

BEN SOUTHALL

Winner of Tourism Queensland's 'Best Job in the World'



THE  
BEST  
JOB

IN THE WORLD

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HOW TO MAKE A LIVING FROM  
FOLLOWING YOUR DREAMS

WILEY



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‘From the moment I met Ben I knew he was the man for the highly sought-after Best Job in the World. He is a memorable character who grabs your attention and opportunities with both hands. A consummate storyteller, who has an incredible ability to engage with people, a raw energy and zest for life. His passion for Queensland was apparent from the outset and his commitment to continue to share the story of our destination with the world through initiatives such as the Best Expedition and other digital marketing has sustained global interest in Queensland.’

— **Steve McRoberts**, Tourism and Events  
Queensland Group Executive, Marketing



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# About the author

Ben Southall was born in 1975, the son of Margaret and Duncan Southall. Educated at Ropley and Perins schools, Ben went on to study his A levels at Alton College before moving to Kingston University, where he gained a BSc in Automotive Systems Engineering.

Ben spent the next few years swapping between the northern and southern hemispheres on a mission to follow summer around the globe, working for Mumm Champagne as an event manager, promoting the brand at major sporting events such as Cowes Week sailing, Lords cricket, Wimbledon tennis, Henley rowing, Ascot racing, Silverstone F1 and the Round-the-World Yacht Race in Cape Town.

From this posting in South Africa his love of the African continent grew, with extended travels along the coastline being the best place to spend the UK winter ... and his hard-earned cash. Having found a base in the town of Port Edward, Kwa-Zulu Natal, Ben worked as a tour guide for Wild Coast Tours taking backpackers and tourists on local adventures.

In 2000, Ben embarked on his first overland expedition to witness a total solar eclipse in Mozambique, followed by another a year later in Botswana—enough to whet the appetite for later expeditions. While working at the Royal Star & Garter Home in Richmond as an event manager, Ben developed a love of running and endurance events, creating the Charlie Hankins 24hr Challenge in 2006.

In 2008 Ben departed on his solo adventure, Afritex—an ambitious overland expedition to circumnavigate Africa in his trusty

Land Rover, Colonel Mustard. Together they travelled over 65 000 km through 38 countries. His return to the UK was short-lived however. Ben won Tourism Queensland's internationally acclaimed Best Job in the World, beating 35 000 other applicants from around the world to the title of Island Caretaker. He spent six months living on Hamilton Island while exploring every metre of Queensland's coastline and diving the length of the Great Barrier Reef, filming, photographing and blogging about his experiences.

2011 saw Ben embark on his next challenge: the Best Expedition in the World — a four-month, 1600 km kayak along the Great Barrier Reef retracing the route of Captain Cook back in 1770.

In 2013 Ben, Luke Edwards and Pat Kinsella set a world record for the fastest ascent of the tallest mountain in each state in Australia — the Aussie 8. The subsequent 42-minute documentary aired in Australia on Channel 7.

Ben has worked with television, radio and print media from around the world, including the BBC, CNN, Sky, ABC and Oprah Winfrey. He holds the unofficial world record for the most interviews in a 24 hour period — 124!

Ben has completed over 15 marathons to date, in Morocco, Kenya, Australia, the US, Japan and Scotland and England, including two 90 km Comrades races in South Africa. Ben is an Ambassador for Alton College, University of Queensland Business School, Tourism Queensland and Alpina Watches, and the Patron of Sailability.

He is a keen supporter of the Royal Star & Garter Homes, FARM-Africa, IDE-UK, ZigZag Foundation and Sailability. Ben married his sweetheart, Sophee, in 2012 after meeting her while emceeing an awards ceremony in the Whitsundays, Queensland, in 2010.

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# Acknowledgements

Life is full of 'stepping stone moments' that have helped me jump from one chapter to the next. Some have been good and some bad, but they've all helped shape and steer my direction through life.

Over the years the incredible support of my friends and family has allowed me to take full advantage of the opportunities that have come my way. By nodding positively as I reel off my plans for the next adventure, supporting my ludicrous ideas and firmly believing I'll succeed, they've given me the confidence to think big and fully embrace life.

