

Y^{the}oung Woman



A journey inside the mind of endurance athlete **Lia Ditton** as she prepares to row halfway around the globe—completely alone.

By **Diana Kapp**



JULIAN WINSLOW

and the Sea

First things first: Lia Ditton needs to avoid becoming a moving target for dive-bombing birds.

This means once a week leaping overboard into the frigid swell, tethered to her single-person ocean rowboat, and swimming underneath to scrub away the colonizing algae that constantly build up along the hull. Vigilance is paramount. The organisms attract hungry little fish, and then bigger fish, and then, eventually, the birds. The screaming birds. “People get rammed because basically they are an ecosystem,” Ditton explains. One long-distance rower she knows had a marlin jam its nose right through his hull. “The bill snapped off. They had to epoxy it in place,” she says.

It’s a glassy February morning on the bay, and Ditton is matter-of-factly laying out the myriad tribulations that lie ahead. I’m crouched in the tiny sleeping cabin, poking my head out for air—it’s the only place other than her lap where I can feasibly fit. On her diminutive vessel, which fits a rowing seat and watertight pods just larger than her body at each end, it is frighteningly apparent how she could be mistaken for a floating sandwich. As we round Strawberry Point, a man yells from shore asking where she’s going.

Ditton grins, and then, tugging on her oars, booms back the answer: From Japan to San Francisco. Not just yet, but eventually.

All I can think is, Holy God. All alone. On the big ocean. In this tiny boat.

Ditton intends to be the first woman to row solo from Japan to California across the Pacific Ocean, uninterrupted. The group of people who’ve achieved that is more rarefied than moon walkers. Having arrived in San Francisco in 2016, boat in tow, she is in the midst of a two-year preparation to launch. More cosmically, she is on a nearly two-decade-long quest. For what is less clear.

Ditton’s drives seem basic—an urge to test limits, a taste for attention, a desire to cast off the remnants of her staid upbringing. Yet in the deeper waters of her soul, there is, as in all those who chase superlatives, an elusive apex predator she needs to slay.

Her plan is to launch from Choshi, Japan, in March 2018. Then, before autumn descends, to row victoriously under the Golden Gate Bridge—she visualizes this frequently. Just 18 adventurers have attempted to

row the Pacific west-to-east alone, and only two have finished, both Frenchmen. The first, Gérard d’Aboville in 1991, became a national hero for his conquest, though he famously professed, “If I had known it would be like this, I would never have tried.” The most recent woman to try, in June 2015, quit after eight days.

DITTON DIDN’T START OUT LIKE THIS. She describes her childhood in England as conventional, middle-class. She convinced her parents to let her attend the Chelsea College of Arts, but she instantly felt out of place. Her instructors were interested in conceptual art—this was the heyday of Damien Hirst pickling dead animals in formaldehyde. She, on the other hand, was a maker, a sculptor. She despised the way her professors deconstructed her pieces, pressing for meaning. “I never made a single thing again,” she says.

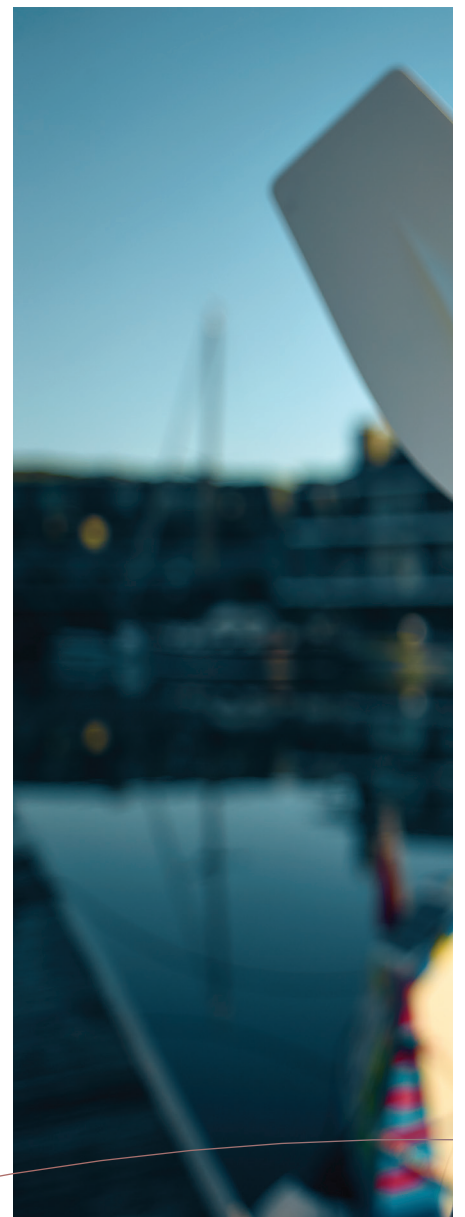
Instead, at 20, she ran off to India to apprentice with stone carvers, which she explains thusly: “I guess I got locked out of my own life by choosing that art school.... You either end up in substance abuse, which is probably the most common route you could go, or you drop out, or you run away.” Before leaving, she’d hauled out her grandfather’s typewriter with an old blue silk ribbon and tried to write about what was undoing her. “Big stuff—Who am I? Why am I here?... It got to a point where I was like, *I don’t know*,” she says of that period. “India is a really good place to go because it takes every concept about who you are and just dumps it.”

