

Love at Long Distance

based on an article by Sam Scott Thomas, about her partner Robert Portal



- 1 As I sit and write this in the comfort of my sofa, my partner, Robert Portal, is running up and down sand dunes with a heavy rucksack on his back. I'm in a relationship with a man who likes to challenge himself, both physically and mentally, and he does this by setting himself tasks such as rowing (yes, rowing not sailing) the Atlantic in a seven-metre boat. That was 2011. The two-year build up to that challenge had been busy and very exciting. I did as much as I could to help. Fundraising turned out to be my strength and between us all we managed to bring in quite a sum for the charity Facing the World.
- 2 Some people warned me that I would get fed up with him being away doing so much training, but I 28 it as much as possible because in my eyes, the fitter he was, the quicker he would complete the challenge, and the more likely he would return home uninjured and safely to us.
- 3 Oh yes, that horrid fear that he wouldn't return was lurking constantly in the back of my mind. It wasn't easy, it was a dangerous challenge, and the thought of losing him was unbearable. Once he set off, the phone never stopped, emails and calls needed to be answered, family reassured, the Facebook and Twitter pages had to be updated. The lists of things for me to do were endless. Still, the anxiety that high seas and deep water bring, never went away. I watched on my computer screen as the boat's tracker slowly crossed the Atlantic. After 59 days he climbed off the boat and on to dry land. He had lost three stone in weight, looked haunted and worn out, but I was so pleased to have him back.
- 4 He's now training for the Marathon Des Sables. Five marathons in seven days, with a 50-mile run in the middle, but the sable (sand) in question is not in Wales, but the Sahara Desert. That means temperatures pushing 50 degrees, sore feet, storms, mountains, dunes, sand in places

I daren't even mention, thirst and a 10mm mattress to sleep on. Dehydration is the biggest danger of running in high temperatures. It can do terrible things to your mind as well as your body.

5 I've heard Robert being called many things, but the most common are "mad" and "insane". It does tend to get a little boring after a while, mostly because it's not true and I know he hates it. He does these things because he loves a challenge and believes it would be sinful not to raise money in the process. The fundraising is a big part of it too. Endless meetings, appearances, speeches – and all these jobs have to be prepared for.

6 Robert sets his sights on something and goes for it. I truly admire that in him and to ask him to stop doing these challenges would be wrong. It is part of who he is, and that's fine by me. Still, I would be lying if I said that training doesn't affect our life at home and sometimes I get fed up with it. The very early morning starts that wake me up and seeing friends on my own are only OK up to a point. For in those moments, when I find myself beginning to get resentful or angry, all I have to do is remind myself of the money he's raising, and the children and families that will benefit. It's my small part in the big picture.

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