

No Place to Rest

While the U.K.'s Lizzy Hawker is not a household name in trail running on this side of the pond, she is tearing it up, from Europe to the Himalayas to South Africa. But you wouldn't know it by talking to her. **By Ed Douglas**





Deep in the Himalayas, Lizzy Hawker sits in front of an open fire cupping a glass of tea in her hands, listening to the rain falling from the night sky. Despite the late hour, she's anxious to be on the move, but the weather has trapped her. Less than a third of the way into her attempt to break the record for running 200 miles from Mount Everest to Kathmandu, her plans are on the brink of collapse.

Early that morning, November 16, 2011, Lizzy had left basecamp under clear skies. Yet by the time she passed the village of Pangboche a few hours later, clouds were building. Further down the trail at fog-bound Lukla—home to one of the world's most perilous airports and gateway to Everest—frustrated trekkers shared rumors about when their flights might leave. Hawker skipped past in the late afternoon, having covered in a few hours ground that had taken many of those trekkers four or five days.

Then the rain started to fall. By evening, she was soaked. Even though her altitude had dropped from a lung-busting 5200 meters, she still faced a series of steep climbs over passes up to 3500 meters, crossing the hills between Lukla and the road head at Jiri.

At 10:30 p.m., all alone, shivering with cold and coughing spasmodically from a chest infection, Hawker knew she must stop

Then she sat her guest down where she could dry out her soaked running gear.

Hawker explains she only wants to rest for an hour until the rain stops. Then she'll be back out in the dark, hitting the trail again. But the deluge shows no sign of stopping, so one hour becomes two, and then three. It is so tempting to sleep, but Hawker wants to be out of Bupsa the moment the weather clears. And so she keeps a lonely vigil, half-dozing in front of the fire, waiting patiently—and thinking of the door.



BEING OUT ON HER OWN isn't a novel experience for Hawker. She may be almost pathologically self-effacing, is thoughtful and kindly, but as friends attest, she does things her way. This is a world-record holder who has never had a coach or joined a track-and-field club. She admits herself she has much to learn about race tactics, especially for shorter distances like the marathon. Yet she's also a four-time winner of the 166-kilometer Ultra-Trail du Mont-Blanc (UTMB)—more victories in Europe's premier ultra event than any other man or woman. What she knows, she learned the hard way.

Her 2005 UTMB debut was the stuff of dreams. Then 28 years old, Hawker, hailing from Upminster, in east London, had never run anything like the distance before. She had no support team and no plan. Under current rules for qualification, running two races in the last two years on a UTMB list, she wouldn't even

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and warm up before hypothermia took hold. Kathmandu would take another 40 hours or so, but toughing it out across mist-shrouded passes in the wet and dark could only end badly. The next village was Bupsa, but when she got there, all the windows in the tourist lodges were dark. Everyone seemed to be sleeping. Had she left it too late?

Then Hawker spotted a flickering light in a porter's shelter. A local girl was putting out the fire and preparing for bed. Taking one look at the tiny bedraggled foreign woman dripping on the dirt floor, the girl stoked up the fire again and put on a pan for sweet milk tea, that reliable Nepalese pick-me-up.

have been allowed to take part.

"I mean, even *I* hadn't heard of me," she says. Yet when she started running at the back of the field, she found she just couldn't stop. One by one, she passed all the other women and won the race. Overnight an ultrarunning legend was born.

In the half dozen years that followed, Hawker proved 2005 was no fluke, winning many of Europe's most prestigious mountain races—including the Gondo Event, the Zermatt Marathon and the Swiss Alpine Davos, setting course records in the latter two. She quit her job as an oceanographer to live in the mountains and focus on run-



ning. Yet as it has turned out, simply racing hasn't been enough for Lizzy.

This is a woman with a strong environmental conscience who thinks constantly about how to live as lightly as she runs; a woman who is driven as much by the beauty of her surroundings as her will to win. So much so that interviewers are sometimes foxed by her talk of sunrises and perfect landscapes. Is this woman in the race or looking at the scenery?



THROUGHOUT THOSE LONG hours in a rain-swept and obscure Nepalese village, Hawker ponders the wisdom of going on. It's not as though she is in Nepal for the express purpose of breaking this record. Running 200 miles back to Kathmandu is a bonus in an exceptional year—even by her high standards.

