

# MOBILE MINIMALIST

Summit's assistant editor, Sarah Stirling, has been interviewing outdoor creatives for this page for eight years. We thought it was time to turn the microphone round. Sarah has been a freelance outdoor writer for over 15 years, specialising in the intersection between adventure, nature and living lightly.

Is she living the dream? How did it all start?



📍 Sarah and Rufus on the Croix de Fer ridge, above the Chamonix Valley.



🏃 Running the 35km skyline around Llanberis.

🚐 Early morning on the wild West Coast of New Zealand's South Island.

**SS: Oh dear, starting with a cliché!** – but I always knew what I wanted to do. It began with stories written in notebooks and illustrated with crayons when I was very small; often about animals having the sort of wild and free adventures I longed for. I was always a swot in English lessons, but never listened in Maths, which I regret now. Who knew that writers would have to do tax returns...?

**At 16, I learnt a valuable lesson about outdoor exercise and mental health.** After thoughtlessly giving up horse riding, which had been my life, I got utterly lost for a while, then spent a year trying to find a new sport to suit a freer lifestyle. After getting hit in the head with a boom and missing countless tennis balls, I found climbing and skiing, and ended up instructing both part-time for years.

**I was an early laptop adopter.** No-one could understand why I wanted one of those flimsy things for my birthday instead of a proper computer. It was second-hand, clunky and ugly, but I loved the minimalism and portability, and dreamt of where it might take me in the future. A bonus: the laptop had a Mavis Beacon touch-typing program installed – one of the most useful things I ever learnt how to do!

**A stodgy uni halls dinner led to the discovery of my lifelong passion.** My friend Julia made us run around the block and I've run pretty much every day since. Pure simplicity and freedom: it was impossible to get tired of running. Someone said to me, "Then you've got to run further or faster!" I went further and further and got shin splints, and then invested in my first proper trail shoes.

**While at uni, I got my first lucky writing break.** When my dad was asked to write a local history book, he suggested I write it, and we'd tell the publishers afterwards. I think it amused him greatly. The publishers weren't happy, initially, but came round! In my final year, I worked hard to scrape a first-class degree, hoping this and being an 'author' would be selling points when it came to pitching to magazines.

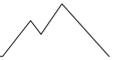
**My freelance career began with a sneaky trip to the newsagents.** After jotting the email addresses of magazines I liked, I offered myself as a skivvy for week-long stints, hoping to learn how it all worked and maybe even write some things to build a portfolio. Fall-line Skiing kept me on after my week, working on Fridays in return for ski gear. It was utter chaotic brilliance, like something out of Bridget Jones.

**I also randomly picked up a job working for Your Cat magazine on Wednesdays.** There was merciless teasing for this at the climbing and skiing centres where I still taught part-time. I remember being introduced to someone about my age who was a journalist. Someone said, "Oh, Sarah is too! Who do you write for?" "The Guardian." "Oh, Sarah writes the Cross-stitch Your Cat page at Your Cat magazine."

**Then I threw everything away.** Fall-line skiing magazine offered me a full-time job and I was in a relationship with my high school sweetheart. Neither felt quite right, but it was hard to let go. After some soul-searching about what I 'ought' to be doing, I went to New Zealand for a year with a bodybag on wheels of outdoor gear. It was terrifying to arrive alone, but I was so much clearer on who I was when I got back.

**After a couple of years of freelancing, I'd picked up a few editorial hats:** 'Short Breaks Editor' of Adventure Travel magazine and 'Gear Editor' of The Outdoor Adventure Guide. I'd also quit instructing and was living my dream: after calling in a load of kit to test, I'd take it on a press trip somewhere like Norway, sample the adventure scene, and then write it up for various outdoor magazines.

**In 2008, I became the 'girl who works for UKClimbing'** When I pitched a series of women-specific outdoor articles, covering topics like 'mountaineering mums', it turned out to be timely: they were looking for a female to diversify their team. I was intrigued, and travelling so much had become hollow, so I went to Sheffield to meet what was, back then, a tiny team: Alan James, the boss; Mick Ryan, advertising; and Jack Geldard, editor.



→ **Initially my job at UKC was boring and I learnt that I'm terrible at sales:** I wrote product news and sold ads, part-time. But Alan was looking for a Gear Editor, so I put together a big pitch for the role, and was thrilled when it led to a full-time job as Gear & Features Editor. Travelling less also allowed me to live a different dream: moving to remote West Wales, where my Mum grew up. I'd always loved it.

