

The Pull of the Pennines



The BBC has produced a four-part series celebrating the 268-mile Pennine Way to mark the National Trail's 50th anniversary. We spoke to the programme's presenter Paul Rose about what the show entailed, and how it compared to his other global adventures

Even as a child, Paul Rose, presenter of the BBC's forthcoming television tribute to the Pennine Way, knew he wanted to be a global adventurer. He was fascinated by explorers such as Jacques Cousteau and, coveting the outdoors experience, he'd regularly drag his mattress onto the balcony of his Romford council flat to sleep outside.

'It was the claustrophobic urban sense that propelled me into the wild places,' says the 63-year-old, who's had two stints as Vice President of the Royal Geographical Society. 'I just knew I had to escape from the urban area.'

He was 14 when he had his first experience of proper adventure. It came while he was on a school trip to the Brecon Beacons. He'd always struggled academically ('I was hopeless in school and the teachers became the enemy,' he says), but on that trip he excelled at navigating, loved it in fact, especially after being praised by his geography teacher.

'I remember peeling potatoes into a bucket at the Merthyr Tydfil youth hostel in the rain, feeling the sense that I'm alive,' he recalls. 'I've often looked back at that and wondered if I've ever felt so alive. I knew it was all about the outside for me after that.'

Back at school he managed to pass metalwork, which meant he could leave to become an apprentice at Ford in Dagenham. He loved the job, and it enabled him to spend his spare time enrolled on courses at two diving clubs – 'That was the making of me,' he says.

With an appetite for new experiences, he emigrated to America in the 1970s to work as a toolmaker at an outboard motor company in Waukegan, just north of Chicago. While over there he became a qualified diving instructor, teaching the Chicago Police Department's recovery team before becoming Director of the US Navy's scuba diving programme for the whole of the Great Lakes area, instructing Navy Seals among others.



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Episode 1 EDALE TO CALDERDALE

- Paul sets off from Edale in Derbyshire and meets Pennine Way veteran and author Damian Hall, who tells him what to expect.
- Next he tells the story of Tom Stephenson, who had a 30-year battle with government and landowners to launch the Pennine Way.
- Paul visits the wreck of a US Superfortress bomber which crashed in the Peak District in 1948 killing all 13 airmen on board.
- Near Holme Moss he meets people who are reseeded the moors in an attempt to undo centuries of industrial pollution.
- While passing Hebden Bridge Paul meets author and actor Barry Rutter who tells him about the landscape’s literary connections.

He also gained mountaineering qualifications before taking on mountaineering work in the local area, as well as in Ecuador and Alaska, before returning to the UK in 1988, his CV bursting with qualifications. His newfound expertise eventually got him a job as Base Commander at the British Antarctic Survey’s Rothera research station.

‘I originally applied for a diving officer’s job in Antarctica,’ Paul explains, ‘But when they realised the amount of mountaineering experience that I had – they had some big projects that required mountaineers – they took me on as a Field Assistant, which I worked as for three years. Then I was offered the Base Commander role.’

He’s had a lot of ‘bumps and scrapes’ on trips over the decades, but he says the most dangerous situation he ever faced was while working in Antarctica.

‘I was making a dive to recover some lost equipment and a very big iceberg broke off. The tide brought it over my position, but I didn’t know,’ he says, ‘So when I came up, instead of coming up to the surface, at about 20 metres I banged my head.’

He assumed that the iceberg had only drifted over his position by a few metres, so he and a colleague followed their line for several minutes before coming to the buoy at the other end of the line – the buoy was also being held under the water by the iceberg.

‘That’s when we realised how massive it was,’ he says. ‘You’ve only got so much time down there and we were at the end of the dive anyway.’

In the darkness they carried on in the same direction before seeing a light above. They came up. All they had found was a cavity, another dead end. So they went down again and spent ‘a long time’, slowly and methodically searching for a way out.

‘By sheer luck we popped out with probably only a minute of air left,’ Paul admits.

Surprisingly, it was while working in the dangerous and isolated environs of the Antarctic that Paul’s interest in the slightly more benign Pennine Way began.

‘I was Base Commander for 10 years and one of my jobs was recruiting new personnel. The Pennine Way would always come up,’ he laughs. ‘I swear, 90 percent of the people sat in front of me looking for jobs as pilots or mountaineers or divers or scientists had walked the Pennine Way. It was amazing. So it was in the back of my mind that this iconic adventure in England was something everyone had done, except for me.’

