Transcript of Podcast 079: Running

Hello :)

It's November and I'm not living in the UK's second-wettest urban area any more. Not that you'd notice. My local Parkrun's course flooded for the second time in about five weeks this weekend (they have an alternative route to avoid the ducks and geese where necessary), and at least one of the named storms that's passed recently has ruffled up the artificial turf on our balcony like a duvet after a particularly restless night.

{deep sigh}

Cripes, so, because my last podcast was a stand-alone dedicated pod, I've got a whole host of housekeeping life updates for you, because A Lot Has Happened, and some of it quite fundamental. Don't worry, it's all good stuff. I never know how my housekeeping vibes with y'all as it's all quite self-absorbed and lengthens the podcast, but equally, I'm a personality podder not a travel podder and I always felt it was important to know more about the enby behind the microphone, much like how it's always interesting to see what Instagram Influencers are like when they're not posing in a sundress in front of a famous monument; it gives a sense of the 'authentic', it shows there's real people behind these posts.

I do not have a sundress. I've never found one in my size that I liked.

I suppose the most important thing to note about my 'realism' in the past month though has been ... I got my hair coloured. I finally managed to get to Glasgow without too many delays, and spent a shade over four hours in a small room in an arts/crafts collective in Pollokshields getting my hair bleached and coloured. I learned, because it's not something I've ever done before, that bleaching hair doesn't turn it white, but actually quite a cool but vibrant yellow. The colour of healthy urine, which, I guess, when you think about what bleaching actually is, makes a weird amount of parallel sense, Anyway. When she added the colour it at first looked quite dark blue, but as it dried the purple became supremely vibrant. It was pretty much exactly what I was hoping for. It also made me look 10 years younger and far more lesbian. Which also, well, maybe,

I was fearful beforehand about how long it would last, and had expectations of it lasting three days and then fading to brown. But over three weeks later and people are still wowed by it. Yesterday I had a couple passing me in the street and I overheard one of them saying to the other 'why don't you get your hair dyed like that?', then while sat on a table outside a pub last night, two chaps came over to me and asked if they could have a selfie with me because of my hair. It's kind of weird being so much more 'noticeable', but it's doing great things for my self-confidence.

The only downside is being a middle-aged male-bodied person is that my hair is receding a bit and I'm getting a bald spot, which is slightly irking me, but I'll have a ponder about what to do about that.

One of the reasons for getting it dyed when I did was because I knew this month would be pretty social for me, so I wanted to look my most ... my most 'me', I guess. At the start of the month was the World Travel Market, an event at the ExCel in London where lots of travel companies and tourist boards come together to promote

themselves and try to get business. It's a weird place for a travel-oriented content creator but we count as 'media' which helps in conversations. Anyway I had a couple of interesting chats but mostly I was there for networking, since I'm far too disorganised to plan out exactly what it is I want and what I need to sell myself as. I probably said that last year too. And every WTM since 2018 I suspect.

The weekend after WTM I met with a bunch of kinksters in a pub in Liverpool. Well, that was the Saturday. The Sunday was ... somewhat more hands-on, literally. I did mention this in my pod two episodes ago; I went to a small gathering in what is normally a swingers club in the industrial suburbs of Birkenhead, for a tickle play party - if any Full Swap Radio podcasts want me to guest-appear and talk about tickle play, hit me up. Anyway it was much less angsty and much more open and friendly than I'd been fearful of. But it's a perfect example of why I moved to Manchester, and proof of the success of my social media strategy. These are things I've always been interested in turning up to, but I was always conscious that being an introverted male-bodied person who didn't know anyone meant I feared I'd just be sat on the edge looking lost and obviously out-of-place. So I joined the Discord servers, started to chat to people, went on voicechats, got to know them a bit, so ... even on the Saturday in the pub munch meetup, I was still anxious about turning up not knowing what any of them really looked like, and being worried that they'd be all talking to each other and I'd not be able to say hi, or that there'd be several different groups in there and I'd be nervous about introducing myself to the wrong one. In the event, I walked down the stairs into the place where they were meeting and they saw me and shouted my name, so that was a very good help. They recognised me before I'd even got off the stairs to look around - the hair, mainly. It always helps to stand out when you're a socially-anxious introvert. But yeh, we chatted for several hours so when we all met up outside the play party venue the next day, even though I was arriving on my own and still a little nervous about it, they were there before me and it was fine. I was still slightly worried that they'd end up doing their own things once inside, but if I learned anything from the event, it was that this community is very friendly and casual and inclusive.

