wanted to tell the stories that came to you as a result of making the journeys?

Leon: It came quite organically, because the first thing I wanted to do was just go and have an adventure. And I'm really glad I did that with no agenda, didn't . . . not looking to tell stories. I just went of and had the adventure I wanted to, and had the journey I wanted to make.

And then through that, after a while, that side of it started to get a little bit boring in and of itself, so I began writing about it, and taking pictures, and making videos, and realized that telling the story and seeing people's reaction to it was something I really enjoyed, and something that could be quite powerful if it's done in the right way. And over the next couple years after that, I made it a priority, and started to try and make it into a career, as well.

Paul: So was there an actual moment that you thought, "I could make . . . " Because you talked about traveling being a way of life, and traveling by bicycle as kind of being a way of life. Was there at point at which you thought, in terms of making films and writing and speaking, that that could be . . . a sort of point where you said, "That's going to be a career I might be able to follow"? Or was it just, again, was it a sort of slow, organic process that brought you to that point?

Leon: Quite slow and organic. I think when I finished my first big bike trip, and I finished it in Hong Kong, came back to London, that was the point at which I always assumed I would just get a normal job again, and rejoin normal society.

And then, quite quickly after getting back to London, I realized that I had no real intention of doing that, and there was nothing that really appealed to me. And that was quite a big disappointment, because I'd hoped that life would get easier at that point, I would get it out of my system.

Paul: Right.

Leon: So it was a bit of a disappointment to realize that that wanderlust wasn't going anywhere. So that was the point at which I figured I'd make a go of it, because nothing else was really going to make me particularly happy or fulfilled.

So then I spent a good few months staying on friends' sofas and not earning really very much money at all, but slowly trying to build my skills in writing and film-making, and developing ideas for new trips. And then I teamed up

with a friend based in Hong Kong to go and do another quite long journey after that, and I think that was kind of the moment in which I thought, if this goes well, this could be the thing that launches it into something that's survivable.

Paul: That was the walk through China, was it?

Leon: Yeah. So we did a walk through China, and through the . . . through contacts of my friend Rob, who I did the trip with, we were able to get a commission from National Geographic to make a TV series, which was just a great slice of fortune and a really . . . just a really good opportunity to go and do something, and do it well, and then use that as leverage, really, to keep doing other journeys.

Paul: So you used that to build . . . I mean, I guess that's the same in any career, isn't it? You build on what you've done before, and take the opportunities where they come, and . . .

Leon: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah.

Leon: And you, I think, every time try and do something a little bit different, and do it a little bit better than you did it before.

Paul: And how about you, Tom? How did you kind of . . . again, was it an organic thing that you . . . once you set out to make this journey, you . . . there was a film muddied about it?

Tom: Well, when I set out on that first big bike trip, I had absolutely no intention of ever coming back to normal society. Quite the opposite. I was getting away from all the things I didn't like. You know, all the aspects of society that I was totally disillusioned with at the age of, what was it, 23 or something. I had a kind of mid-life crisis quite early on.

But yeah, I was definitely up for just separating myself from it completely, making a real clean start of it. And I had no real agenda for making a film. Basically, a film-maker friend of mine convinced me to take a camera, told me that it would be good fun and that it was worth filming. So it was an interesting idea, to try and cycle around the world.

Started doing that, and kind of really enjoyed the creative . . . you know, the creative side of trying to tell a story with this really difficult medium of video. And it just became kind of habit after that. And then my journey went off on all

these different tangents, and had no real end in sight for many years. And I was filming still, mainly out of habit. You know, I used it as kind of catharsis, in a way. I just . . . when I had no one to talk to in the middle of the Sahara Desert, I would turn on the camera and vent into it. That kind of thing.

But at no point was there ever, like, "Oh, I'm going to make a film," you know? That didn't come until a few years later, when the guy who'd originally suggested I take the camera said, "Oh, you really should send me all that footage." There was 300 hours of it. So I was like, "Yeah, you have that. I'm not going to watch it."

