



**The Story Behind my 555Km Swim Around Mallorca
aka
A Half Way Point Thank You Letter to All Those So Kindly
Sponsoring Me**

I am writing this two thirds' of the way through 2020; a year none of us will forget and, with all your help, I am almost half way through my 555 km swim around this incredible island. Pain stopped play for the most August but I am glad to say I am recovered now sufficient to start the second and final leg of this journey.

A Master Mariner friend of mine has been watching my progress these past 120 days only to point out, on good authority yesterday that if you draw a triangle around Mallorca “and then jump in at Sant Elm and swim round the island by the most direct route its just 272km give or take a few” ... !!!!?????

But fear not. I have committed to swim 555km i.e. in and out of every nook and cranny of this jagged coastline. 555km is what I told my sponsors and my family I would do. So 555km is what I shall do. I have just 277km to go as of 31.08.20.

Because of the lockdown I have done most of the swim in a tank in our garden. However, as the island opened back up during June and July I have also had the pleasure of doing epic stretches out on the open sea.

At this almost-half-way-point I feel it's time I tell my story of why fundraising for The Cancer Support Group has become paramount for me.

I swim to rehabilitate. I swim because the neuropathy in my hands and feet makes walking painful and picking things up cumbersome whereas in the water my body feels great.



I swim to become Mallorca's fittest 48 year old. I swim to shake off the inertia of the pandemic and to build up my strength so I can get back out on the waves.

I swim because the swimming, just like my production of poster art, gives me a sense of purpose and mental clarity during these uncertain times when we are all adjusting to just taking each day as it comes.

I swim so I can one day walk my daughters up the aisle on their wedding days. I swim so that I can maybe even one day have the privilege of becoming a grandfather to their children.

While I swim I meditate on all the people to whom I feel tremendous gratitude, all those of you who have so generously sponsored me not least amongst them

When we decided to move to Mallorca my wife Meg and I were in our 30s, surfing every day, super-fit and feeling invincible. For most of our adult lives we had lived and worked in frontier markets. So it never even crossed our minds to evaluate the quality of the health services in our home-to-be, nor whether there were effective charities to help fill in the gaps where the government-funded services cannot always reach.

Adventurers by nature, the practicalities of where we had chosen to live and travel to had never been deciding factors.



Like emotional house buyers, we were entranced by Mallorca for so many reasons: its benevolent flora and fauna (a relief having lived in a jungle riddled with cobras by a crocodile-infested lagoon for eight years); its exquisite culture and heritage, its 262 beaches, the incredible climate with an average of 300 days of sunshine a year. From a business development point of view the island's position in the Western Med, accessible to so many and close to the major metropolises of Barcelona, Madrid, Paris, Berlin, Rome, Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Zurich, Stockholm and London was highly appealing to us after so many years in the Middle East and Asia.

We adore the free-spirited, anti-materialistic, outdoors upbringing our kids enjoy here in a safe and peaceful environment. Perhaps most of all we love the magnificent way in which children, the elderly and the importance of family and local community are upheld in society here.

We were also drawn by all the mountains to climb, canyons to slide down, reefs to snorkel and waves to surf, the fantastically diverse nature of the island's one million residents, Palma's unbeatable allure and nearby Catalonia's seminal role in the generation of art deco-style poster art, wherein Barcelona and Valencia had arguably become on par with Paris by the 1920s through to the 1960s.

There were just so many factors that made Mallorca appealing for us as creatives seeking a dynamic, open-minded, cosmopolitan, hybrid centre of excellence within which we could live peacefully and finesse our poster art proposition for roll-out Europe-wide.

As per the strap line of one of our first Islas Baleares designs, - in this particular case Grace Kelly-inspired, the archipelago (where the royal actress honeymooned in 1956 with Prince Reina) seemed quite literally to be the place “*donde los sueños se hacen realidad*” / “*where your dreams come true*”.