I have an upcoming episode on 'Love and Sex on the road' so I'll keep the deets of the event itself for that, as it's definitely related, so if you want to know more, you'll just have to wait a month or two.

I actually met some of them again yesterday, in another pub munch in Leeds; same as last Saturday really - chat in a pub about not necessarily kinky things, and drinking beer and cocktails. It's weird, is Leeds, for me, since pretty much it's a city I've visited several times, but apart from the University open day I went to in 1993 where I got quite lost, I've only gone there to drink beer. To be fair it has a lot of decent pubs and breweries; we ended up last night in the brewtap for nearby Ossett Brewery but there are many others.

Another group of people I've met up with recently were the local Asexuality group in Manchester. I didn't go to their meetup last month because they were doing a film night and I don't do films, but this month was a discussion about a recent Stonewall-initiated report into Asexuality and its presence in things like media and healthcare provision, There were nine of us there, meeting in a back room inside a museum (which I got lost in), and while I knew less about them because their online presence is quite quiet, I still felt, because I'd already made contact with them, that I wasn't going in totally metaphorically blind. It was a pretty good discussion too, and I think it was also a couple of the other people's first time going. Next month's a board games evening - they like to mix up the event types so everyone's interests feel included.

All that remains, for the main regular part at least, is the non-binary night, but I think that's always fallen thus far on days I'm not around. And next month will be the same, given I'll be away in South East Asia, on a backpacking trip whose routing makes no logical sense if you looked at it on a map, but that's what you get when you only have 12 days and a travel partner with very specific tastes and needs that are far away from each other. I hope she appreciates Laos.

I need a calendar.

{section separation jingle}

I've been meaning to do a pod specifically about running for a while; it's something that I mention quite often in my housekeeping and I've also tangentially talked about it in smaller sections on pods covering a wider remit. As such, some of what I'll talk about you'll have heard before, but I felt it was the right time to cover this topic again now. Even if I've not done Parkrun for a couple of weeks due to weather or logistics.

I've always been a runner. Well, I mean, that's not entirely true since there's a large part of my middle life when I did an actual run quite infrequently, but in principle, I started running when I was a teenager, and still do it

now, with almost the same level of dedication. Albeit about three minutes a mile slower, because I was actually fit then.

I'm not quite sure why I fell into running in the first place though. I think in part it's because it was about the only sport I didn't suck at. Like, I went to a private school that had an ex-England rugby union international as its primary sports teacher. We didn't get along. And if you've ever seen me you'd know that rugby would not be my sport. There were few alternatives; field hockey was a distant second but does anyone really trust me to wield a big stick at a solid ball and not break anything? The same went for cricket in the summer. Those of us who were not gifted at any of these sports ended up in a catch-all group called 'rugby extras' which was kind of a 'we don't really care about you so we're going to make you do rugby anyway and laugh at you while you fail' kind of group. And you wonder why many kids get alienated by sport.

Anyway, part of that was cross-country running; there was a cross-country team but of no real regard and provenance - it existed because it had to, not because anyone wanted it to - and there was no dedicated running 'squad' at that time, it was literally just those people who finished in high positions in the annual school cross-country run. Most of the other kids hated doing cross-country, and either walked, or just skived altogether (the route passed close to several of their houses so popping home for an hour was regularly done).

But for whatever reason, I kind of clicked with it. Near where I lived is a pine forest and red squirrel nature reserve, and my uncle used to take the dog for a walk in it of an evening; he'd drive me there and I'd run home on one of about four routes (a distance of between three and five miles) through the woods, along the sand dunes, or on the main road, depending on how I was feeling. And I felt free. I didn't enjoy my school career, for a variety of reasons my therapist is fully aware of, but on those trails, I was alone and able to be the person I wanted to be. It's why I have an affinity for pine forests even now, I'm pretty sure.