And then he made this film out of it, which was a real surprise. And I got embroiled with all of that project when it came to releasing it, and I . . . I'd also been writing a blog while I was doing this bike trip, and writing was also something that I really, really enjoyed doing, just for its own sake. And I ended up writing, you know, thinking, "Well, I can write a book about this story, as well." This guy goes on a bike trip, you know, having existential crisis after existential crisis, eventually meets a girl who changes his life. Gets married, comes home, everyone lives happily ever after. It's quite a nice story.

So I wrote a book about it. And it's all just kind of followed on from that, really. There's still no sign I'll ever go . . . re-enter normal society. But the writing and the film-making are the two things that seem to be fulfilling and meaningful, and somehow generating enough money for me to not starve.

So yeah, we'll see where it goes, really. It's definitely not a traditional career. I definitely don't know where it's going to end up.

Paul: Do you think we're living in an age where traditional careers don't really make as much sense as they used to, anyway? I mean, it used to be the case, you know, I guess one or two generations ago, where people could start a job when they were 18, or 16, even, and they'd have a job until they retired. And it's just not like that anymore. You know, people go . . . people seem to be reinventing themselves more now, anyway, or having . . . or gaining multiple different skills, and use them in different proportions at different stages in their lives.

I mean, do you think it's . . . in a way, it's just sort of an extension of that freedom to be more flexible with your career?

Tom: Well, there's a lot about the modern world that enables people like me to do that. You know, obviously communications technology is a big thing. My

stuff goes . . . it's based around my website. I wouldn't have a platform without that. I wouldn't be able to make a living out of it.

But yeah, I think it's now a genuine option for people to do that kind of . . . to go down that route of changing things up, and to a certain extent, like, being their own . . . running their own . . . you could even call it business, I suppose. Just a one-person operation, where you figure out what people are going to value, and what you would like making, and make it, and get it out there.

I think it turns on people. Because also, there are lots of people who will want to make a, you know, real craftsperson, and want a very, very specific thing, and do that forever, as well, so . . .

Leon: I think there's also core elements of being successful that never change, which is that you still need to work incredibly hard at it.

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: Be . . . have at least some modicum of skill in it, and be able to appeal to people, be able to appeal to a market of some sort, and . . . yeah, we're all much more digitally enabled than anything else, but it still requires all of those things to be in place.

Tom: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah. Because I think the cynics will look at, you know, what you guys do, or what people like Alistair Humphries do, and other people of that ilk, and sort of see it as . . . the cynics might say, "Well, it's quite self-indulgent." You know, they just go off and have these adventures and, you know, they get sponsors or, you know, they make films about it, and that . . . you know, it's all kind of easy. But it isn't, is it?

Tom: It's not easy.

Leon: No. I mean, I think there's a lot of travel and adventure is self-indulgent to a certain degree. There's a huge amount of selfishness in some of the desires to go off and do these things. But that doesn't necessarily mean it's a bad thing. You can still get a lot out of it by doing that.

But then, in terms of turning it into something that you can share with people, and something that appeals to people, that's a whole different way of looking at it, and a whole different way of packaging it up. And I think it just relies on good storytelling, which is sort of irrelevant to any of those things.

Tom: I think the cynics that you speak of may also be looking at it through a very . . . slightly narrow lens, in that . . . [inaudible 00:52:23]

You know, there's no hard-written rule in life that working 40 hours a week, five days a week, you know, four weeks holiday a year, is the only way to live, and the only way in which you can bring value to society. And I think . . . but the films we're making now, we've gone beyond . . . or hopefully, at least, we've gone beyond the self-indulgent adventures, and tried to make . . . tell two stories which are going to have much more of a . . . much more social significance.

And for me, you know, there's this personal reason to go to Iran, and to travel there. But I think also, Iran could really do with a bit of an image boost in the public eyes. Because we get all of our information about places like Iran from what's in the news headlines.

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: It's very unfavorable, and it doesn't deserve it. And, you know, we just need to understand each other a little bit better. And a story like our Iranian story, you have all these unexpected elements of hospitality and kindness, just good people. It's going to . . . it can only help with that.