We never foresaw how quickly a medical crisis could manifest, nor could we ever have dreamed how rapidly the community here, with CSG over-arching it, would come to help save the day. Like every other optimist in good health you just never think the worst is going to happen to you. Until it does.

Exactly 15 months ago, on the 7th May 2019, I found myself feeling all of a sudden incredibly ill at our youngest daughter Alexa's seventh birthday party in the garden of the village school, besieged by agonising lower back pain that until then had just been a dull incremental sparked by heavy lifting flat packs of posters and sacks of tubes in and out of a warehouse in March. By nighttime the pain was so acute I was doubled over, being driven to hospital by my wife while my parents-in-law who were, by lucky coincidence, visiting, looked after our kids.

I was holed up on the trauma ward for a couple of weeks undergoing endless tests before the doctors were able to diagnose me with a particularly aggressive strain of grade 4 cancer that had metastasised onto my spinal vertebrae (which was also fractured towards the base) and even into some of the peripheries of my skeleton. The scan results were terrifying. The tumours littered my body, vibrating at a higher frequency and appearing on the images like angry black masses of dark energy. They were growing and on the war path, heading towards my spinal chord and vital organs. The odds were not looking good.



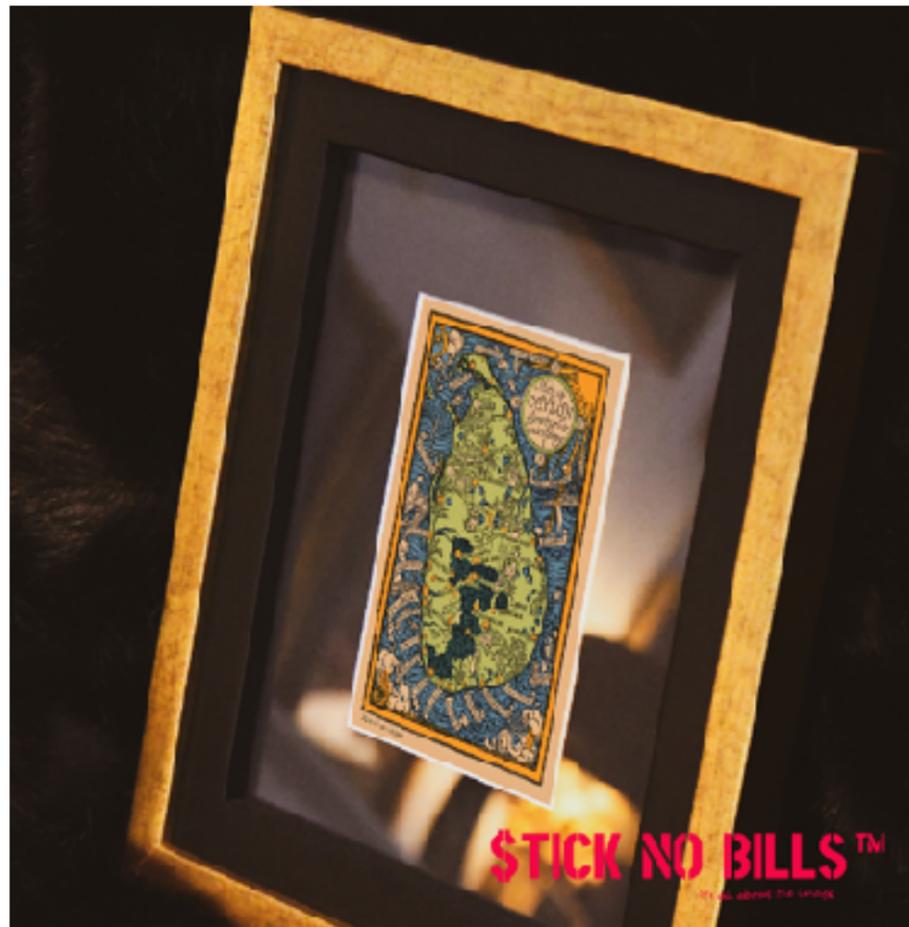
My wife was determined to do everything in her power to turn the situation round. As, of course, was I. But we really did not know where to start and the demands of our fast growing business were meanwhile intensifying just as everyone was advising us to “*put it in a holding pattern*” and “*avoid stress above all else*”.