In addition, even then. I liked walking in general. I'd occasionally go for decent-length walks around the town or through the country footpaths - just south of where I lived was a dead railway line that had been turned into a long-distance footpath, and I used to walk along it a bit. Sadly it's not the most exciting walk given that part of north-west England is a flat mossy plain that a rise in sea levels will only make more aesthetic It's not the most boring part of England but only because The Fens around Ely are considerably bigger. That railway line had a station on it called Mossbridge which ... I've no idea what it served since it was where a road through the moss heading east/west crossed the line heading northwest/southeast. That was it. Possibly it existed just to write something on a map to fill in the space; a kind of 19th Century 'here be dragons'. It closed in 1917 and no-one really noticed. There was another line to the East that ran from Altcar to Southport which had a station at every road bridge, with names like 'Plex Moss Lane Halt' and 'New Cut Lane Halt'. I often bemoan the loss of much of the UK's rail network, but I have my limits.

Something something ADHD. Anyway. So I'd always had that vibe of just going out and being on my own, of going somewhere by foot just for the sheer pleasure of doing so. It's also, I guess, why I like hiking, and it's maybe surprising that I never connected the two and took up neither fell-running nor ultra-marathons. I guess my dyspraxia and my consequent unwillingness to go down slopes at high speed doesn't help either of those to be honest, though the latter's been in my mind since my hike across Great Britain in 2019.

Later on in my school career, something unexpected happened. The way sports worked at our school was that there were several groups of skill levels within sports like Rugby and Hockey, and there'd be a teacher or two assigned to each group; these teachers maybe knew little about sport cos their specialist subject was like Maths or French or something, but they were there to oversee and whatnot. Two new teachers joined, and were assigned into Cross-Country running; presumably they said something at their interview that the headmaster took offence to. One was a casual hippie-like chemistry teacher, the other was a history teacher who was ex-army and had a real chip on his shoulder about that whole experience. The impression I got was that both very quickly took a bit of a dislike to the school, and reacted in the most unexpected way: as 'good cop bad cop', and powered mainly by what seemed to be spite at the stuffiness and traditional nature of the school and the way they saw sport in particular, they turned the school's cross-country team from also-rans (pun intended) into the 6th best in the north of England. We ended up sliding into a Saturday morning cross-country running league in Merseyside running against teams of full-grown adults representing the likes of the Civil Service and the Fire Brigade, and finished third.

I've no idea how long they stayed on after we all left for University, or whether the school still has a decent cross-country team, but for two glorious years between 1991 and 1993, we were Noticed, and the school didn't really know what to do with us.

I kind of fell out of the running vibe when I went to University; I kept trying to get back into it but I never quite managed it. In a sense the walking kind of took over - I'd always end up walking for miles just around and about for no real purpose other than to go down roads I'd never been down before. Often these walks ended in pubs, and maybe one of the reasons I walked more than I ran was so I could do things like take my time, see places more than just in passing, and visit things like pubs and shops that I'd otherwise not get to experience if I ran past them at speed. It also meant I could carry a bag; I hate running with a backpack (another reason I've never gelled with ultra-running I guess). I still walked quite quick though, and could knock out a decent jog where necessary.

Sometimes though I just see it as a weird 'effort'; psychologically it feels different to prepare for a run than a walk, even though there's really no practical difference in terms of I'm still going out to move at my own pace. I guess it's more the expension of energy and effort - I feel like I have to feel fit to go for a jog, but not for a walk, even if my walks end up being far longer and spending the same amount of energy.

And given this is a travel podcast, that kind of thing passes over to my trips away from home, where I'm oddly even less likely to go running, but there's a number of other reasons for that, as you'll now hear.

{section separation jingle}

You'd've thought I'd go running a lot when I was abroad, as it'd be a good way to quickly orient myself in a new place. But to be honest, I tend not to. Partly because I'm always quite active anyway, and it's a lot easier to take photographs etc when walking - and I don't carry anything when I run, not even my phone.