Paul: Yes.

Tom: The same with the other film we're making, on a slightly different . . . in a slightly different way. But, you know, that's . . . I think, personally, that that's equally valuable to society as working, you know, all hours to contribute financially, so . . .

Paul: Yeah.

Tom: So you have to not mind being poor and homeless a lot of the time, so . . . yeah, like you said at the start, it's not easy. It's not all fun and games.

Leon: But it's a compromise and a choice that we're happy to make. And even if it involves working a horrendous amount of hours every day for a few weeks to make the films, it doesn't bother us, because we get to create this great end product that hopefully people enjoy, and we get to go and do these journeys.

Tom: Yeah. Like, in the last three months, the two of us have probably been doing 60 or 70 hour weeks, except without the salary.

Leon: Yes.

Tom: You know? So you can be as cynical as you like, but it's not really that different.

Paul: And you're both married?

Tom: Yeah.

Paul: So supportive partners all the way? Or is it difficult? And that's a bit of a personal question. But is it difficult in that sense, as well? So maintaining a relationship? I know personally with, you know, I'm away a lot with my work. It's harder, isn't it, than if you've just got a regular routine where you're at home in the evenings, you're at home on the weekends. It's harder, that distance.

And I guess you've got that . . . you've got the trips, and then you've got to work hard when you're home. You know, when you're actually home, as such, then you then have to be away from home, you know, in an editing suite, or in a basement, wherever. It's . . . I guess that puts its strains.

Tom: Yeah, it does.

Leon: But I think for me, this . . . the way that we've been editing these films has been slightly unusual, in that it's been so intense, so we have been working evenings and occasional weekends. But normally, I find that just . . . in general, my desire toward to be more in one place, rather than constantly nomadic. And when I got married, that kind of cemented that a bit more.

And so I can be away for a couple of months at a time, but normally when I'm not away, when I'm at home, I'll be able to work . . . fit my working hours around what my wife does. She's a teacher. So actually, I can be around most evenings, I can be around most weekends, I can take school holidays off when she does. And it frees me up a lot more. And that's . . . I think, for us, balances out the other side of being away for two, three months, or a year, on trips.

Tom: Kind of. Although my other half doesn't have a regular career, either, so . . . and also, because she's from Iran, and has family there, and we spend . . . we met in Armenia. She's from the Armenian community of Iran. She was studying in Armenia when we met. We're kind of floating, as well. You know, we don't have a base at the moment.

And so, yeah, when I go away on a big trip, it's kind of . . . it depends on the circumstances in general, where we are, where we're living temporarily, what

she's doing with her work, whether it's . . . that depends on how difficult it is for her, and so it can be quite tough, for sure. Yeah.

There's no way around that, though. It's . . . I've got to do these things. That sounds horribly selfish, doesn't it? But we met while I was in the middle of a giant expedition, and it's always been part of our understanding of each other that these are things I have to do to keep me sane.

Paul: So does it feel like a vacation in that sense, what you do? Is it something that you found your calling, as it were, in terms of what you do and how you do it?

Tom: Oh yeah, totally. I mean, it's very random, a lot of the time, and it's quite . . . it's very difficult. A lot of work, and not much money. But ultimately, it's definitely what I'm supposed to be doing at this point in time. That's how it feels.

Paul: As you say, it's not all about money, is it? We kind of, we get brought up . . .

Tom: [inaudible 00:57:46]

Paul: . . . in that kind of framework, don't we, that it's about . . . you contribute your bit, you do your 40, 50 hours a week, whatever it is, you have your nice life and your house and your mortgage, and a certain amount of money, but . . .

Tom: Yeah, sure. But . . . yeah, I mean, some of us are not happy with that for some reason, and we can't do anything about it apart from try and do something about it.

Paul: I mean, you talk about making meaningful . . . on your blog, you . . . meaningful journeys. Is that meaningful for other people, as well? Are you trying to sort of help other people sort of get some meaning out of their lives, or be inspirational in that sense? Bring adventure a bit closer to them?