In March we had upgraded into a bigger, better combined gallery and warehouse space in the heart of Palma in order to headquarter our business for expansion across the Balearics and the peninsula, only to have our original poster gallery enterprise in Sri Lanka (hitherto growing at a meteoric pace) devastated by synchronised suicide bomber terrorist attacks there on Easter Sunday; two of which occurred in 5 star hotels wherein we had points of sale. I guess there is some sort of grim irony in the fact that our own family run business was so directly impacted seeing as my wife had been involved in counter-terrorism in her former career.

It was June 2019 and both physically and spiritually speaking I felt like I was falling into a black hole.

This was just as peak season was upon us, so we had many prestigious resellers to resupply all over the island while our own gallery opening hours were supposed to be 10 till 8pm six days a week.

When our daughters were sleeping we did a crash course in Doctor Joe Dispenza's research findings within neurology, neuroscience biochemistry and cellular biology. We watched *Heal* and *Forks Over Knives* on Netflix and heeded everybody's advice that a radical improvement in my diet would help. I became T-Total and, guided by my wife I started nailing a disgusting litre of organic celery juice every morning followed by all manner of supplements and preparing myself mentally for chemo and radiotherapy.



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It was at that point, just as we were being fast-tracked into the system at Son Espases national hospital that I first saw a stack of the brochures for the Cancer Support Group at the reception to the Oncology ward. We looked online and read an article about the Mallorca-based founder Krista being awarded a medal by Her Majesty The Queen no less for services to British nationals overseas. We went to see Krista for a free joint counselling session which, much to our embarrassment, deteriorated in front of her experienced and forgiving eyes into a heated debate about the terrorism and illness-fuelled crisis in our business. Krista listened politely, assured us that CSG could help with the medical admin, with official medical translations while also putting us in immediate touch with many medical, nutrition and alternative therapy experts.

Meanwhile Meg's family and our dearest friends rallied together to form two Whatsapp support groups: "Phil's Global Angels" and "Phil's Local Angels". Meg's sister Rebecca came to stay for a week then whisked our daughters away to Rebecca and Meg's parents' farmhouse in Cornwall for five weeks of surfing and beach picnics before Meg's greatest friends from her Edinburgh University days had our kids to stay for a further two action packed weeks in the green and pleasant Cotswolds.

This **incredible** support (provided by parents who already have three of their own no less) enabled us to get through the worst of the chemo and the July-August heat wave without Farrah and Alexa having to see my in such a scarily frail condition. Instead they had one of the best summers of their childhood.



Some exceptionally talented angels also offered to jump in to help Meg stabilise the business on a temporary basis. They were so dedicated and transformative in their impact that we brought them on board for the long term. The kindness of the community of our village of Es Capdella was equally astonishing. Meg was so flat out at our gallery she was often not reaching home till 9pm so many neighbours were dropping off delicious home-cooked food. One British family we had not known long even volunteered to be "the support team for the support team" heroically hosting Meg's mother in their casita for the four visits she made during the rest of the year. Another with boys the same age as our girls and who had been through a similar Grade 4 crisis a year earlier literally took Farrah and Alexa under their wing for many July poolside afternoons, their boys cheering our girls up with their pride in their father who they had helped make an amazing recovery. I'll never forget one particular evening in late August when I felt well enough to go down into the village to meet Piers, my former boss from the *Financial Times* (he was also Chief Usher at our wedding) who was visiting from London. I walked into the poolside pizza bar at the heart of Es Capdella for our rendezvous and was greeted with a round of applause followed by so many embraces from friends in the local community it took me a while to reach Piers and introduce him to everyone.

