

## Machu Picchu

Where did it start ?

I'm standing at the peak of Machu Picchu. It does make you wonder where it all began. What leads you to this beautiful, serene moment with every remaining limb aching? You would have to start where it became "remaining limbs" to really begin to understand my view on life.

It feels odd to say that losing my leg was the making of me. Waking up in a hospital bed at the age of five it would have been hard to see that. I was very lucky to be alive after being thrown from a car in an accident. Both my mum and brother were both involved in it, and my dad had to watch it all unfold in front of him. There was only one major physical casualty: me. I suffered head injuries as well as losing my right leg. The future wasn't a certainty. This is where the fighting spirit started for me. Or so I have been told.

Being so young I didn't know any better, or worse for that matter. So for me getting around on crutches was completely normal. Even now, I don't ever remember having two legs. I am not going to say my life was that hard growing up, either. School, which was the usual working-class route of a state infant school to the local comprehensive seemed the 'normal' thing for me.

I have the most wonderful parents who realised at an early stage that trying to wrap me in cotton wool would be useless. From learning to ride a pushbike again to wanting to learn professional wrestling, my parents knew that I would do it anyway.

Learning to ride a pushbike with only your left leg is not the simplest of tasks. Determination and a great ability to dust yourself off were required. I soon learnt that when I came to a stop I could not lean to the right.

Simple lessons. Repeated. Soon the task is mastered and the next challenge is on the horizon.

Fast forward 22 years: I am stood on a mountain range looking at Machu Picchu, having spent the previous four days hiking over 26 miles at altitudes as high as 4,200m. Let those numbers sink in. Coming from the UK we don't really have massive mountain ranges to use as reference points. Ben Nevis, the highest UK mountain, is only 1,345m, which gives you some idea. To say the least, it was tough.

Machu Picchu, at least to most people who haven't been there, is just a set of ruins on a mountain in Peru. For those who have toiled for days on rocky paths and thousands of steps to actually get there, it is much more.

The journey starts from Cusco where you meet the people you are going to spend the next 4 days with. Lucky for me I had been travelling with those people for a few weeks beforehand. They had been introduced to my determination.

I had some notion of how hard it would be. I know I am not a hiker and four days' walking would be extremely difficult. I knew that my hands would take the brunt of the punishment. So I prepared for the task in hand. I taped up my hands like a

boxer, hoping it would spread the pressure. Blisters would mean an instant end to the trek. So the preparation was well needed. I had striven to be in shape for the trip. Several years of playing international sport had helped, but being hockey-fit is one thing. Hiking on crutches is completely different.

The first two days you spend looking at the beautiful scenery and hoping that over the next hill you will see the ruins. The narrow track is not really suited for crutches; it is often slippery shale, uneven steps and old, rickety bridges.

Bridges such as this one: straight out the tales of pirates searching for their buried treasure. It looked like it would give way every time someone walked across it. But we all did, and lived to tell the tale.

At every step you see new wonders, but danger is lurking around every bend. Not one of the mountain passes has a guardrail. One wrong step could be the difference between a beautiful scenic hike and a crash course in learning to fly. Even I, who have not been the most cautious with some things in my life, thought it would be a good idea to take my time. I would make make sure the footings were safe and the ground firm.

Getting huge deep breaths of pure air every morning as you roll out of your tent is a great feeling. Whereas the camping itself is less than glamorous. I was not expecting 5-star hotels on the hike, but a toilet where you didn't have to squat would have been a nice luxury. Especially as being a single-leg amputee... I cant squat! So improvising effective toilet seats became one of my daily challenges. You don't read that in any guide books.

I have of course had to camp on quite a few of my travels. So having the advantage of beautiful scenery for a change rather than a toilet block in the back of beyond, was a huge morale-raiser when you unzipped the door and peered out at the start of a new, and probably exhausting, day.

The saving grace for me was a great team of guides and sherpas, without whom it would have been impossible for me to keep going for the four days. They would carry the tent and a few kilos of belongings from station to station, and build a camp twice each day. One for the half-way stop where food would have been cooked for you. The second would be where all the tents are arranged for the evening and more food was provided. It is worth noting that every bit of cutlery, food and drink is carried by the team of sherpas. Nothing is left on the mountain. They carry everything with them. The sherpas were the true heroes of the trek for me.

The good thing about climbing up a hill, which for me is the hard part, is that you get the joy of going down again. However, on trails of century-old steps made from uneven stone, this can be daunting. Peering over the edge of another hilltop to see a winding staircase, where a slight trip would see you rolling down the mountain like a cartoon character, can fill you with apprehension.

Using crutches for so long you get used to not putting your hand out when you fall. But here it wouldn't make any difference. If you were going to fall, I would say: "Get the beers ready for when I meet you at the bottom." Because not a lot is going to stop you.

As I said earlier, walking up the stairs is the hardest part of using crutches. Having to lift up your total weight with just your upper body is exhausting. So when turning a bend in the trail to be confronted by yet another steep stairway, climbing into what feels like eternity, your heart sinks. You take a deep breath

and keep reminding yourself that for every step you take, you are one step closer to your goal.

And that goal would be the obligatory photo above the citadel of Machu Picchu. We have all see the picture in holiday brochures - and now I could say I had been there. I have stood on that rock and looked over an accent ruin, which still has running water.

Making it to the end with nothing more than a few bruises was better than I could have hoped for. The memories from the trip have kept me smiling years after. The long days of hiking in the hills with the sun beating down on my back have now been etched into the best parts of my memory, where everything is still in vivid colour and I can still feel the breeze in the air.

Reaching the town below the citadel, happy to have completed a mammoth challenge, I sit with a beer in my hand. There are several moments in my life that where, even now, when I look back they fill me with such pride. I am so grateful that I have had the chance to experience these wonderful places. Not just because of my disability - but in spite of it. People who said it couldn't be done just held everyone back.

I don't follow their rules, or yours. I make my own. The boundaries you impose on me speak louder about you than of me. I am a man who will always push myself to the limits and beyond. I understand some of my limitations. This does not govern what I try to achieve. It merely guides me in the direction I must go in order to achieve the unachievable.