If only everyone had friends and family as wonderful as mine, the world would be a much better place.

To my darling Sophee. The moment you walked into my life it became a much better place. Having someone to share the world and its wonders with, to bring me back down to earth when my internal chaos takes over and to be the rock in my brilliantly stupid life needs someone with your inner beauty, intelligence and understanding. I can't thank you enough for standing by me and being my wonderful wife and best friend.

Mum and Dad — simply the Best Parents in the World — you gave Becky and me a childhood to cherish. Nothing was ever too much hassle, you instilled morals in us I still value today and you were always there to pick up the pieces whenever I screwed up! Words fail to explain how much you mean to me.

To my sister Becky, I may have been a brat of a brother but as long as you know how important you've been throughout life as my little sister, a voice of reason, my shoulder to cry on and mother to the most wonderful nephews and niece I could hope for, then I'm happy.

Africa. The birthplace of my sense of adventure. Without its rawness, beauty and addictive personality I wouldn't have embarked on a personal journey of exploration that continues today.

My friends in Port Edward, of which there are too many to name. My second home and somewhere I cherish and think about all the time. Happy days and even happier nights!

Without the team at Tourism Queensland and Hamilton Island, the Best Job in the World would never have happened and consequently I'd never have met Sophee. Your vision and creativity to produce a campaign that gripped the world's media, all 34 684 of the applicants and especially the 15 other finalists has gone down in the history books as one of a kind.

Thank you to all the friends who've come on parts of this journey with me. Owen for being both the most brilliant and useless friend at the same time. Luke for just being you. Josie, Rosie, Zoe and Alison for being the splendiferous sunshine friends who helped my Best Job campaign get through to the final.

And to those dearly departed friends who left Planet Earth far too early — Guy Kilgallon, Charlotte and Alan Jones. Your friendship, zest for life and stories of travel and adventure sit with me every step of the way as I continue to push myself on to yet greater goals. Your lives were not in vain.

Jay Byrde — I miss you.

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## INTRODUCTION

# Am I dreaming?

I covered my face with my hands and stifled a gasp, frozen to the spot by the shock of what had just happened. For a moment time stood still.

Then came the crush. Hands grasped me, arms wrapped around me, hugs forced the air from my chest. I struggled to stay upright as more people joined in and the sound in the room got louder. A throng of blue t-shirts surrounded me.

I took a deep breath and felt a kiss on my cheek that woke me from my stupor. I focused on the people around me. They were all grinning from ear to ear, jumping up and down, celebrating—and *I* was the centre of attention!

The other finalists cheered and showered me with congratulations, the sound of their voices merging into one. Slowly they separated and fell back into line as a microphone was thrust into my hand. I walked towards the lectern, lifting my gaze to the audience before me and outwards to the line of cameras at the back of the room. The media was watching.

How on earth did I get here? Twelve months ago I was covered in sweat and mud in equatorial Gabon rebuilding a broken bridge on my journey around Africa. Now here I was on Hamilton Island in front of the world's media, winner of 'the best job in the world'.

After five months of hard campaigning I'd beaten 34 684 other contestants vying for the job of 'Caretaker of the Islands of the Great

Barrier Reef. Behind me on the stage stood the 15 others who'd made it all the way through to the final.

I had no idea what the next few months would bring—apart from a change of country, a salary of \$150 000 and a \$3.5 million luxury villa to live in. With 2300 kilometres of coral reefs and more than 600 islands to explore there'd be travel, and lots of it.

'Wow! Ladies and gentlemen, we've all been involved in a marketing campaign that has been an enormous worldwide success. To all of the candidates standing behind me... everyone is an absolute winner and I think we've had the most incredible three days of our lives—thank you!'

With my brief acceptance speech out of the way the media interviews began. I worked my way out into the bright spring sunshine, ready to face the paparazzi.

'How does it feel to have won the "best job in the world", Ben?' one journalist asked.

'It's absolutely crazy if I'm honest. I can't wait to get started,' I replied, almost bursting with excitement.

'How lucky do you feel right now, moving from the outhouse to the penthouse?' she came back.

I worked through the question in my mind. How 'lucky' did I feel? Had luck really played any part in the last five months of hard work or the 10 years of expeditions, training and logistics before that?