This is actually an important point, and one where I know I differ from other runners. Like, I've never got into the whole Strava thing, despite being a data analyst by career and that should therefore be an easy application and second nature for someone like me. And yet. And yet. So I'll generally plot out a route on Google Maps but more so I can gauge a rough distance and so I can have in my mind the rough routing. I don't really care how fast I've gone, or specific details about distance and time. Now, for runs at home, it doesn't matter if I don't have my phone since I generally know where I am, or if I don't, I kinda know how to get back to where I am. But if I'm in a place I don't know, all I'd have to go on is a sketched route based off Google Maps, and that would mean having to keep topping to check it all the time just to make sure. Which relies on my transcription being accurate, Also, at home, there's a fair chance I'll have walked the route first; when I'm travelling I might not have time to do that as well. And I'd rather explore a new place by walking than by running anyway.

Thinking about it, that's probably a more important point anyway - if I'm only in a place for a limited time, say three or four days, I'm going to be spending the majority of that time exploring the surroundings, visiting the sights, and making maximum use of my time. This gives me less scope to actually go out for a run, even if that run'll only be for an hour or so, as there's preparation and cool-down time either side (stretching, warming up, warming down, showering).

It would thus be incredibly inefficient to get lost while running in a new place. And quite embarrassing.

Now, Steven Ericson, who goes online under the name of Steven On The Move, talks a bit about another aspect of running somewhere new, which avoids these dangers.

{STEVEN: *When I've travelled internationally and run in places, well one thing I do like doing when I'm trying to find a route to run when I'm travelling in the US if I'm not simply running city streets, what I might do is go talk to somebody at a local running store. Or just go look at their website and see if they have suggested routes workday host runs while I'm there visiting in town, because then that's an easy way to know that, hey I'm going to run with a group of individuals. I might not know these individuals but they're all runners. And I feel like the running community, you know, is fairly protective of each other and mindful about each other's safety. And so that's a good way to be able to run, with a group of people run in a space in place where you don't have to worry as much about your surroundings, when you're in a place that you're unfamiliar with them.*}

I've never done this, although I have travelled for Parkrun, which I'll talk about a bit later, but it makes logical sense. I'm also aware of organisations like the Hash House Harriers, though I've never taken part in any of their runs.

I only know them from being mentioned in passing during my trip to SE Asia in 2012, but it seems, despite

having started in World War Two era Malaysia and Singapore, it's a concept that's spread worldwide (1500 chapters, according to Wikipedia); the name seems to have come from the original venue in Malaysia that was casually called the 'hash house' because it served average food (when I was growing up, 'hash' was a sort of mix of meat - usually corned beef - mashed potato, and veg, all mixed together, which is pretty much the definition of average food. It's not very interesting, but it's functional, bulky, and hard to get wrong).

They're very much into the social side of running, with events that border on orienteering in the sense of following a defined trail with clues to the next directions, and generally put on events that mix running and beer - most of their runs end in the pub, so you'd've though this would have been right up my street, but I'm not that much of a social creature.

Another aspect to running while travelling is to do with the more practical aspect of luggage. While this isn't so much of an issue for me personally, I know people often have specific running clothing. I tend to travel with only hand luggage, and I wouldn't have room for extra clothes that I might not need otherwise, so if I were to go running it'd probably be in the previous day's t-shirt, and a running skort or leggings don't take up too much room and could function as underwear anyway - when you travel with only hand luggage, it helps if the more you have can be multi-purpose. I certainly wouldn't have room for running shoes if I wasn't going to use the same for generic walking around in - I mean back in the day I'd wear trainers as everyday-wear, so it wouldn't have been a problem for me, but many people don't do that. And shoes are bulky.

Steven talks a bit about this here.