Tom: Yeah, totally. It's . . . the reason I wrote that article, and all of the stuff I put on my blog, is trying to help other people who are looking to do something like what I've done to do it. You know, making . . . trying to break down all those barriers of, you know, the fear, and the uncertainty, and the money, and the time, everything else. Just trying to really get people going.

And it seems to be doing that job pretty well, and that's . . . that makes it, you know, that makes it meaningful for me, as well. Because I'm sharing what I've

learned, in the same way as you do in your blog. You get a certain satisfaction from that. You can see what the effect is on other people's lives, and that's also satisfying. I think everyone's a winner, really.

Paul: Indeed, indeed. And back to the Patagonian trip, I mean, there's a . . . we talked . . . we went over that. I mean, you said there's a meaning there, there's a reason for it, there's a message there, and, you know, you haven't really said what that is. It's about the fact there's a massive hydro plan for that area?

Leon: Yeah, well, the journey, the idea came from the fact that I'd wanted to go to Patagonia for a while, and always kept an eye out for something that might take me there. And I'd come across the accounts of this expedition along the Santa Cruz River in Patagonia, which runs all the way across, down the southern part of Argentina, really, from the Andes to the Atlantic Ocean. And that journey, led by a guy called Fitzroy, and on board the ship was a young Charles Darwin, before he really knew what he was doing in life.

And I got this idea it might be quite nice to follow in their footsteps and retrace their journey along this river. And as I was looking into that, I found out that imminently, the Argentinian government were going to dam the river, build these two huge dams in the middle of the river, and flood more than half the river valley. And that was . . . I was finding all this out in kind of September last year, and the dams were due to begin in about January time. So I realized that if I didn't go and try and make that journey along the river almost straight away, I'd never be able to do it.

And I also figured that if I didn't go and try and document the river valley as it was one last time, it might never be done. And that seemed like it would be quite sad to lose that without ever having a record of it.

So that was the idea for the journey, and we went and did it in November and December. And the film that we're making is just trying to tell that story, and show what stands to be lost if these dams are built. And we went down there trying to be as open-minded as we could. It's hugely complex, but I think in short, the dams are a very bad idea. Not even necessarily to do with the damage that they might do or anything like that.

It just seems that the reasons that they're being built are all wrong, that they're being built to make people money, is what it seems like from the outside. And they will have a huge impact on the environment, and there's been no environmental impact assessment done, and all that kind of thing.

So it's . . . yeah, it looks like it could be a real disaster about to unfold, and we just wanted to show that through the medium of adventure, and through the medium of a good story, and just try and reflect on this constant battle that seems to be going on around the world these days of nature versus progress. And I think that's highly relevant . . .

Paul: Yes.

Leon: . . . in a lot of places.

Paul: Is that some . . . that nature versus progress, is that something you would say characterize a lot of the places you've traveled? You've both traveled a lot of countries around the world. Is that more prevalent in some parts of the world than others? Or is it just a general malaise that seems to be spreading?

Leon: I think it's certainly more prevalent in some places than others. But yeah, increasingly . . . it's been a long time since I went somewhere that didn't have some element of progress sneaking its way into the wilderness. And even the Empty Quarter trip I did, which was six weeks across 1000 miles of desert, following in the footsteps of an explorer who'd done the same thing in the 1940s, and he saw no one apart from Bedouin tribesmen for that time.

And Alistair and I, when we did the journey, spent most of the time walking along little gravel oil roads, you know, between nodding donkeys. And it's . . . things like that are happening all over the place.

And it's the . . . certainly my position is not that progress is a bad thing at all, but just that it does need management, because increasingly, as a society, we're valuing that progress, whatever that might mean, over the natural, wild parts of our world. And I think that increasingly, as we lose those, we're losing something very important and irreplaceable.

Paul: It's interesting that we're using the word "progress," as well, even though we don't necessarily think it is. It's kind of . . .

Tom: Progress in the wrong direction.

Paul: . . . very ingrained in the way that we're sort of meant to think, isn't it?