In the summer, she'd won her fourth UTMB. In September, she'd smashed the world 24-hour record by 3.42 kilometers in the Commonwealth Mountain and Ultra Distance Championships held in North Wales. She'd beaten all the men that day too.

A few weeks later, she'd flown to Nepal for a challenge that was left-of-field for a competitive runner but spoke to Hawker's pow-

TIM KEMPLE



LEFT TO RIGHT: Hawker training in her stomping grounds of the French Alps, near Chamonix.

With Mount Everest and its famous plume of snow blowing in the background, Hawker trains for her Everest Base Camp to Kathmandu record with companions Stephen Pyke and Mark Hartell.



erfully deep relationship with the mountains in general, and the Himalayas in particular. Her plan was to make a fast traverse of the Great Himalaya Trail, or at least the section of it that currently exists, across Nepal. The existing route covers more than 1000 miles from gigantic Kangchenjunga in the east of the republic to the remote district of Humla in the west, crossing passes up to 6200 meters along the way. Typically, she planned to run alone, with minimal back-up, linking up with Sherpas working on climbing expeditions to see her safely over the highest passes.

Hawker's plan foundered when she lost the main trail somewhere between Kangchenjunga and its equally huge neighbor Makalu, just a few days into her attempt. Then, at a stream crossing, the small pack she carried on her front became detached and fell into the water. It held everything that was irreplaceable—satellite phone, permits and contacts book. Her logistics team in Kathmandu spent an anxious few days waiting to hear why she had suddenly fallen silent. When Hawker eventually found a phone, she managed to get a message through. It was over almost as soon as it had started.

Lizzy could have just slunk home to her temporary base in the Swiss ski resort of Klosters to lick her wounds

and plan her next move. But that's not her style. She was in Nepal, so why not make the most of it? After a shower and a good night's sleep, she looked around for something else humungous to sink her teeth into. Her first thought wasn't the trail from Everest to Kathmandu. She'd already done that in 2007, setting a new record of 3 days 2 hours 39 minutes with running partner Stephen Pyke.

Instead she signed up for the Everest Sky Race. Organizer Bruno Poirier had been inviting her to the event for a few years and now here was the perfect opportunity. Starting at the town of Dolakha, the course takes in some of the wildest terrain in the Everest region in nine stages totalling 200 kilometers with 11,000 meters of ascent. The finish line is basecamp for one of Nepal's most beautiful mountains, Ama Dablam.

After the seventh stage, and within sight of Everest, Lizzy led the race, but a chest infection she'd picked up in Kathmandu was taking its toll. After reaching the summit of Gokyo Ri at 5350 meters, her lead had been cut to seven minutes, and she lost it next day crossing the Cho La, a pass of 5420 meters, to the eventual winner, local Jorbir Rai, who also won the race in 2008. Hawker finished third, having won four stages, unprecedented success for a foreign

athlete in the event. She pronounced herself satisfied with her effort.