How amazing to be buoyed up like this. Many of the Local Angels are anyway Cancer Support Group volunteers. We had never realised how many people we knew had quietly, personally been directly affected by the Big C until we too were battling to overcome it. Their compassion knew no bounds. We were inundated with acts of kindness that were humbling. This unsolicited but nevertheless incredibly welcome psychological, emotional and logistical support began to feel medicinal in and of its own right. I became determined to go to war on the disease until I had it nipped in the bud. I felt like I had an army of warriors backing me up.

Life expectancy statistics for someone in the condition I was in are pretty dismal when you look at the stats. However, by a freak of my own specific DNA, I had been beset by the disease at an extraordinarily young age for a caucasian male. I was at least two decades younger than the majority of cases the doom and gloom statistics are based on. So we ripped up the empirical evidence and looked to the future.

One four-time breast cancer survivor friend on the island told us half way through the wretched six months of chemo, when there seemed to be no light at the end of the tunnel and I was feeling at my most sick and close to death's door “its a year of your life”. How right she was. I have only just realised that I began swimming on 7th May 2020, exactly one year on from when I fell ill. Until then I just did not have the energy.

It is truly amazing how increasingly possible it is, with much but not all thanks going to innovations in modern medicine, for patients diagnosed with terminal diseases yet equipped with positive mental attitudes to be steered through myriad therapies that can engender radical remission and failing that, non-progression or rather the definition of terminal being replaced more accurately by “chronic diseases that can be managed” and, possibly even one day cured in the context of all the groundbreaking research that is underway in Spain, England, America and elsewhere.



Because of my relative youth and fitness (I am so thankful for all those golden years of surfing, cricket, football and tennis) the recommendation was that Son Espases oncology ward go all guns blazing in their combined conventional therapies in an effort not just to provide palliative care (as they would have done with a much older patient) but actually to save me. We bought a calendar and began crossing off the days as the treatment programme we prayed would result in remission commenced. We planned a holiday in Hawaii for my 50th in 2022 and invited our loved ones.

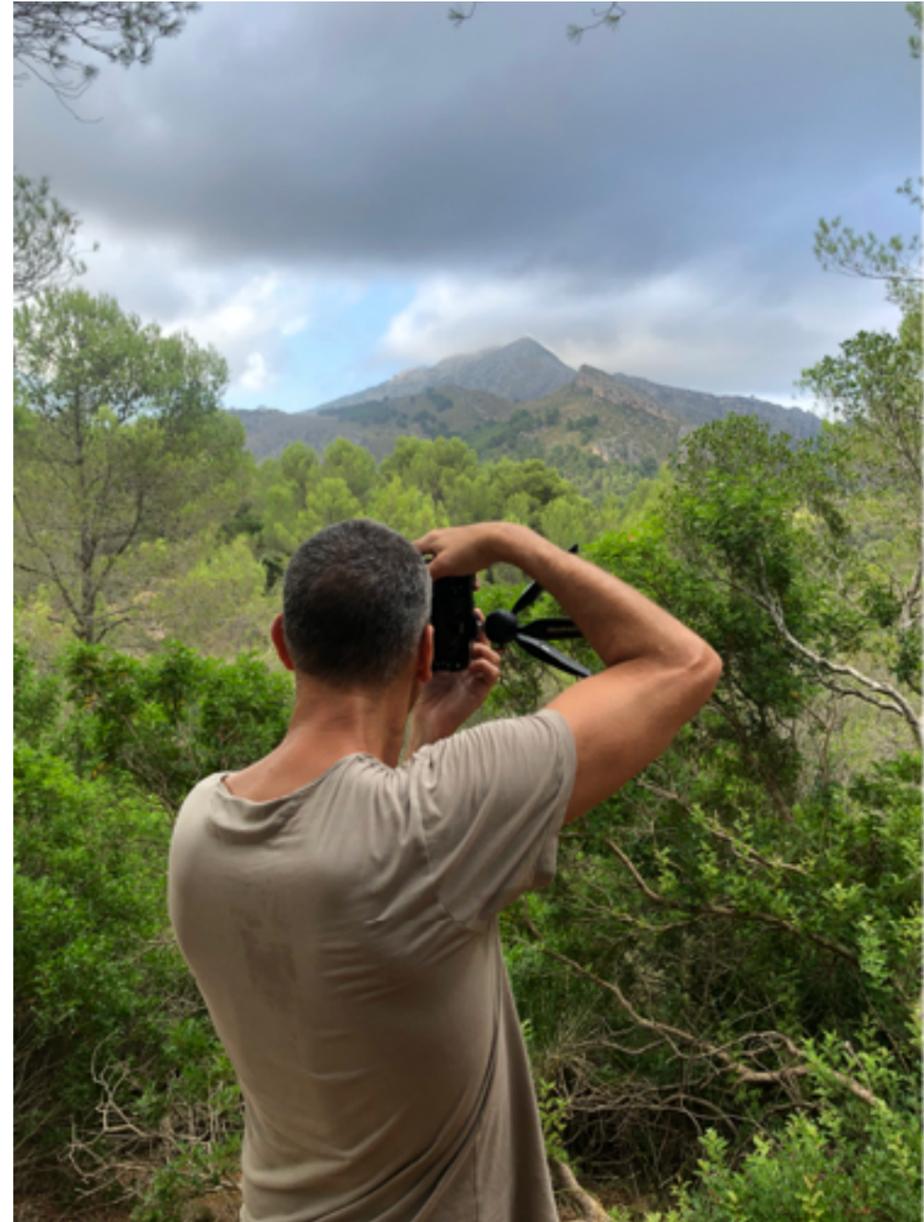
We know we are especially fortunate here in the Balearics to have access to this state-of-the-art hospital having subsequently visited some of Spain’s leading oncology experts at Malaga where the hospital was crowded and appeared to have not had a refurb for many years and Barcelona (Valle De Hebron) where there was barely standing room in the oncology waiting area on the day we visited in January 2020, before the pandemic had even begun.