Leon: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, it's very . . . we need to find a new word to replace that.

Tom: There's different ways that progress could manifest itself on there, and these are examples of ways in which we think it's happening in the wrong way. It's depressing, because you know that, if you do any amount of reading, that there's so many ways in which we can do it in the right way. So why are we not doing it? I don't know.

That's not going anywhere. That was the end of my thought.

Leon: Right. That's a good starting point, yeah. No, it is interesting, isn't it, that we . . . and we're not the only people, I'm sure, sitting around today saying that, you know?

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: That . . . yeah, progress is not . . . or technological change, or whatever we want to say, is not necessarily a good thing, or the way that it's been applied is not necessarily a good thing. Or it has bad side effects that could be avoided with a little more thought and a little bit more coordination, and yet . . . yeah, it's not . . .

Tom: Yeah, we spoke to a lady and her daughter in Argentina about all of this stuff. They're local residents to where we were. About the dams and, you know, why they're happening, and how they're happening, and what they think, and all that kind of stuff.

And the daughter's thought was, well, you know, you're going to dam a pristine wilderness river, you know, put two huge dams across it, completely destroy two-thirds of the river valley's natural habitat, yet you're in Patagonia where you've got constant supply of wind, like, more wind than you could ever possibly ask for, and sun. So why not wind or solar, you know? You've got all of this, all of . . . you've got three options there, but you've gone for the one that's going to do the most possible damage by a long shot.

It's probably . . . I'm sure the engineers will tell me reasons for why it has to be, but . . . you've got to ask them.

Paul: Yeah, yeah, ask the question. Because these decisions have been made for us.

Tom: Yeah.

Leon: I think it's quite important, as well, that we as a society try and separate out people who speak out against these things with . . . from just that label of kind of leftie, green, tree-huggers.

Paul: Being an anti.

Leon: Yeah.

Paul: Yeah, yeah.

Leon: Because that's kind of the issue at the minute, is . . . from what I've been reading around this dams issue, it seems like anyone who does speak out is . . . they just get labeled as this and that, and it's an immediate kind of black mark against them. So it just needs to be more of an open discourse, I think, would be the first step to trying to combat it.

Tom: Yeah, that's the real problem with the environmental . . . with anything that's of that nature, when people talk about environmental problems, you get branded with the tree-hugger thing, which is a little hangover from decades ago, which is . . . how can you get past that? It's . . . we're not tree-huggers. We're just . . .

Paul: But it's interesting. They're such loaded phrases, aren't they? Like, we use the word "progress" like, as a society, for the things that aren't necessarily positive, but yet we're kind of trained to think that they are positive, through use of that word. And, you know, "tree-hugger" is used as a derogatory term. Well, what would the . . . if you wanted to hug a tree, what's wrong with that?

Tom: Sure. It's cutting it down.

Paul: And yet it's used as an insult, you know? That there's something wrong with you because you like trees.

Tom: Yeah. Or, well, generally, that if you're still one of the few people that seem connected with nature, that there's something wrong with you.

Leon: Yes.

Tom: Or slightly odd.

Paul: I mean, the journeys that you've made, and . . . have they always made you feel more connected with the nature of the place you're traveling? Or is it sometimes more the people, or is it always agood mix of both?

Tom: On the bike trips, it's mostly been people. Because you're on roads, and roads are there for people. But definitely the last few shorter trips, which have been more wilderness-based, have been real eye-openers in terms of . . . well, yeah, I mean, just the Patagonia one is the best example, I think, of that.

Leon: Yeah.

Tom: We went there, we saw what was going to be destroyed, and we couldn't help but care about that, because it seemed so totally wrong as a result.

Leon: In general, I think it's a combination of the two. I find that, as a general rule, I'm mostly attracted to journeys and places to go because of landscapes. It's the idea of certain landscapes or geographical features that make me want to go there. But then when I go there, make the journey, and come back, it's the people and the social side of it that I remember better.

And this Patagonia one was perhaps a slight difference, because of the nature of the story we were following. But, yeah, it's the way in which the two interact with each other, I think.