The reason I was standing there giving that interview wasn't down to luck, but to the hard work I'd put into each and every one of the projects I'd been involved with. Taking a dream and turning it into reality was something I'd become used to doing, following the age-old adage that 'the harder you work, the luckier you get'. So the 'best job' didn't just fall into my lap by chance; there was application and strategy involved at every stage of the process.

\* \* \*

Over the years I've read many travel and adventure books written by inspiring people who've completed outrageous journeys around the planet. From driving a pink *tuk-tuk* across Africa to skateboarding across Australia to running a marathon on every continent in seven days—all of them have challenged the human spirit and confirmed the theory that life is there for the taking.



With this book I want to offer more than just a chronicle of my travels. There are writers who wrap their travel stories in beautiful words and conjure up breathtaking images of life on the road and their experiences along the way.

Unfortunately I don't have that kind of creative or artistic mind, and I often struggle to find ingenious words to summarise an escapade. But what I can share are the many lessons I've learned planning, executing and delivering successful projects in far-off corners of the world. Threaded through my stories of travel and adventure you will find the tools you need to turn your own 'could-do' journey into a 'have-done' adventure!

*The Best Job in the World: How to make a living from following your dreams* is my story, but it is also a guide that can help you make key decisions when planning your own journey or adventure. My hope is that it will inspire you to live your dream while also providing you with practical advice on how to get there — from turning an idea into a plan, to gaining sponsors and partners, to using digital and social media platforms to build an audience and tell your story.



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## CHAPTER 1

# Finding my way

Despite the success I've enjoyed in my adult life, I always struggled in school. My first memory of it was sitting in a classroom in Bournes Green Infant School at age six wasting an entire morning working out whether 'this morning' should be written as one word or two.

It didn't get much better when I moved up to the junior school. I can't quite remember how at the age of eight I managed to send my teacher home in tears, but suffice to say Ms Murray didn't list me as one of her favourite pupils. My school report constantly referred to my inability to concentrate in class.

Back in 1985, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) wasn't recognised. My hyperactivity as a child was blamed on excessive E-numbers in my food and drink. I clearly remember being forbidden to drink orange and lemon squash because they contained a dangerous combination of the additives E102 and E110.

Mum and Dad struggled with my schooling, especially on the annual Parents' Evening. I dreaded their first words when they got back. I would ask optimistically, 'How did it go?', hoping that one day they'd say, 'You've been a model student, Ben. Well done'. It never happened. My sister Becky got enough brains for both of us, always topping the class and putting me to shame. She's been a source of inspiration all my life, but I felt that as the older sibling it should have been the other way around.

## **An education**

One of my favourite subjects at school was geography. Learning about the world and what makes it tick provided fuel for my mind even at an early age. As soon as I opened my first *National Geographic* magazine with its yellow-framed cover, I was hooked. I remember folding out the map of an unknown country and poring over it, mesmerised by all the squiggly lines, trying to work out what the legend meant.

Seeing magnificent images of distant lands and strange-looking people only added to my fascination and curiosity. In my final year at Bournes Green, I crossed the path of a teacher named Mr Barton, a bald dictator who put the fear of God in me. If I acted up in class, he'd tower over my desk and stare intensely at me from behind his thick-rimmed glasses.

'You, Ben Southall, will amount to absolutely nothing in life if you continue as you are', he would bellow at me across the classroom. The memory still sends shivers down my spine.

As to my other favourite class, physical education, Mr Barton did have a few good words to say in my school report: 'In PE, Ben is extremely enthusiastic and competitive.'

It may not have meant much at the time, but what I was introduced to by those two subjects—a love of travel and physical challenge—still shape my world and motivate me every day.

When I was 10 years old my father changed jobs, which took the family from the delights of Southend in Essex to rural Hampshire. Our house no longer fronted onto a main road but instead looked across a huge arable field with glorious views of rolling countryside.

The move brought a change of schools of course, and with it a change of teacher. Enter Mrs Wilson. I walked into my classroom at Ropley School for the first time, lost in a uniform I'd 'grow into', with my school kitbag slung over my shoulder, and sat next to the nearest boy, Dan Kieran, who looked friendly enough.