**OutDoor, Europe's main outdoor gear trade show, revolved me out into completely different lives, twice.** In 2012, after reporting on the show, I hitched a lift to Chamonix for a holiday. The weather forecast for Wales was constant rain that summer, and I didn't have a return flight booked. After falling in love with a rickety cabin on a mountainside, I ended up staying four years, running in the mountains every day with the dog-next-door, Rufus.

**In 2013, Alex Messenger, then the editor of Summit magazine, emailed.** I'd just gone back to freelance adventure writing: this time focussing on living lightly more than travel, plus issues like mental health and diversity. Alex had done his back in, and wondered if I'd write and edit a bunch of articles for the next issue. Summit felt like the right fit, so I worked hard and was delighted when Alex asked if we could make it a regular thing.

**I didn't buy and convert my first van until five years ago, and regret that wasted time enormously.** I always wanted one but doubted my building and parking skills. Then, on a trip to the Pyrenees, I asked a friend what to look for in a van. The very next day we drove past one for sale that met those exact requirements. I bought it on the spot and drove it home.

**In 2016, that same trade show revolved me out into a different life.** I was walking round with a photographer friend (this time reporting for the BMC), when he asked me to describe my perfect man. We strolled onto the DMM stand and interviewed this lovely chap about harnesses design. "I'd go out with that guy," I said, as we left. Eighteen months later Rob and I were married and living in Snowdonia.

**I fell into wild swimming while living in Snowdonia, after injuring my Achilles.** Without trail running, I got a bit down. Intrigued, I began researching an article about natural highs, and discovered that you didn't necessarily have to push harder at a sport to access them. In cycling, natural highs are enhanced by the peloton camaraderie, while wild swimmers raved about the 'afterglow' caused by the cold.

**I've never liked the cold, but after connecting with the swimmer's high (dubbed 'endolphins'), couldn't stop swimming!** A project to swim in 50 different Snowdonian lakes, waterfalls and rivers soon became 100 swim spots. I winced at how on trend I was, but it was fun to write about the eccentricities of this booming cult – so many fascinating angles from human evolution to mental health.

**I enjoy being led by serendipity in my work.** Five years ago, editors from the Guardian, Telegraph and Times began finding their way into my inbox, which felt like a highbrow direction! And, a couple of years ago, the commissioning editors of book publishing houses began turning up, leading to contributions to Lonely Planet, Frances Lincoln and Dorling Kindersley.



PHOTO: ROBERT GREW

*"IF I HAD one TIP FOR THOSE WANTING TO ENTER A CREATIVE CAREER IT WOULD BE: THINK SIDWAYS"*

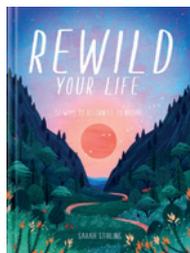
📍 **Maxing out on natural highs after a circuit on the Snowdon Horseshoe.**

**If I had one tip for those wanting to enter a creative career it would be:** think sideways. Rather than applying for a job along with countless others, could there be a more independent way to get started? Don't be too proud to have a part-time 'side-job' for a while. Also, as Ruskin wrote, 'Every new possession loads us with a new weariness'. If you don't gather too much stuff, you can be nimble with opportunities. One tip... told you my maths was terrible...

**I always seem to move house, and country, by accident.** When CV19 hit the news, Rob and I were visiting New Zealand, his home country. We travelled back to Wales only to receive an email, a day too late: Rob's boss at DMM suggesting we weather the pandemic in New Zealand. I'd had some health problems, so a hasty and stressful decision was made: to head halfway back around an apocalyptic world and wait out the storm there.

**In 2020, I wrote what Rob calls 'my first major work'!** (Because it's not quite my 'first book'). *Rewild Your Life* is a little hardback of weekly projects spanning a year, designed to build a stronger relationship with nature and the seasons. It covers everything from natural navigation to spoon carving, stargazing to foraging, and is a work of art thanks to the talented illustrator, Amy Grimes. It comes out in April.

**While incredibly stressful, CV19 has also brought forward some of our dreams.** Rob planned to start his own business one day. We thought we'd spend a couple of years in New Zealand at some point. I thought I'd write books a bit later in my life. We talked of a housebus, maybe when we retired. Instead, we hunkered down and did all those things last year. The housebus is just finished, and we've hit the road... 🚐



Sarah's book, *Rewild Your Life*, comes out April '21.

There's more about Sarah on her website [sarahstirling.com](http://sarahstirling.com), and she's on Instagram [@sarah\\_stirling](https://www.instagram.com/sarah_stirling)