

Ain't no mountain high enough



When Denise Van Outen and Fearne Cotton decided to climb Machu Picchu to raise money for Breast Cancer Care, they asked a few celebrity friends and women affected by breast cancer to go with them. We catch up with Lou Rall to find out about the highs and lows of the trek.

Walking the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu is something I never thought I would do, but last year I found myself in the mountains of Peru with five other women who had been affected by breast cancer and six celebrities doing exactly that and being filmed for an ITV2 programme.

I really wanted to go on the trek to prove to people watching on TV that you can live with secondary breast cancer and you can keep it under control. But I did have a few concerns about going. I didn't know if I was physically fit enough to do it. Since being diagnosed with secondary breast cancer I've led a more sedate life. Although I was doing Pilates regularly I wasn't doing much aerobic work and I was worried I wouldn't have the stamina to keep going. There was also the

emotional side of the trip. I'm so busy getting on with everyday life, I rarely talk about my inner thoughts and feelings, but I knew I would have to deal with that and talk about it for the documentary. My family and I know what the consequences of my diagnosis will be but we rarely talk about it.

The TV crew came to interview me and I had to dig deep and answer some difficult questions. If I was going to be part of the documentary it was important to me that I showed the true emotion of what it's about.

WALKING TALL

Before agreeing to go on the trek I had to talk to my mum. I don't know why I felt I had to get my mum's permission at 37 but she's quite protective of me. She wasn't even

keen on me doing a *Pink Ribbonwalk*. I rang her and that morning she had seen Denise Van Outen on *GMTV* talking about the trek. My mum said: 'I know what you're calling for, you're going to go to Peru with Denise aren't you.'

I went to see my oncologist as well and said 'can I go?' He said 'I feel like your father giving you permission.' He was happy to work around the trip in terms of treatment. He has walked at altitude a few times so he gave me some tips. All of the medical team at my hospital were excited for me in the build up to the trip, which was nice.

When I found out I was going I spoke to a trainer at the gym and started exercising four times a week. I worked hard at building up my strength and when I was walking up all those steps to Machu Picchu it really paid off. The first big hiking day of the trek was very steep for the first few hours. I was trying to keep up with the main group who had started at a quick pace but I slipped further and further behind. I could see the group disappearing and I got quite upset that I couldn't keep up and join in with the chat. I started to question whether I was going to be able to do it. The trek doctor,

Dr Raj, told me to adjust my pace and mindset, and focus on what I was doing. Denise dropped back and helped me adjust to the slower pace and be happy with it.

BACK ON TRACK

Being at the back I had some quite special moments and was able to take in the scenery. I learnt quite a bit about myself in that I can still go on an adventure, face challenges and push myself physically and emotionally. I'm still strong and that bodes well for when things become more tricky in the future.

For me the best thing about going on the trek was the whole sense of teamwork. The people I went with made the experience. It was great getting to know the other girls and learning about their experience of breast cancer.

On the last day we had eight hours worth of walking up steps to reach Machu Picchu but part way through the day I realised I was going to make it, I was going to get there. The atmosphere built up so by the time we reached the top it was so awe inspiring being at Machu Picchu. There was such a great sense of teamwork and achievement.

I watched the first documentary with my mum

and dad. Mum was either laughing or needed a hanky for the emotional parts. The second programme I watched with my husband and had a glass of champagne. It was nice to see what other people were up to while I was at the back. I was also able to hear their stories and see why the celebs were so passionate about the walk.

The whole experience has been quite liberating. I realised I'm stronger and can cope with more than I thought. Secondary breast cancer may seem like it's all doom and gloom, but dig deep and jump through the hoops that you need to in terms of treatment. It is possible to live a relatively good life even with secondary breast cancer.

If Lou has inspired you to take on a challenge, visit www.breastcancercare.org.uk/challenges or call 0845 092 0805.



The incredible trekkers who climbed to Machu Picchu.



Paula Dixon



Annabel Reynaud



Gaynor Sinton



Jenny Steele



Lisa Rees

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