

On shaky ground

an MS
adventure in
Antarctica

A profile on Fiona Hall –
photographer and
adventurer

By Lynn Guilhaus

Fiona Hall has been living with MS for 25 years and has travelled to some of the most remote areas in the world. In this candid interview, Fiona shares with us a unique and wonderful insight into the world of adventure travel with her constant travelling companion – multiple sclerosis.

Adventure travel hasn't all been smooth sailing for this naturally energetic, vivacious and dedicated career woman. For the last 25 years Fiona has been living with MS and has continued to bounce back after being hospitalised 14 times.

Fiona is living proof that disability and adventure travel are not mutually exclusive. She has made ten trips to Antarctica, has built a professional photographic portfolio, led a team on a Trans-Atlantic Tall Ships Race, spent a winter living in the Western Isles of Scotland in a campervan and for 18 months taught English whilst photographing in Chile.

To highlight the challenges faced by physical disability Fiona will soon undertake another voyage to Antarctica followed by an extensive 'road trip' in Chile. She plans to raise funds for MS research and rehabilitation projects

through the sale of articles, images and talks to community and interest groups.

Most people never visit Antarctica in their entire lifetime, yet you are about to embark on your 11th voyage. How did this amazing adventure begin?

I have been extremely fortunate in that I have only had to pay for two trips. One was financed by a small inheritance and the other from some loose change after refinancing my house to renovate the bathroom! After the second trip I wanted to return so I wrote to tour companies offering to do anything that would get me on board a ship to Antarctica.

What sort of response did you get from your letters?

I managed the third trip as a tour guide for a Sydney-based Antarctic tour company. I probably wasn't their best guide, but I certainly learned a lot. In 1997, I decided to leave the corporate

“I had always wanted to go to Antarctica and after my first two trips I thought I'd never be able to go back.”

world so I sold my house and settled in Edinburgh to study photography and film. Three months into my four-year course, I received an email asking if I could run a gift shop on the ship 'Explorer'. The only catch was it was due to depart in ten days time. I said "yes".

Did you do more than one trip as a gift shop operator?

I did seven trips – back to back. We picked up passengers at 4pm on a given day and dropped them back 11-17 days later, usually around 9am. We then picked up a new group at 4pm on the same day. So between 9am and 4pm on embarkation day was the only time I had completely free every 11-17 days.

Are you working now?

I have a 20-23 hour per week Sales/Administrative job which started as only an hour a week – at that time I had just been in rehab for six weeks. My employers are fantastically supportive and are willing to work with the challenges of MS.

So what inspired you to do an 11th trip to Antarctica?

Last year I had a mini attack that landed me in hospital. I was totally bored and thought, "If this is going to be the one that I'm not going to get out of, what would I have really wanted to do with my life?" I then got excited about returning to Antarctica. With my friend Stellar we worked out what we needed and the cost. We started approaching potential sponsors for funds and equipment and then realised we had taken on this massive project and wondered how on earth we were going to do it. Gulp!

Who did you approach for sponsorship?

Firstly, we approached Aurora Expeditions and told them of our mission to raise awareness about MS. They kindly donated a berth worth \$7,500.

Having just moved to digital photography I've discovered the associated costs such as storage, memory cards etc. So I approached Hewlett Packard who generously supplied us with a notebook computer in exchange for an article and photos for their staff newsletter and a motivational talk to their staff. Harris Technology donated computer storage devices. We are taking 'product style shots' for a couple of major alcohol companies and negotiating their contribution to MS projects. Nikon have loaned Stellar \$10,000 worth of photographic equipment and their PR company is helping us promote our exhibition at Federation Square in Melbourne (11-17 July 2007). Friends have also helped with personal donations and generous support. Ours sponsors to-date include:



The Western Isles Scotland.

Fiona's corporate supporters to-date include:

Sponsor	Value
Aurora Expeditions – Berth Cost	\$7,500
Hewlett Packard (Managing Director's Office) – IT Assistance, Laptop	\$5,000
Scotsport Pty Ltd – Donation to Costs	\$500
Nikon Imaging Australia – loan camera equipment	\$10,000
Harris Technology – digital storage i.e. memory sticks, portable drives	\$2,000
Megadeck Australia – administration costs	\$250
Pixel Perfect – photo lab, printing costs	\$250
Out of Sight (discount on glasses)	\$150
G & V Imaging Camera Store – discount on camera gear	\$1,500
Kathmandu – clothing and Gortex boots	\$2,000

You've been hospitalised 14 times. Is there any fear about heading off again, knowing the unpredictability of MS?

No, there's no fear. I just go with the flow. I always prepare and put a lot of effort into planning. If anything happens, regardless of what it is, I know I've done everything that I could possibly have done. Whatever happens, happens.

So how do you prepare for such a trip, given the MS?

It's important to be fit and I'm always exercising. I walk and have been doing yoga for 20 years. Even if I'm not feeling well I manage a few sets of light weights – a few is better than nothing. I'm walking with a weighted backpack at the moment and I've moved up from 4kg to 7kg. I have to work up to at least 12kg which is the weight of my camera gear. Once I struggled to get home with the pack so I left it at the newsagent and asked if I could pick it up later. They were most obliging.

I don't worry about what other people think – I can be stubborn and single-minded now that I'm over 50! And I don't stress over housework. I know it will be waiting for me after I recover from a flare-up.