If I began to name individuals here in Mallorca and overseas who have helped my wife and I come through this difficult chapter I would be here all day and all night. If any of them are reading this they will know who they are and hopefully also how heartfelt my gratitude to them is.

God forbid you are ever in the same crisis as I was. But if you are and you are lucky enough to live in Mallorca then I hope this letter allows you to rest assured that CSG will take you under their wing. They can support you in the administration of your recovery plan and help you restore normality to your life. Their role here, in as much as they can reduce stress, improve your self esteem and provide practical help is vital, integral and complementary to the public and private health services. You are not alone.

And that is enough. Once you have been guided to that point in your recovery I firmly believe you can take the remainder of the healing process into your own hands and can also start giving back to the community that has helped you. No matter how bad it seems you have to keep in mind that we humans are a resilient species, our bodies are designed to heal; our cells *desire* regeneration and *can* replenish.

Loving family and friends, fitness, healthy living, being close to nature in your daily life are EVERYTHING. So, in spurring me on with your sponsorship I hope to inspire others to rise out of the post-chemo doldrums, buoyed up like I have been by CSG and all the love and the support I have been so grateful to have felt and to have been given.



Long may this vital organisation flourish in Mallorca, supported by the donations you have made. Thank you for helping me fundraise for CSG and for spurring me on. I mean that from the deepest recesses of my soul.

Philip James Baber, Es Capdella 31.08.20

Footnote: Sri Lanka, with fantastic support from the international community, in fact dealt well with the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, so much so that millions were relieved to see tourism on the island revive to almost 2018 levels in time for the winter 2019 spring 2020 peak season, only to be wiped out once again by the 2020 pandemic. I have no doubt that the island will bounce back stronger than ever though, no sooner than the travel restrictions lift. The Indian Ocean flung nation of 23 million people, second only to Hawaii in its biodiversity, has quite rightly earned its place as the number one travel destination for the intrepid explorer. As a survivor of the tsunami that enveloped the south and west coastlines there in 2004, I can safely say that resilience is every Sri Lankan national's middle name. Resilience is a fine thing indeed.