

## Julia Mear met Ingrid Betzler in Axminster



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I'm often asked if, after several years living in the middle East and working in some of the countries most challenged with humanitarian catastrophe, corruption, and war, whether life seems mundane now. Despite our own country's challenges, living with a national health service, and bathing my children in drinking water is wonderful.

I grew up on the edge of the Blackdown hills in rural Somerset surrounded by family, fields, and animals. I was incredibly fortunate. After schooling I earned a place at Leeds University to do Classical Civilization. At 17 I had no idea what I wanted to do professionally, but I liked the sound of it. I did know that I wanted to get out and see the world, so I deferred my place and took a year to travel. I worked multiple jobs and scraped together enough money to buy an around the world plane ticket. After my 8-month trip I came to realise I didn't want to study the past and managed to talk my way into the Asia-Pacific Studies and International Relations degree programme instead.

Following university and an opportunistic summer internship in Mongolia, I found myself back at my parents' house



*Ingrid Betzler*

job hunting in the 2008 recession. After university we expected to stroll into a career but that wasn't the case. I moved to Bristol and found work at a call centre between constant job applications. While on calls, reeling off the same script, I would stare at a map dreaming up adventures and eventually the idea got into my head that I could bike from home in Somerset across the continent to Istanbul. The idea stuck. I continued to unsuccessfully apply for jobs, so I said to myself "If I don't get this next job I'm giving up and biking to Istanbul". I didn't get the job. So I biked. I had a shoestring budget, a £100 bike from eBay, an old tent, a gas stove and £200 spending money. I unwisely decided to leave in March when the weather was cold and wet. I loaded up ready to go, but I'd never actually ridden my bike with the loaded panniers, so when I tried to set off, I tipped over. The bike and all the bags weighed the same as me and I had not trained! I didn't have a smart phone, so I navigated by paper map. To start with I could cycle a maximum of 40 miles a day and I was absolutely done.

My parents were worried, to say the least, but I had warm places to stay in England through connections with the charity I was raising money for. Starting in France I wild camped in my tiny tent. I set up camp just before dark, but not too early so I would be spotted. I'd make a little dinner and then get into my tent, but I couldn't sleep because every noise was someone breaking into my tent. In the end I bought some earplugs.

I got stronger. I cycled across France to Germany, to Austria and to Serbia and by the end I was cycling 100 miles a day and singing as I climbed hills. If I was near a town I cycled around and looked for a garden with toys. I'd go in and write a sign in the local language, explaining what I was doing and hold it up or read it out. Lots of people let me sleep in their gardens or would invite me in for dinner with their family. I was blown away by the kindness of strangers. 2000 miles later I was in Turkey.

The charity I raised money for was ShelterBox – a humanitarian organization based in Cornwall. At the time, they deployed volunteers to disasters to distribute aid. I applied to join the response team prior to my bike ride and

was accepted while I was biking. I flew back and started as a Shelter Box response team member. The response team volunteering turned into an internship that eventually turned into a job in Falmouth, Cornwall for a few years. From ShelterBox I was able to leapfrog onto a fast track humanitarian training program with Save the Children. The programme had us working and training in London, Kenya, and France. A final deployment of the programme took me to Afar, in rural Ethiopia, for six months of intensive learning on a drought response while grappling every stomach issue you can imagine – I still can't eat goat! In Ethiopia I started to specialise in an area of humanitarian work known as cash and voucher assistance. The focus is giving people humanitarian assistance in the form of cash, vouchers, or electronic transfers rather than physical items like food or clothes with the intention that people know what they need most while also supporting the local market.

After all the learning, volunteering and adventuring I accepted my first "real" job in the humanitarian world, in Turkey, working on the Syria crisis in 2013. I was based in Antakya – a stunning historic near-border town in Southern Turkey and I was absolutely out of my depth. At 27yrs, no prior management experience, and suddenly responsible for an incredible team who were going back and forth into Syria to provide the needed assistance. I'd work all day, every day, until 10 or 11 at night. The work was incredibly demanding but I loved it and was learning fast – an old colleague of mine would say, 'like drinking from a fire hose'.

That's when I met Bjorn. A co-worker was having a birthday party in our office in the old town Antakya. We were doing similar work. He would entice me out of my office in the evenings by putting a glass of wine on my desk. We got to know each other through work and hiking the beautiful hills surrounding Antakya. Slowly we became inseparable.

We eventually got a house together and enjoyed our limited free time. After three years of long hours and high stress we left to take some time off before getting married. Bjorn learned to surf and we went to Minnesota in America to spend time with Bjorn's family and friends.





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Next we moved to Lebanon, where Bjorn got a job in the Beqaa Valley and I got a job as a Global Technical Advisor for cash-based humanitarian work. As an Adviser I supported humanitarian cash programs across multiple countries around the world. Moving frequently between contexts and continents was fascinating. One month I'd be travelling in Afghanistan in an armoured vehicle, wearing a headscarf and a bulletproof vest, the next I was in remote Nigeria where the camel spiders felt like a bigger threat than Boko Haram, and next meeting with families recently escaped from ISIS rule in Mosul, Iraq.

All the travelling meant I hardly saw Bjorn so we ended up moving to Beirut to better enjoy the time we had. We used to go surfing a lot – at the end of the Mediterranean there's surprisingly great surfing and stunning vineyards. That's Bjorn's influence on me in life, wherever we are he finds the best things to do (or eat).

During our time in Beirut we got pregnant with our son, and we decided it would be a good idea to be near the NHS. We moved to Somerset just before COVID and felt lucky to be home isolating near my parents. Looking for houses in the pandemic was not fun, prices were skyrocketing. We had nearly lost hope until we found this wonderful, secluded valley on the edge of Axminster with an old silage clamp that somehow had planning permission. We saw it on a Friday afternoon and put in an offer before the close of business.

At this point we were pregnant again with our second. When our daughter was just a month old we moved into a mobile home on site and managed the build as much as possible on our own. We wintered in the caravan, working, building, and taking care of two children in nappies. We worked as hard as we ever had and moved into our new home the following spring.

With the house (mostly) built I took a job to support the Ukraine response remotely as a Technical Advisor. Despite working remotely I was sucked into the long hours and pressure of the humanitarian sector so after 2 years I switched to consulting. My work now involves research and evaluation, working to use data to improve humanitarian responses.

We are happy to be in Devon, hopefully staying safe with a third child on the way later this year. Together we're enjoying our time gardening, surfing, and taking care of the animals on our smallholding and feeling closer to the right work/life balance. While I'm passionate about humanitarian field work, for us it is incompatible with raising a healthy family. I think back to my childhood and would like my children to feel the security I did growing up. Sadly, our two last houses before moving back were destroyed, our first house in the old town of Antakya was completely flattened in the 2023 Turkey/Syrian earthquake, and our home in Beirut was irreparably damaged in the blast in 2020.

We are both so grateful to live in a safe country and still do work that is interesting and useful. ☺