In the corridor outside I heard the raised voice of an angry teacher before a frightened looking girl hot-stepped through the door followed by Mrs Wilson, her hand clutching a slipper raised to head height, poised for the strike.

I sat motionless for the next five minutes, watching as Jessica received every centimetre of that size nine moccasin across her backside. I'd left the city behind and arrived bang in the middle of Victorian England, where corporal punishment was standard practice.

Mrs Wilson turned out to be the best teacher I've ever had. Her tough exterior quickly melted away as she took me under her wing. I learned more about life in one year at Ropley Church of England School than I had in the previous five at Thorpe Bay. A combination of tough love and an understanding of how to channel my hyperactivity gave me direction for the first time in my school life.

Stepping up to 'big school' at the age of 11 was another huge shock to my system. I no longer had to walk for five minutes to get to the school gates; instead, I faced a 10-minute journey in the other direction to wait for the scary school bus. My love of sport and outdoors really took off at Perins Community School, and nowhere more than on the Wednesday cross-country run. Come rain or shine, 30 unlucky souls would take to the tracks and trails around the town in a desperate race to get back to the warmth of the showers.

I loved every minute of it—splashing through the mud, crossing the ankle-deep River Arle and fighting my way through the bramble-lined footpaths of Hampshire. There was something exhilarating about throwing off the shackles of organised sport in the school yard, being let loose in the real world to take on the elements. It felt stimulating to explore even this small corner of the planet.

Sport was fast becoming my main creative outlet. I joined the hockey team at age 11, when Perins became the first school in the county to lay an astroturf pitch. It was 1988 and England had just won gold in men's hockey at the Seoul Olympics, so I rode the wave of enthusiasm all the way to my local club, Winchester. For 10 years I couldn't get enough of it, spending five evenings a week training and playing, representing my club, Winchester; my county, Hampshire; and Kingston University.

At the time, family holidays didn't offer much insight into my future love of travel. Year after year we'd pack up the car and drive for hours to the north of Scotland to spend two weeks gazing out of a rental cottage window at the driving rain.

Yet these holidays were also wonderful. Mum and Dad loved exploring and took us on all kinds of crazy adventures around the highlands and islands of west Scotland. Their love of the great outdoors was instilled in Becky and me from an early age.

Apart from a couple of long, challenging weeks spent on French exchange programs while at school, by age 16 the only foreign adventure I'd had was a two-week school cruise around the Mediterranean. Mum and Dad saved for two years to pay for the ticket that saw me join 30 other lucky kids to explore the wonders of Greece, Israel, Egypt and Turkey.

My school shirt was signed by a hundred friends when I walked out the gates of Perins for the last time. I'd scraped through my exams, just about getting the grades required to attend Alton College. Not

that I particularly wanted to go; it was simply what everyone expected of me, so I toed the line and signed up for three A levels: Design Technology, Computer Science and Physics.

It didn't take me or my teacher, Dr Colley, long to realise I'm no mathematician. Physics and figures weren't my forte so I dropped the most mind-numbing subject to concentrate on my newfound loves of design and engineering.

Dad spent 40 years working as an engineer, so a hands-on approach to technology played a huge part in my childhood. I can remember few occasions when Dad had to call on the services of a tradie of any kind, always preferring to 'have a tinker' himself. Although this approach can result in a few unfinished projects, it also provides a wealth of knowledge and experience of how you can fix just about anything if you put your mind to it and keep your patience.

For two years I applied myself at Alton College with the help and guidance of two inspiring lecturers, Steve McCormack and Steve Goater, who provided their own style of tuition. Along with Dad, both helped me create my finest engineering project—a bright green half Volkswagen Beetle trailer. It matched the very 1990s snot-coloured car everyone knew me for at the time.

The expectation of university loomed large over me during those final few months at Alton. I'd had my fill of formal learning and more than anything wanted to get out into the real world, but I decided to risk it all with one final attempt at educating myself to a reasonable level. University, after all, is about proving you can apply yourself—for a fixed period of time. Apparently it's something employers find attractive. Many years before, Mr Barton had declared my chances weren't good. It's amazing how long such slights can stick with you.