The move served as a demarcation in Ditton’s life—there’d been pre-India Lia, and now there was a new, post-India Lia. For six months she traipsed around, picking up a couple parasites that hung around for a decade. Needing to recover, she hit the Thailand beaches. There, she talked her way into crewing a Thomas Colvin-designed ketch with hand-cranked winches and a kerosene stove that was heading up the Red Sea. For five months, she sailed around Thailand, then Malaysia, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Yemen, Eritrea, Sudan, Egypt, Cyprus, Greece, and Turkey.

The whole experience, the impulsiveness of it, suggested an entirely new way of life to her. “We didn’t bathe. We washed the wooden plates by throwing them in the sea and swimming. We didn’t wear any clothes after a while, which is weird, especially if you’re British,” she says. “It was raw.”

Still, she continued to heed the sea’s siren call. She flew to New York, then hitched a boat ride down to the Caribbean. When her sailing crowd migrated to Rhode Island, she followed, making herself useful, then indispensable.

Three years later, she was grabbing headlines as a professional sailor. In 2005, at 25, she became the youngest finisher and the only woman to complete the Royal Western Yacht Club of England-sponsored OSTAR (Original Singlehanded Trans-Atlantic Race), navigating a 34-foot trimaran called *Shock-wave* from England to America in just over 27 days. The next year, she took second in her boat class in the 3,542-mile Route du Rhum, soloing an Open 40





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(40-footer) from Saint-Malo, France, to the Caribbean. She’s now crossed the Pacific three times, the Indian Ocean twice, and the Atlantic nine times—all told, the equivalent of nearly eight laps around the globe.

DITTON’S ACCOMPLISHMENTS ARE MANIFEST, her motivations less so. I call her lead sponsor, Simon Woodroffe, the founder of the whimsical British hotel and sushi chain Yo!, to ask for an outside perspective. Woodroffe’s company is currently the largest underwriter of Ditton’s Pacific quest. (The rest she’s still frantically trying to raise.) I ask him the big question about Ditton: Why would anyone row across the Pacific Ocean, especially alone?

“Because she can,” he offers eagerly. “I don’t really know what her grit is in her oyster. It probably goes way back.” Does she care about fame? “She likes being the center of attention.... She wants to get the gong, the award from the queen.”

Then, after a pause, he adds, “She can [do it]. I

don’t think she’s sitting there going, ‘This is a monstrous thing to do.’”

Her training isn’t being done in total solitude, however. Ditton has employed a sports psychologist, Michael Gervais, who prepped Felix Baumgartner for his 2012 jump from a helium balloon 24 miles above the earth. I ask Gervais, too, whether Ditton is crazy. “No, by no means,” he says. All the greats, he explains, are “looking to add to the body of knowledge”—to have deeper insight about how one’s self works, or how nature, or the universe, works. “Samurai warriors, special forces—there’s a deep calling to put your life, your mind, and your craft to the test.”

Marin endurance athlete Meredith Loring, who in 2014 paddled from San Francisco to Hawaii with her husband, views Ditton’s goal, while torturous in the doing, as doable. It’s mostly about mental fortitude, she says. Her advice to Ditton: Have friends, colleagues—maybe the psychiatrist—on speed dial.

Ditton’s motivations also have an artistic bent: At sea, Ditton journals daily, once even scribbling

her meditations all over the cabin walls. In 2006, she turned her first transatlantic sail into a performance installation. After completing the trip, she lived aboard the boat—not disembarking even once—outside London’s Tate Britain museum for 28 days, the journey’s length. For this trip, she is considering live-streaming her entire Pacific odyssey and is plotting a land-based installation to follow. “What I’m doing isn’t important unless it means something to other people,” she says. “Otherwise, it’s just my own little trip.”

DITTON LOOKS PERPLEXED when I ask if she’s called the two French guys who soloed the Pacific. Clearly this is not done. An adventurer must forge her own path. This is perhaps why Ditton so frequently answers my questions the way she does. How much weight should you gain? *Nobody knows*. How much will you lose? *Nobody knows*.

Instead, she’s making most of her training up from scratch. For now, she’s deadlifting 135 pounds, grinding toward two hours at a two-minute pace on the rowing machine, circuit training, SoulCycling, and ticking off 1,000 miles rowing on the bay.

Here’s what she knows she’ll have to do to get from Choshi, the easternmost port town in the Tokyo region, to San Francisco: 12 to 16 hours a day at the oars, for between four and six months. Some 5,082 miles point to point, though at times the currents and eddies off the massive underwater Hawaiian-Emperor seamount chain will likely force her to paddle furiously for days only to end up back where she began. Altogether, she’s likely to clock in at 6,000 or even 7,000 miles total. (For amusement, she’s considering copying distance swimmer Diana Nyad, who memorized the lyrics to nearly 100 songs to amuse herself as she trekked from Cuba to Florida.)

