

TONY'S LONG ROAD HOME

It has taken almost four years, but in running around the world, Tony Mangan has done what few will ever achieved. This is a tale of adventure, courage and single-minded determination; a triumph of the spirit in pursuit of a unique dream. Gavin McGuinness meets the world traveller. Main Photo: Brendan Moran / sportsfile.com

TONY Mangan has been running around the world for nearly four years. Now, 48 pairs of runners later, he has landed back home. He's not like other people, he's much more. For him, there are no limits.

Fans of ultra-running will be well aware of Tony as the double treadmill and indoor 48-hour world record holder. His physical and mental readiness for epic challenges is proven and legendary. Still, this challenge broke new ground.

Indeed, it was an unfathomable risk – even for such a hardened athlete. This was a step into the unknown. And alone, at that.

No one had ever done what he was proposing; to travel the world on foot from west to east over four years

The direction alone set him apart from the handful of others who have circumnavigated the globe. Explorer Ferdinand Magellan had his ship and a small army of men, but even he didn't make it home. Tony had his feet and a 40kg buggy (when fully loaded) called Nirvana.

Yet the 57-year-old from the Liberties had no choice but to go for it. When a notion has eaten away at you for decades, as this did,

at some stage you've got to bite down on it or forget about it completely. Tony bit; as he puts it: "Since the day I got this idea I've been a prisoner of my own dream".

THE JOURNEY

It was in October of 2010 at the Dublin Marathon that the quest began. Fuelled by a little money and lot of heart he set out to chase his long-harboured vision. To get to the start line was an achievement in itself, what with the organisation involved and all the years of wondering.

Redundancy from his construction job helped focus his mind; now was the time. As



Tony back in 2010 getting set for his world tour.



"Every morning I hit the snooze button. Eventually reality dawns as I slowly climb out of my lovely warm and comfortable bed. Soon this comfort will be traded for the unknown of life on the road. In a few short weeks' time I will be climbing out of a tent and into the harsh Canadian snow. Life won't be so easy then, I will probably have to melt snow for my coffee. I can't help asking myself just what I am letting myself in for."
– Tony Mangan, 2010

- ### Tony's travels: the itinerary of a run around the world
- | | | | | |
|------------------------|---------------|-----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| 1) Republic of Ireland | 9) Costa Rica | 17) Fiji | 25) Burma | 33) Austria |
| 2) Canada | 10) Panama | 18) New Zealand | 26) India | 34) Czech Republic |
| 3) USA | 11) Colombia | 19) Australia | 27) Iran | 35) Germany |
| 4) Mexico | 12) Ecuador | 20) East Timor | 28) Turkey | 36) The Netherlands |
| 5) Guatemala | 13) Peru | 21) Indonesia | 29) Bulgaria | 37) Belgium |
| 6) El Salvador | 14) Bolivia | 22) Singapore | 30) Serbia | 38) France |
| 7) Honduras | 15) Argentina | 23) Malaysia | 31) Hungary | 39) England |
| 8) Nicaragua | 16) Chile | 24) Thailand | 32) Slovakia | 40) Wales |
| | | | | 41) Northern Ireland |

PHOTOS: TOMÁS GREALLY



Homecoming – with his mother Ann

Victor Hugo said: “Each man should frame life so that at some future hour fact and his dreaming meet”.

Twelve years earlier Tony had been so far into the idea of walking the world that he even had the promotional T-shirts printed. In 1978 he cycled across Europe and through Iran and Afghanistan on the way to Korea, amongst other places. Once a fearless romantic, always a fearless romantic.

I catch up with Tony in the autumn of 2014. Only months from home, he hasn't been disappointed by the experience.

“This run has been the real deal, beyond my wildest dreams. I will be glad when it's over, at least pain-wise, but I will have lost my baby.” He admits to the bittersweet sensation of missing the huge daily challenge. “Someone summed it up perfectly: ‘Happy to finish, sad it's over’.”