The practical side of engineering was proving to be where my aptitude lay. I was good at pulling things apart and almost as good at putting them back together, bar a mystery screw or bolt here and there. I enrolled for a Bachelor of Science degree in Automotive Systems Engineering at Kingston University and spent my first year living in student digs, my first taste of what life was like living away from home.

It didn't last long, but not because I didn't enjoy it. I was playing more and more hockey for my Hampshire-based teams, picking up a stick almost every day. Back then I considered my commitments to my chosen sport more important than being part of university life.

I look back now and wonder whether I'd have done a little better at university if I'd actually stayed there and given it my all.

The pressure was building from all sides during my final year at Kingston. My course was becoming more analytical, requiring total application, but I just wanted to play hockey down in Hampshire. Driving 50 miles a day up and down one of the UK's most congested roads probably didn't help my sanity.

One morning I cracked. I walked out to my car to start the long drive to London, but then stopped and broke down. I sat on the driveway with my head in my hands, sobbing uncontrollably. The massive pressure of my final year had become too much. I was convinced I was doomed to failure. Mum spotted me from inside the house and rushed out.

'Ben, what on earth's wrong?'

'I just don't know why I'm doing this course. I'm no good at it and I've no idea what I want to do after uni!' I blubbered, tears rolling down my cheeks.

As usual, she was ready with good maternal advice: 'If you can just get through the next couple of months, apply yourself as best you can and get any sort of grade, we'll be massively proud of you. Then you've got the entire summer to decide what you want to do.' It was a reassuring and practical take on my mountain of a problem.

She made 'getting through' sound so easy, but I knew I had some serious work to do to have any chance of even scraping a second-class degree — a goal that had sounded so easy two years earlier.

I worked furiously hard over the next few weeks. The fact that it was the end of the hockey season helped, as it meant I could concentrate fully on the task without the distractions of my favourite sport. I became a social hermit for a month and applied myself like never before, revising for my exams and finally handing in a dissertation I was proud of. It took a massive effort of late nights to get there but at last I was free to breathe in the freedom of life after uni.

## **Mumm's the word**

That summer proved to be a turning point in my life. With the shackles of education removed, I had to go out and find work. It didn't matter what it was — just something to fund the festival-packed lifestyle I wanted to lead over the next few months.

I fell on my feet.

An ex-girlfriend had been working for a public relations company called First Results that handled a number of high-profile accounts, including French Mumm Champagne. After we split up we'd remained good friends, and now she asked if I'd like to work with them at the exclusive Cowes Week sailing regatta on the Isle of Wight for a few weeks over the summer.

The offer sounded too good to be true. We'd get to drive brand-new sponsors' cars, serve champagne on luxury super-yachts, socialise with the yachting fraternity and live life to the full — while getting paid handsomely for it.

Only a few weeks earlier I'd walked out of university not knowing where my future would take me. Now I'd been given a wonderful opportunity to enter the world of public relations, event management and hospitality. I knew I was a 'people person' and could start a conversation with anyone, but until I started the job I didn't know what an asset this would be in the 'real world'.

Surely work wasn't meant to be this much fun. My team was wonderful, filled with active, dynamic, social young people happy to put in the hours and proud of the product we were representing. It didn't matter that we worked 13-hour days; life was all about smiles and good times.

As the summer rolled on I was in my element, out in the open air, working hard and saving money too. My best mate Jay, fresh back from a year living in South Africa, got a job with us for the last few weeks, which made the daily 'grind' even more enjoyable. I'd missed him, so when he said he'd be heading back in a few months I felt a pang of jealousy. His travelling lifestyle was truly enviable.

'What's stopping you from coming with me, Ben?' Jay asked nonchalantly, making it sound easy.

'Umm... I've got a job to find and a career to start. I can't go off gallivanting around the world... can I?'

'Well if you don't go, you'll never know', Jay replied smugly, walking away with a glint in his eye.

For a few days I didn't think about the proposition, until Mary, the owner of First Results, pulled me aside after another long day at work.

'Ben, you've been brilliant this summer; we've really enjoyed having you around. You live the brand, use your common sense, have an eye for detail and always wear a smile.'



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