Paul: Yeah. And I think that's, for me, as well, it's something . . . an important thing to remember. You know, we sort of see the people and place as separate, whereas they're not, are they? They're very much integrated. Particularly in places that aren't as developed, that they're very . . . you know, people are living much closer to the land, much closer to nature, and subject to its rhythms, and all that kind of thing more. Again, we've kind of moved away from that in our society.

Leon: Yeah. Well, it's a rarity to go anywhere in the world and see people and nature living in harmony. And when you do, you really notice it. So that's something that always sticks out as a positive in travel.

Paul: It's interesting. I had Professor Jules Pretty on my podcast a few episodes ago, and he's a professor at a university out in Essex, and his most recent book was about how people, some people have managed to live more closely with nature. And he picked 12 different societies, if you like, or microcosms, that were . . . specifically were within richer countries.

So, you know, we kind of think of people living close to nature as being an underdeveloped, as we might term them, countries, whereas he picked, you know, subsets of, you know, societies, so, like, the Amish in North America, and the fisherman in north Finland, Maori in New Zealand, and various sort of

societies, and looked at what is it that they're doing different to the wider societies that they're kind of within. And that was a very interesting, you know . . .

Leon: That sounds fascinating.

Paul: It is possible.

Tom: Yeah. You can get them in, get these tiny little isolated societies in the UK. There's one . . . I've got a friend who lives in Eastborne, and he told me that just outside of Eastborne, there is a self-sufficient, ruralistic, and very isolated community which is completely separated off from the rest of society. And, you know, they make crafts, and they sell those, and that's where they get their money from, for things that do, and have to pay for from outside.

But apart from that, they're totally living this completely different life, right in the middle of the . . . of England.

Paul: And fairly well-populated, right?

Tom: Yeah.

Paul: So gents, just to sort of finish up, I mean, you've . . . you know, you've got adventure in the blood, both of you. If there was some budding adventurers listening to this podcast, is there any specific advice you would give them, either in terms of . . . you mentioned not to overplan, but in terms of planning or preparation, or things they definitely should do, or things they definitely shouldn't do if they were looking to make some . . . an independent journey, and so . . . an independent, human-powered journey somewhere they'd not been before, any particular advice you'd give them?

Tom: I think a trial run is always good. Something short and very achievable, very close to home, that's something similar to what your big idea might be, that's going to give you the confidence to go and do it, rather than keep dreaming about it.

So a lot of people ask me about going on bike trips, and I always say, "Well, just go away for the weekend." Then camp out one night, do a giant loop from where you live back again. Anything bigger than that is the same, except there's more days involved. So that's . . . I think that's my . . . first thing that comes to mind.

Leon: And I think setting something achievable, to me, that's reasonably tangible, and then just committing to it, is quite good, as well. So something that's not dependent on whether or not your friends are going to come. Something that doesn't rely on you earning 25 grand before you can go and do it, and something that you look at a date a month away, a year away, and you, you know, book a flight, or quit your job, or whatever it's going to be, in time to go and do that.

I think those two elements . . . you can always scale it up. You can say you're going to cycle to Italy, you can still cycle around the world. You can just keep going. But if you say you're going to cycle to Italy, it's going to be much less intimidating to actually go and do it. And if you book that start date . . .

Tom: Or just cycle to Dover, for that matter.

Leon: Yeah, yeah, exactly. But making a commitment not related to all these other issues is very important.

Paul: I was speaking with Chris Townsend on a recent podcast, and I've also had a . . . one of my course students walked the Pacific Crest trail rather recently, and she very much made a point of the fact that you walk yourself fit on a journey like that.

Tom: Yeah.

Paul: And Chris was saying a similar thing. With all the long-distance backpacking that he's done, is that often, because he . . . I guess like the rest of us, he, you know, he writes, and he does other things. And if you're going to go away, you've got to kind of get more done before you go away than maybe you would do normally, and you end up doing less exercise before you go than you do . . . you know, than you would like to.