In this morning’s serenity, the San Francisco skyline in pastels, seals popping up, it’s hard to picture the misery ahead: her finger muscles growing so rapidly that they trap the nerves; or, as in the case of other marathon rowers, her hands becoming claws from clutching the oars; or calves so atrophied she will struggle to walk.

Then there’s the aloneness. Ditton finds the prospect of six months by herself both alluring and terrifying. She describes herself as being “different” from a young age—“I couldn’t quite find my place,” she says. She came to be comfortable alone, and now the far edges of loneliness fascinate her.

But the mind can do funny things. So she’s tracking her emotional state as religiously as the algae accumulating below her boat. “I don’t have that other person to go, ‘Are you OK?’” she says. “If you haven’t got someone to reflect that, you need to do it yourself.”

To make this self-awareness second nature, Ditton’s been logging time in a sensory deprivation chamber. Trapped in the pod for up to 90 minutes in total silence, she is creating a reference point for a state of peace. It’s what she’ll refer back to in moments of tremendous psychic distress, like if her 21-by-5.5-foot glass boat, which is covered in a colored wrap to look like a Frank Stella paint-

Lia Ditton

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ing, is being pummeled by 50-foot waves. That's happened to her before.

It was just such a pummeling that launched Ditton's impending moon shot, in fact. This was her first transatlantic race, in winter, on a famous 56-foot multihull sailboat named *Moxie*. "I didn't know that a boat could break up," she recalls. But then the boat cracked between the main and port hulls.

"We shouldn't have survived that," she says. Clutching the helm, she fought all night through the storm. Through it all, she felt oddly calm. Fascinated, actually. "It was just so stunningly beautiful," she says. "The waves taking off in sheets, roaring water...jade-and-white swirls. It was just another world."

When the furor ended, Ditton felt ready for anything. Then she heard that others in the race had maneuvered through the same storm in single-person boats. "I was like, Oh my God, they just went through what we went through, but alone. And that really got me thinking." So in 2016, she bought a washed-up boat off Sarah Outen, the

rower who in 2013 came closest to setting the record Ditton seeks, soloing as far as the Aleutian Islands.

A crossing departing from Japan represents the ultimate navigational challenge, going against the favorable trade winds that blow from east to west. Ditton sold Woodroffe, an old friend and a fellow adventurer whose boats she had captained in the past, on the idea. He loved the audacity. "I wanted to see her do something amazing," he says.

In the run-up to departure, Ditton remains casual about sharks, her water-desalinization pump crapping out—even about 180 days of eating little beyond stone-cold freeze-dried spaghetti Bolognese and pork stew. Even her possible death is no hang-up. "I don't think this is really that dangerous," she says.

What is freaking her out, however, is gaining the 40 pounds she'll need to pack on before the trip. Even now, 11 months out, she's breakfasting on four or five eggs. "Yeah, 'I need to gain 10 to 15 kilograms,' said no woman ever," she says, laughing. Three months before she departs, she'll start smothering everything she eats with oil and butter.

IN MANY WAYS, Ditton has free-fallen into an alternate universe. Every new threshold she crosses reveals ever more possibilities for mastery and heroism. Maintaining the buzz requires more pain, more risk, more focus, more grit. Yet as her adventures expand, her world telescopes, the set of relatable peers and lifestyles growing ever narrower. "It can be alienating. You come home and you've crossed an ocean, literally and physically," she says. "You go to the moon and back, the thing you might otherwise have done feels trivial."

I can't help wondering whether Ditton has followed that road so far that she's come untethered, free-floating. For her own part, Ditton seems either unaware or simply cagey about my probing her motivations. Maybe to the envelope pushers, for whom mountains are there to climb, the better question is why the rest of us sit inside all day, walled off from soul-altering experiences. "I know people don't accept [my] reasons," Ditton says. "They are looking for some ultimate truth that maybe doesn't even exist. Or I don't know it. Ask me afterward. Why does anyone

do anything? For some irrational reason you can't necessarily vocalize until afterward."

Ditton's lifestyle has rendered her a "pretty undatable" woman, she says with a laugh. On her voyages, she says, company can be overrated: In 2010, she volunteered to be a last-minute replacement in a race from the Canary Islands to Antigua in a two-man boat. She and her partner annoyed each other right away—a situation made even more uncomfortable by the fact that they had to row for 73 days completely naked to avoid the unbearable chafing.

Eventually, the conversation winds its way back to the big unanswerable question: So why put yourself through these ordeals? Ditton considers the question yet again, between pulls on the oars. We're nearly to my drop-off point in San Francisco now.

"You have quite an amazing power after you do something like this, and I think that's really what I want," she offers. "Power in the sense that people take you seriously, for example."

I parry it back to her. Haven't you already earned that? I ask.

"More power, then." ■



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