The baby, as he calls it, has afforded him emotions few, if any, will ever have. However, we can identify in ways. Most people will know the joy of discovering a holiday destination with a lazy morning run; but imagine seeing the entire world like that! Mangan doesn't have to imagine it.

“It's an amazing experience,” he says. “To see a country gradually change; that is the great thing about slow foot travel. You see a country gently unfold before you.

“I did not like eastern Turkey at first,” he says to illustrate his point, “and then, when I was about 10 days into the country, I found I loved it much more. If you travel on a bus you may pass through western Iran without even realising that the people there speak Turkish and Azerbaijani, not Farsi, as their main language.”

TALES OF THE UNEXPECTED

From the outset, the sense of the unexpected has been a constant stimulant.

“ The whole world jog cost about as much as a small SUV

In Canada the State Police kept getting calls about a man running on the Trans-Canadian Highway, pushing a pram. It was just Tony and Nirvana.

In America he was stood up by a local athletics club in Portland, Maine, despite having been promised support.

In Mexico he slept in police stations while under police escort through 2,000km of a 4,000km route and smiled at their generosity, having previously considered dressing as a tramp to stay safe.

In Guatemala he thought nothing of a re-route due to a collapsed flood-damaged bridge and then being caught up in a monsoon. In Colombia he struggled to avoid FARC guerrilla territory.

Mangan has thousands of amusing stories like these and, by and large, they are positive ones. However, not much good could be said of some places.

“I am still a bit angry and traumatised after India,” he admits, particularly because of the driving and harassment he experienced. “I never met so many idiots in one country in my life. You have to understand that my life was at the mercy of idiots behind a wheel. It was the same in Indonesia, but not as bad.”

Indeed, visitors to his rivetting site, www.worldjog.com, will have been troubled by Tony's images of Indian communities without sanitation, where entire villages are surrounded by animal dung which is used as a building material and a source of fuel.

Because of what he saw, his blog is much more than a simple account of his running; it is an engaging social commentary that promotes social justice. That, he explains, was not his intention.

“I wanted the blog to be non-political, but I was sickened by corruption in countries like India and Indonesia,” he says. However, he doesn't want to dwell on all he has left behind in Asia. That would be negative. “Come on! I only set out to run around the world. But the trouble is I've got too much time on my hands, or rather on my feet, to think about things!”

HEALTHY OUTLOOK

This refusal to dwell on the drawbacks has undoubtedly helped him struggle through the inevitable difficult days. And there have been plenty of those.

“I have had a lot of ups and downs,” he says, tracing the origin back to his early days in South America. “It started to become really tough for me when I was in the Andes over two years ago. I have been really hanging in since.”

Most runners hang in for the final lap, or the last couple of kilometres but, for Mangan, hanging in is something else. To him it means keeping it together across South America, New Zealand, Australia and Asia. ‘Hanging in’ is one modest turn of phrase.

Across immovable obstacles like the Andes, he has been buoyed by his experiences. For example, even though Asia offered many painful experiences, he has particularly fond memories. For example: “Being escorted across Myanmar by the police in a country that was closed to the outside world until recently”.

There have been many such highlights



Back on Irish soil.

but, when pushed for his favourite memory of the expedition, his ultimate answer shows that the competitive spirit remains: “Running across Australia in a record time of nine-and-a-half weeks from Queenscliff to Darwin is a great memory”, he says. “It's about 3,800km.”

Indeed, many people questioned his sanity in running across that near-desert country. His reply was to quietly run it in record time. He is quick to point out that he had great help through his support driver Michael Gillan, who will be in Dublin for the marathon. Mangan ran the whole of Oceania at an average of 50km per day.

BROKEN EASTERN PROMISES

That run in Australia and the Americas and Oceania in general came with logistical difficulties, but it was in Asia that he was forced to revert to Plans B, C, D and E on several occasions. China and Pakistan were two of the main casualties due to visa and security issues, though he never compromised his overall goal of running the world.