{STEVEN: I think the biggest difference for me is the knowing that whatever fuel that I want to take for myself while I am running in general or racing on race day, that I need to secure with me before I travel. So you know that's just a little bit, little bit of an extra step before race day to take it, that I need to to plan out, but isn't anything that stressful or concerning whatsoever. As far as other issues that are different, you know, it's also that, well if I'm not home, or I'm not able to get anything from my house because there's nobody there to send anything to me, the biggest thing is to know that, okay, whatever race shoes or running shoes that I choose to take with me or what I have with me so I can't swap out. And if you're a runner who has more than one such shoes that can be a little problematic, because I have multiple running shoes and I use them for different things. So I haven't you know set of shoes that I used just for racing I have shoes that I use for a shorter easier run. I have shoes that I use for a tempo speedworkout type of thing. And and then of course I have shoes I'll just walk around in etc .. And so having to think through, okay, what shoes do I want to bring? How many shoes I'm I'm going to bring? And of course how does that affect how much space I have in my luggage? Is a little bit of a time consuming thing but definitely not a bad problem to have, if you enjoy being able to use shoes in a different format.}

Obviously, for those of you who know me, in general that's not a concern when packing, and I'll mention this a bit later too, but I do have running shoes for less-than-ideal terrain. They're called Skinners, they're about 3mm thick at the sole, and made from some kind of fibre and polymer combo that I don't have the engineering expertise to explain. They give me the flexibility I get when running barefoot, but without my having to worry about loose pebbles. They're also not very rigid so I can fold them up and stick them in a pocket or down my crop-top if I feel I don't need them on a run,

Skinners don't sponsor this podcast but that's something I ought to work on. I'd say that's a subtweet to my VA but it turns out she doesn't listen to the episodes very often so she might not notice.

{section separation jingle}

From 'running while travelling' to 'travelling for running', in the sense of specifically visiting a place for the purpose of going for a run. Again, we'll talk about Parkrun later, but here I want to talk about visiting somewhere for a big race. Which is something I've never done, to all intents and purposes, but Steve Biggs, who's online at BiggsyTravels, does on a regular basis. However, for the purposes of his contribution, he's deferred to one of his big running influences,

{BIGGSY: When I was asked to contribute some thoughts about travelling for running events, I did have a few personal anecdotes up my sleeve. But instead, I thought I'd focus on my dad Roger's exploits. He's run 913 official marathons. Yes, you heard that right. Nine One Three marathons. If you like a good stat, that's equivalent to running 96% of the way around the equator, or it's slightly further than running from Dublin to Queenstown, and back again. 913 sounds like a lot, and it is a lot, compared to my frankly disappointing 6, but

it's not even close to the world record of over 2,000. But my dad was the first Brit to run a marathon in every one of the 50 US States.

I wrote a blog post about him four years ago and asked him why he travelled so much to run them. His answer was that if you've been somewhere, you have an opinion of the place. But like anything you collect, once you start, you can't easily stop. So his hobby has led him to many places he wouldn't have necessarily considered before, including a lot of those 50 US States.

When I asked him what he gets from running a city, that you don't get from normal sightseeing, he answered with one word: atmosphere. I can vouch for that. New York is pretty epic. But running the New York City Marathon added a totally different dimension to it. I distinctly remember, Mile 20, and a DJ mouthing into his microphone 'Welcome To The Bronx' (apologies for the bad accent). I also asked him how he keeps his running mojo going, and he simply answered: travel. It's travel that's been the incentive to keep going. Why run a marathon around Milton Keynes (no offence Milton Keynes, it's actually a great course), when you can run a marathon around Honolulu or Reykjavik?

And due to who's hosting this podcast, I finally asked if he'd ever considered running barefoot. Another one word answer: no.}

I'll be doing a future podcast episode about Milton Keynes. But, aside from that, he raises a great point - because running events take place all over the world, it gives you a great reason and excuse to maybe go to places that are less attested and visited. I mean, pretty much everyone's got New York on their bucket list, and while the New York Marathon is indeed an epic bucket list item for athletic people, not quite as many people decide to visit Bismarck North Dakota. And something like a marathon gives you a reason to visit - you get to see and explore a place you might not have thought of, without getting disappointed and bored at it being off the beaten track for a reason. It's not really that different to my having visited Liechtenstein to watch a football match in a way - an event that takes people to a place they wouldn't otherwise have thought to go,

I don't know if many of my listeners hail from Bismarck North Dakota, let me know :)

As you might expect, Steven Ericson has travelled for many such a run. However for this podcast he told me a bit on how he felt going into his first foreign marathon, back in 2021, including the trepidation before the start.