It's all about what matters most and fitting that in with how I'm feeling. My fatigue at

times is terrible so I rest with a bit of knitting or reading. When double vision and optic neuritis knock out the reading, I'll watch the Vicar of Dibley and have a big laugh. I accept what happens and work with it. The yoga helps with everything, even awful pain. I meditate and breathe through it.

How do you deal with exacerbations that occur whilst preparing for the trip?

Every time I have an exacerbation I see it as time to review. I work around it by finding a different way. Every day I do what I can, whilst I can. Having flare-ups can help me decide what I need for the trip. For example, I sometimes get floppies of the ankle so I approached Kathmandu for some light Gortex walking shoes. It's great, it lets me indulge in my Imelda complex!

What's in your survival kit that makes it different from the other crew members?

I have to be careful that I don't carry too much weight. I choose clothes that I don't have to pull over my head and I prefer zips to buttons. I wear plenty of light, fine layers and easy-to-put-on shoes that I've practised walking in. I take my meditation tapes and my own drum of water. Surprisingly it's very dry down there. I take a supply of



Fiona supports Foundation 5 Million (F5M) which aims to raise \$5M for research into a cure for MS. For more information go to www.f5m.org.au

medications including Prednisone, Baclofen and Voltaren, tons of vitamins, B12 injections and of course, seasickness remedies.

What passion is at work here? What keeps you going?

Bloody-mindedness! And my love for photography and wild places. I get a lot of joy out of planning things and if anyone says to me “you can’t do that” it gives me an even greater incentive to do it. I think “bugger you, I’m outa’ here”.

You’re clad in bulky warm weather gear with thick gloves and mobility limitations, so how do you manage the intricacies of your photographic equipment?

It’s funny watching me get into and out of position to take a shot – sometimes I can’t get up! I wear fine silk gloves and it’s often not that cold so I can take my gloves off. Believe me, we can have a mix of Tahiti days and really ugly days. When we go ashore on a Zodiac boat, I use a tripod or a monopod, a fast shutter speed and my big luxuries, fast lenses.

On this trip we are on an ‘expedition-style’ ship with only 56 passengers and we have the opportunity of camping on the ice. Now that will be fun.

In all of your adventures what was your scariest experience around MS? How did you pull through?

In the Tall Ships Race in 1992 I was put in charge as watch leader. After 12 days at sea the spasms and cramping kicked in and my sensory system was just shot. I took to my bunk for two days dosed up with Valium and Voltaren. I slept, rested and stretched. As we were in the middle of the Atlantic, getting off the ship was not an option. I breathed through the experience and tried to enjoy being on the ship. I thought, “I might never be here again”. I got through it OK.

What sort of relationship do you have with your MS?

I don’t really look at it that way but it has made me look closely at what I do with my life. For many years I have accepted it and

acceptance is different to tolerance. Tolerance comes with some resentment and I don’t want that. I’ve learnt to choose different activities for different times. I indulge in resting, knitting, photography, reading, sleeping, working, walking or exercise, whatever fits. A glass of wine or a good single malt whisky occasionally helps too!

I plan as much as I can which includes planning my energy. I work two full days per week and two half days. On the half days I spend my non-work time doing all the things all of us have to do – shopping, library, cooking, cleaning the kitty litter. On my day off I swim in the morning and usually rest in the afternoons. Saturday is always coffee, paper, yoga class and then pottering.

And a sense of humour is crucial – I can’t take it seriously. People often ask me about the uncertainty of it but everyone has uncertainty in their life.

So is this trip work or pleasure?

The main purpose of our ‘Antarctic episode’, apart from raising funds for MS Charities, is to raise awareness of day-to-day living with MS and explore the idea that disability and adventure travel are not mutually exclusive. I think the pleasure part is a foregone conclusion.

Involved in this project are my friends Stellar Fraser and Luci Tavener. Luci decided to join us and is self-funding. She thinks she is going on holiday but her role expands daily!

One of the project’s main aims is for Stellar and me to produce a collaborative body of work for an exhibition in Sydney and Melbourne in 2007. We have finalised dates with Federation Square in Melbourne and are currently seeking a corporate sponsor for this exhibition as well as space in Sydney.

To publicise this enterprise we have already secured commissioned articles in magazines and newspapers, including Honda Magazine, and are actively pursuing other media outlets.

Do you have any advice for people with MS who would like to pursue their dreams?

Get out there and give it a go, whatever your dream or passion is. Plan it first and although you never know what tomorrow might bring, if some glitch occurs, review the plan. There is always a way. And whatever happens, enjoy it.

Thank you Fiona for sharing your incredible story. We wish you all the best for your next adventure and we’ll be with you in spirit. Stay in touch.

Fiona wants to share her experiences with others through a book, commissioned articles, and photographic exhibitions.

- ‘On Shaky Ground: an MS Journey’. This will take a humorous, yet insightful, view into the life of someone with MS and how they managed to retain a sense of adventure while travelling and living in countries as diverse as Bermuda and Chile.
- Commissioned articles about preparation for the Antarctica trip and the trip itself, including an ability comparison by re-creating activities last done 14 years ago.
- Articles covering different approaches required for photography when mobility is restricted.
- Exhibition of Antarctic images under the title ‘Short Exposure’ highlighting people (particularly tourists) in Antarctica and their reactions to the frozen continent. This capitalises on 2007 being the first International Polar Year since 1957. Exhibitions are planned for Melbourne (11-17 July) and Sydney (to be advised).

Fiona is seeking a sponsor to help fund the exhibitions in Sydney and Melbourne. If anyone is interested, Fiona can be contacted on 02 9557 6987 or fionahall1@optusnet.com.au