“Having to skip Pakistan as it was just too dangerous was a big regret,” he says. “I kept on hearing scary stuff all the time from other travellers. It would have been not only foolish but irresponsible to have tried.” Mangan's caution in this regard was well founded; the Irish Foreign Affairs Department sent him an article which described how a Spanish world cyclist with a police escort of 12 officers was ambushed by the Taliban. Six officers were killed, six officers and the cyclist wounded. Tony was also told about K2 climbers and aid workers being attacked and kidnapped.

Despite such big sacrifices, he has few regrets. After all, there has been plenty else to focus on, namely averaging a marathon a day for 1,123 days and 48,700 kilometres at time of this interview. After nearly four years Mangan has felt every one of those kilometres. Runs he's previously done, such as the 72-hour Across The Years Road Track Race and the 426.178 kilometres for the world 48-hour indoor track record only prepare you for so much.

“I am changed. I'm now very slow and my body is all beat up,” he said. It hasn't stopped him though.

Unsurprisingly, in true tough-guy mode, he says he doesn't stretch. “I do my warm-up when I run in the desert!”

MONEY MATTERS

There is a humility and free-wheeling simplicity to him, but it is tied to a ferocious will and, pertinently, a keen



An emotional return to Dublin.

“ I may want to travel again, but not by running

attention to detail. Tony has needed the latter quality in dealing with the financial challenges of the trip. It is a topic a lot of people ask about. The answer is he managed it through a few sponsors, donations by fans, some “small savings and a redundancy cheque”.

“The North Pole Marathon, The Great Outdoors and Athletics Ireland have been very kind supporters. Many people think this is a Rannulph Fiennes-type expedition! I make this work by leading a frugal life on the road. You've got to be sharp,” he says of the business of watching prices.

You can see he is a little tired of talking about finance and it is easy to understand why. One look at his blog shows how frugal and resourceful he is. His is an ascetic, monkish existence.

“The whole world run cost about the same as a small SUV; about €40,000,” he says by way of closing out the subject “and people don't ask other people how they can afford a car or even how they can afford to get married.”

Luckily, his needs are simple. He drinks a lot of tea, usually filling up his beaker in petrol stations if he is allowed. Strong will, weak tea. His main requirement has been a place to stay. In this he has found the generosity of people incredible. His blog is filled with strangers, now friends, who have housed him as he passed through their town. He has also slept in petrol stations, trucks, truck stops and on the side of the road. Rannulph Fiennes this isn't.

THE FUTURE

One of the big questions posed, now that the run is over, is - what now?

“I may want to travel again but not running,” he says. “I think it will take me

at least a year to physically recover; perhaps I never will!” In the meantime, he does know what he'll do when he gets to Dublin: “A big fry-up! And a rest. And then a long holiday.”

After that, who knows? “Perhaps I will pursue a career as a motivational speaker or do lectures on the run, as I love talking about it so much.”

“I don't really know about the future. It seems only a short while ago I was laughing at that question as it was so far away,” he says. “Now it's very much real! It will be strange for me not having to put my shoes on. Small things like going to a supermarket (will be different) and being able to find what I need.”

Between now and then, check out Tony's website for the Irish itinerary and maybe plan to run with him, or sponsor his trip as he circuits Ireland on the way to Dublin and the marathon on October 27. What's sure is that you won't be disappointed.

You'll learn about the reality of life in Iran away from western media, where in Yazd province (Iran) many houses have two door knockers with different sounds so as the occupants know if a man or a woman should answer, how they keep the food beside motor oil in Turkish supermarkets, and how in India they make soft drinks out of cows' urine.

That's Tony Mangan's world. It's a wonderful world.

To support Aware and Tony please text WORLDJOG to 50300 to donate €4. (100% of text cost goes to Aware across most network providers. Some providers apply VAT which means a minimum of €3.26 will go to Aware. Service Provider: LIKECHARITY. Helpline: 01 4433890). * Siobhan Clifford, Blue Bubble Marketing was part of Tony's crew for his run around Ireland.