{STEVEN: *the interesting thing is that my first foreign marathon, my first marathon outside the United States, was actually my first ever marathon. Which happened to be the London marathon in 2021. And I ran that marathon really before I understood a lot about running in a general sense.*

And I ran the London marathon in 2021 because I ran for charity. I ran for the change foundation which is a U. K. Based charity that seeks to empower marginalized young people through sport. My wife and I have had a relationship with them since January 2019. I knew that they had charity runner spots for the London marathon, and I had an opportunity to apply to be one of those people back in early twenty twenty one. I did, I was selected to be one of two people to run. And most importantly fundraise. And help bring awareness to what the Change Foundation does.

So, why was I angsty. How was it travelling abroad for the race, and you know that weird thing where honestly I have nothing else to compare it to for our, the perspective of it being my first marathon outside of the US. Because it was my first marathon.

I feel like any anxiety that I might have felt was because it was my first marathon, because of what it meant to me to be able to run for the change foundation. And dealing with the issue of getting from where I was staying in London to the race start. The London marathon starts out near Greenwich. At least for most folks running the course and so it's a long haul from wherever you might be staying in London out to that area unless you happen to be staying there in the first place, and most people that I've talked to and encountered typically don't start err don't stay by the start line. They stay elsewhere in town in the more touristed spots of course. So everybody is, you know, taking time to get out to the race start. I didn't sleep particularly well that night. But I don't feel like I slept; poorly because it being a international marathon for me I feel like I just simply was anxious because running my first race and just dealing with the usual race nervous if you will. I have a few concerns about making sure I could get to the race start appropriately. But I was, you know, thankfully close to a subway station, a tube stop, so I knew, you know, where to get started; I'd written out on a piece of paper for myself okay here all the stops where I need to go and transfer and so forth. And of course I had to to laugh

that as soon as I actually made my way down to the platform to get onto the train of course whatever I see; I see the hundreds of other runners who are all in their race apparel, all waiting on the same train. And so really within an instant, the the anxiety of, okay am I going to be able to navigate to get to where I need to be to make it to the race start on time and have time to warm up and then go to the bathroom and all those usual race things for me really quickly went away because it was the, well literally all I have to do now is just follow the crowd. So that kind of eased my fears really easily ,I just stopped worrying about it, I, you know, chatted up a few folks who we all kind of, you know the three of us stuck together and kind of navigate our way to make sure that we all made it there. Even obviously there were several other folks who were going but we've all had started chatting and just kind of progress that way.}

I mean, it did him well; every time I see his Instagram posts he's usually somewhere doing a run.

I've never ran a marathon. It's on my list, but it's something even I feel is going to be a bit more longer-term. I've only ever even ran one half-marathon, and that was a lifetime ago when I was a cross-country runner at school; I did the 1992 Southport Half-Marathon which didn't involve me travelling specifically as I lived about four miles from the start line at the time.

It's on my list. Poke me if I've not mentioned it by this time next year. And yes, Roger Biggs, I'd probably look to do one barefoot-friendly. Which reduces the available selection somewhat, let's be honest.

{section separation jingle}

In principle, if I'm away from home and I need some motivation and accountability to go running, the most obvious solution is to find a local Parkrun and engage in what people call 'Parkrun Tourism'.

I talked a bit about Parkrun in a couple of previous episodes of this pod - in my episode "Get Outside" I talked a little about what Parkrun is, while in a couple of Twitter Spaces recordings, on "Staying Healthy While Travelling" and "Sport and Fitness", I talk a bit about how I use Parkrun to stay fit.

However, I'm very conscious that, while the concept is universal ('let's get up in time to run together around a local park for 5km in the middle of a Saturday morning'), Parkrun a an organised event is not, so let me just do a little bit of the basics first.

The concept started in 2004 by a chap called Paul Sinton-Hewitt, who wanted to do casual running following an injury. The first event was at his local park, Bushy Park, in South-West London, and 13 people took part. Bushy parkrun still exists, it's taken place 957 times (so next year should see its thousandth), and the most recent event saw 934 finishers – people often go there for Parkrun Tourism because of its status as 'the first one'. The concept spread very slowly; the second event (Wimbledon Common, 816 events to-date) started in 2007 and a handful more began the following year. New ones are set up quite often, and it's always an exciting process.