Fortuitously the BBC approached him with the idea of presenting a four-part series about the 268-mile walking trail, which runs all the way from Derbyshire to Scotland, to celebrate the Pennine Way’s 50th anniversary. As soon as they asked, he agreed, cancelling some prior commitments. The experience of making the show didn’t let him down.

Episode 2 HAWORTH TO TAN HILL

- Paul meets photographer Simon Warner at the Top Withens ruins, said to be the inspiration for Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights.
- He goes to Malham Show and judges a few competitions, then goes climbing at Malham Cove with world famous climber Steve McClure.
- In the Long Churn Cave system Paul compares walking above ground with exploring below it.
- In Thwaite Paul tells the story of the Kearton brothers, pioneering wildlife photographers who inspired David Attenborough.
- He ends the stage at Tan Hill Inn, Britain’s highest pub, a refuge for Pennine Way walkers.

Episode 3 TEESDALE TO CROSS FELL

- At Bowes Museum in Barnard Castle (a slight detour) Paul finds out how artists like Turner used to come to paint the Pennines during the Napoleonic wars as they were safe.
- Paul tries kayaking down the River Tees with world champion kayaker Clare O’Hara, who’s from Leeds.
- A geologist tells Paul about the rocks of the North Pennines and how they support the wildlife.
- At Middleton in Teesdale Paul learns about a threatened upland wildflower meadow, one of the rarest habitats in the UK.
- He heads up High Cup Nick, a spectacular geological feature.



Episode 4

ALSTON TO KIRK YETHOLM

- At Vindolanda Paul joins one of the longest running excavations and finds part of a Roman tablet on camera.
- At Hadrian's Wall he meets Kathryn Tickell, a Northumbrian pipes player whose mum grew up on the Pennine Way.
- Paul finds out about attempts to keep the northern stretch of the Pennine Way as a refuge for red squirrels.
- On exercise with the army at Otterburn, Paul finds out what's happening when the red flags fly.
- Finally he crosses the border into Scotland.

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‘Completely the opposite,’ he says. ‘It exceeded all my expectations.’

Over the past year he’s made trips to remote islands in French Polynesia, the Arctic and Mozambique, yet he still found the adventure of the Pennine Way invigorating, though we’ll let you in on a secret: despite filming having now finished, Paul still hasn’t actually completed the whole of the Pennine Way.

‘The original plan was to walk the whole way and tell the story, but it’s logistically impossible,’ he says. ‘We knew what would happen. Inevitably we’d end up with people who were essential for me to meet, experts on art for instance, or geologists or scientists, you name it, and the chances of them all being in the right place at the same time and getting the weather right was pretty impossible.

‘So what I did was walk the very best bits. The Pennine Way is 268 miles, and I think I walked a lot further than that, because to get to some of the places we had to go backwards or take different directions, so it’s fair to say I’ve easily walked the total distance, and possibly more. I’ve certainly walked all the best bits. But later this year I am going to walk the whole Pennine Way. I’m very keen to do it.’

During filming he would leave his house in Windermere and drive east to take on daily challenges along the route, such as walking up High Cup Nick, climbing up Malham Cove with expert climber Steve McClure, kayaking down the Tees and talking to experts, as well as meeting people who know the history of the walking trail.

Paul says that one of the highlights was when he joined an excavation team at the site of a former Roman fort at Vindolanda, just south of Hadrian’s Wall. He grabbed a shovel and started digging carefully, listening to the instructions, when suddenly he found a piece of debris in the ground. They took it out and scraped it off. It was part of a tablet.

‘These tablets are like you and I writing Post-it notes today,’ he explains. ‘They tell not only the official story, which is all covered in official documentation, but we learn so much from soldiers and shopkeepers and livestock managers.’

At the time of writing he’s still waiting to find out what was written on the piece of tablet he found, but Paul says it was another reminder that sometimes the best adventures and most interesting stories are a lot closer to home than you think.

‘I’ve been spending my whole life travelling to these remote places,’ he laughs, ‘So it really was a beautiful moment to realise that this absolutely, genuinely world-class adventure was only 30 miles from my front door.’

The Pennine Way begins on BBC One on 9th April and will run for four weeks.