Do you find the same with cycle journeys, that you kind of cycle yourself fit? Or do you find that you need to do more preparation?

Leon: No, not at all.

Tom: No sweat.

Leon: But I think there's a definite distinction to be made, certainly for me, which is that if you're going on a long, ambling, wandering journey, there's no need to train for it, because you will train yourself fit. Walk, cycle, kayak, whatever it is. If you're going away for two weeks, and you want to do

something quite intrepid and, you know, kayak down a whole river, then it's a good idea to have done quite a lot of training. Otherwise you're going to be in no shape to start and, you know, you're going to be a few miles from the start line by the time your time's up.

Paul: Yeah.

Leon: So depending on the length of the journey, it matters. But most long journeys, there's no need to train at all. It'll come.

Tom: Yeah. And that's, it's funny, because that also factors into stuff like equipment and planning, and logistics. You know, a very, very short, structured mission can . . . it makes a lot more sense to really nail all of that stuff, because you've only got one shot at it, and if you don't get to the end in time, you miss your flight, then you're kind of screwed.

But on something totally open-ended, you can set off tomorrow on some crap old bike and with all, you know, without a tent. Just buy a tent from Argos on your way out of town, and just pick stuff up as you go, and all the rest of it. Like, it doesn't matter how long it's going to take or where you're going to end up, so . . . yeah, it's kind of counter-intuitive, in that sense. Like . . .

Paul: Yeah. [inaudible 01:15:40] Rather than the overnight, the sort of medium-term trips are the ones that maybe need the most planning, then, because you've got a limited window of time to get things done. Yeah. Interesting, interesting.

Cool. Well, thank you very much, chaps. Where can people find you and follow you on social media and interwebnet, and all that kind of . . . now, you've got a . . . your Tom's Bike Trip website. You've got your Leon McCarron website.

Leon: Yeah.

Paul: But presumably you're on social media, Twitter and things, as well.

Leon: I'm on everything as Leon McCarron. It's quite a unique name, which is helpful.

Paul: Yeah. Cool. Well, we'll link to that. Again, we'll link to that underneath the podcast. What about you, Tom? Where's the best place to follow what you're up to?

Tom: Just tomsbiketrip.com. Although I do need to rethink that, because I'm doing more walking trips now. But yeah, Tom's Bike Trip at the moment.

Paul: Okay.

Tom: And I'm on all the social networks, as well.

Paul: Thanks. Good stuff. Thanks. And we'll link to those. Well, thank you very much, gentlemen.

Tom: Thank you.

Paul: And good luck with finishing the films. And I'll look forward to hearing about Karun and the Patagonia film. Have you got a name for the Patagonia film yet? Is it just the Patagonia film?

Tom: Oh, we should really do something about that, shouldn't we?

Leon: Yeah. Yeah, we don't yet.

Paul: Right.

Leon: The river's called the Santa Cruz, so it's . . .

Paul: Yeah.

Leon: The Rio Santa Cruz is a working title.

Paul: Okay. Well, look forward to watching those when they come out, and I'll do my best to promulgate those out to people who are interested. So thanks for spending the time.

Leon: Thank you.

Tom: Great. Thank you.

Paul: Thanks again to Leon and Tom for spending time chatting with me. I hope you found our discussion interesting. If so, let me and them know via leaving a comment on my blog underneath the podcast, or via social media. You'll find links to Tom and Leon's profiles underneath the podcast on my blog.

Please also check out the award-winning short version of the Karun River film, which is available free, as well as Tom's Janapur film and "Into the Empty Quarter," which chronicles Alistair and Leon's trip through the Empty Quarter desert.

And as always, if you're listening to this on iTunes, if I could ask you the favor of leaving a rating or a review, if you haven't done already. Quite a few people have, but there are many more listeners who haven't. If you could leave an honest rating or review, it really helps raise the profile of this podcast and get it in front of other people who enjoy outdoor life and adventure.

So thank you very much in advance for that. Thank you again for listening, and I look forward to speaking to you on the next podcast, which will be Episode 10. We're already almost 10 podcasts in.