In simple terms, they're basically an organised casual run, in a local park, that encourages people to get out and do a 5k. You don't have to run it; the event 'finishes' when the volunteer tail walker crosses the line and that could be any time, though it's rarely longer than an hour after the start. The idea is a dual one - get people into a community, and get people to get outside and do some exercise. You do get a finishing time if you want one, but if all you want to do is casually jog or stroll around the park with other people, you can do that too. Obviously you could do it on your own, but the point about Parkrun is it provides you the accountability and community that might gently push you to doing it at all. Like, if I were doing my own training run, and it was raining, I might decide to skip it and do something in the dry instead, which probably won't involve exercise, let's be honest. But Parkrun will take place regardless of most conditions, so unless there's dangerous ice or the route is flooded or something, know there'll likely be a couple of hundred other hardy souls there and that encourages me to get out and join them.

They're free to do, and you don't even need to sign up to Parkrun as a whole to do it, though the advantage of doing so is you get your own barcode so you can track your performance over different runs. Each event does rely on volunteers though; to set out and take in the course marking at the start (the signage, the welcoming banner, the finishing funnel, and the occasional traffic cone and/or those small coloured plastic line marker things that I don't know what the name of is), to marshall the course and make sure no-one gets in the way, and the three admin roles of timekeeper, token distributor, and barcode scanner. When you finish a Parkrun, the timekeepers make a note of the time in an app. You then collect a token that indicates your finishing position.

This you then take to the barcode scanners who use an app to scan both that token and your own personal barcode. Jiggery-pokery connects these scans to the timekeeper, and hence you get a time for your run. We'll come onto this shortly.

There's now Parkruns across the world. While most of them are in the UK and Ireland, there's a large number of them in Germany, Poland, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand, and a fair number in Canada, USA, Italy, Japan, and the Nordic Countries. There's even one in the Falkland Islands (hello Debbie) but not on either Ascension Island or St Helena. They take place on a Saturday morning; 9am in England, 9.30am in Scotland, and I think 8am in Australia for example. There's also Junior Parkrun, a 3km race on Sunday mornings for the under 15s, but these seem to be limited to the UK, Ireland, and a very small number in Australia.

This obviously means that, certainly when I'm travelling around the UK, but also in certain other countries, it's possible to just turn up at a convenient Parkrun and do a bit of a jog. I've never done a Parkrun outside the UK, though in my case that's because the vast majority of places I tend to travel to don't have any. However I've certainly done a few around the UK as I've travelled, including two in Belfast, one in Bedford, and one in London (Southwark) which would have been the ideal combination of flat, convenient, and barefoot-friendly, but it's also the most popular one I've ever done, because it's flat, convenient, and in London, and in big events the first few hundred metres tend to be very slow as people get stuck in what can best be described as 'race traffic'. Unless you're at the front, obviously.

There's two ways of being a Parkrun Tourist. One is that you just do whatever the convenient one is to where you are. This is what I do. The other is, similar to people who do marathons in every US state, going to a specific Parkrun because it's there. The most common reason for doing this is to try to run a Parkrun beginning with every letter of the alphabet. Alice, known as TrafficConeLlama on Instagram for reasons related to Parkrun that you're really going to have to ask her about, is very frequently to be found doing this. She told me about her reasons why for this podcast:

{ALICE: So why do I love Parkrun, or, more specifically, Parkrun Tourism?

On paper I really shouldn't. 5k is my least favourite distance to run, and I love lie-ins. I started off turning up sporadically, usually to meet a visiting friend or because there were special events encouraging fancy dress, and I love any excuse to wear fancy dress. I have a fabulous group of local friends who make it fun, and gradually I was sucked in.

A smaller group of us started embracing Parkrun Tourism. We call ourselves the Parkrun Wankers, and have a chat group where we decide where we're going each week. My friend Keith is the original Parkrun Wanker, and he introduced me to the 5k app with all the Parkrun challenges, including the Parkrun alphabet challenge, where you have to run a Parkrun beginning with every letter of the alphabet except X. There isn't one beginning with that letter. And pretty quickly I was hooked. When I'm in for something, I go in hard, full of enthusiasm, with bells on. So straight away I was planning that alphabet completion. And I now, about 18 months later, have only two letters left – E, which weather permitting is planned for Edinburgh, and then I'm travelling to The Hague in Netherlands to bag my letter Z at Zuidepark. That will be my first Parkrun outside the UK, and my 50th different venue, and I'm really excited.

My family encourage me too; it's because of them I'm going to Zuidepark, as it was a present for my 50th birthday this year. And my two boys came and ran with me when I celebrated my 50th Parkrun, on the weekend closest to that birthday, at my favourite Parkrun of all, my home Parkrun at Newbiggin-by-the-Sea. Newbiggin is my favourite, not because of the course, although the sea views are beautiful, but because the team who run it are incredible. They're everything that is good about Parkrun; encouraging and supportive, with a little bit of silly thrown in.

Once my Parkrun alphabet is complete, I'm not stopping. One of the other things I love about Parkrun is its supportive inclusive ethos, where you are celebrated more for taking part than speed. As a slower runner I love that, and as much as I enjoy pushing myself for a time sometimes, I also love a slower social run, or supporting someone else to do their best, and I've got a long and ever-expanding list of Parkruns I want to visit stored in the 5k app.

It's become a tradition to take a photo while jumping in front of the Parkrun sign. I can't actually remember why that started, but there are many many more signs to be jumped in front of. If you see me at your local,

come and say hello and take a jumping pic with me. I'll be the one wearing a matching brightly coloured skort and crop-top from Flanci whatever the weather; okay maybe I'll put a top on when it's minus 4.}

I wasn't paying attention to her feed one week so 'liked' a post without taking in the caption, which is why I was incredibly surprised the following week to be barcode scanning and have her say hello to me as I scanned her token. At the time I was volunteering at Queen's Glasgow, which as one of only three Q Parkruns in the UK, and arguably the most accessible – the other two being in Belfast and rural Hampshire – is a popular venue for Parkrun Tourists. There's no Z Parkruns in the UK, and, oddly, more Qs than Ys.

You may be interested to know that, although she recorded this not long ago, she has now achieved both the E and the Z, and so has indeed completed the alphabet – accented letters in Eastern Europe aside.

Alphabet tourism isn't the only form of Parkrun tourism, but it's the most common reason for going to parkruns that aren't near your home. People might want to visit all the Parkruns in a particular urban area or county (or even country, though that'd be tough in the UK), they might be attracted by lists of the 'most difficult' or 'most scenic' (there's a couple by the coast that might qualify on both counts, as they include runs up sand dunes, which were an integral part of my cross-country running training and we didn't actively choose to do that!), or the most northerly/southerly etc Parkruns in a country (or the world – which at the time of podding seems to mean : Pokkinen Parkrun in Oulu, Finland, Cape Pembroke Lighthouse Parkrun on the Falkland Islands, Gisborne Parkrun in New Zealand, and Shawnigan Hills Parkrun, on Vancouver Island in Canada). Apparently there's an app that has all manner of 'badges' available for certain achievements, though many of them are based on the times you run rather than the locations you run in – like having finishing times that include all 60 possible values for 'seconds', and other geeky things like that.

If you really want to tick off a Parkrun, though, my poring over the Parkrun event map suggests there's precisely one that crosses an International boundary. Not the Severn Bridge Parkrun, as the border between Wales and England isn't, but rather the Cieszyn Parkrun in Western Poland, which crosses the Olza River that separates Poland and Czechia, ensuring that, technically, the latter has at least half a parkrun on its soil. It doesn't count though for 'how many countries does Parkrun operate in', if any quizmasters are listening.

--- {end pod jingle} ---

Well, that's about all for this pod. Join me next time for another adventure beyond the brochure. Until then, don't forget your barcode, and if you're feeling off colour, keep on getting better.

{Outro voiceover:
Thank you for listening to this episode of Travel Tales From Beyond The Brochure. I hope you enjoyed it; if you did, don't forget to leave a review on your podcast site of choice.

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Until next time, have safe journeys. Bye for now.}