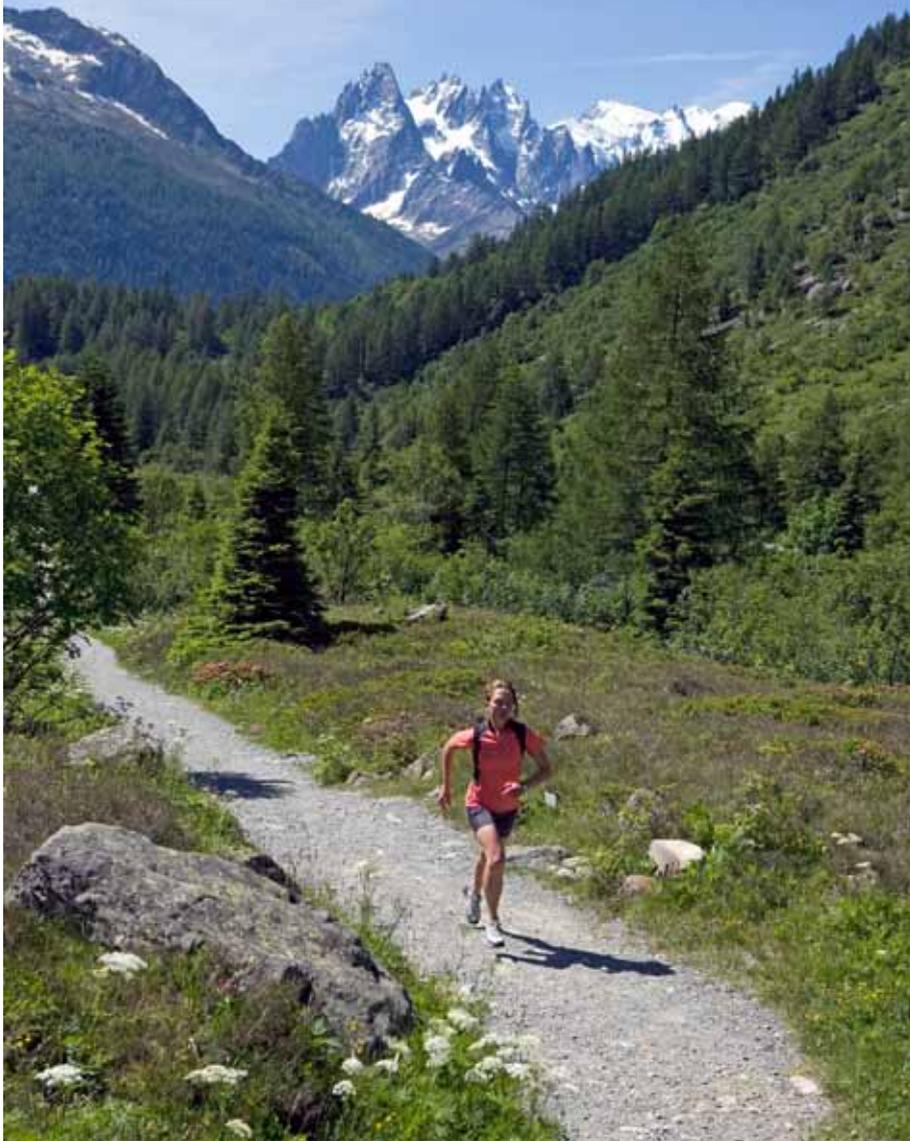
Even so, despite her success and that damned cough, Lizzy wasn't done. Flying out of Lukla might be the sensible option, but that would mean missing out on more days in the hills. And anyway, the airport was shut. Why not run back to Kathmandu? On their first record attempt, Lizzy and her friends had got lost and wasted time. She knew she could run faster, so why not give it a go?

The first thing she did—and so typical of Hawker—was to email Pyke and Mark Hartell, who had organized but then pulled out of the previous run. Would they mind at all if she had another go? Then she hung out with climbing friends at basecamp in the lee of stupendous Ama Dablam, eating and resting—and waiting for her chest to improve on a course of antibiotics. Feeling stronger, she shouldered her light pack and set out for Everest and the start of her long road home.



A WEEK AFTER HER RETURN from Nepal, Lizzy is sitting across the table from me in the Sportzentrum Restaurant on the edge of Klosters, the one town she occupies long enough to call home. The hills through the window are brown when they should be white, and consequently the restaurant is almost empty. Skiing is impossible and the locals are getting anxious for the season to begin. While I plough my way through a heaped bowl of pasta, Lizzy sips at her second cappuccino. In her jacket pocket is a chopped apple she'll eat later, to keep her going for the two-hour training run she's planning after I leave.

Before her first Everest to Kathmandu



record, Lizzy reached the summit of Ama Dablam on an expedition led by mountain guide Victor Saunders. Now in his fourth decade of Himalayan exploration, Saunders was amazed at how little Hawker consumed.

"I get up pretty early," he told me, "but, whenever that was, Lizzy would be up before me. She'd nibble on a chapatti and then go off running for several hours. The guys on the expedition just couldn't stop eating."

The two adjectives you hear most about Hawker are "private" and "tiny." There's some truth in both. At 5 feet 4 inches and 116 pounds, she's no giant, but she has a strong presence. We had arranged to meet at Klosters rail station, and when I catch sight of her, I realize I'd forgotten how tough she can look. With her feet planted a little apart and her shoulders squared up, she's not exactly defiant but clearly self-possessed. Her running style is robust and neat, carrying her down the trail like she was on rails. She has an

open face that lights up when she smiles, but she can look preoccupied, even worried when she's thinking.

As for "private," it largely depends. "She's quite warm and fun when you know her," says Mark Hartell, instigator for her first Everest to Kathmandu run. "She may be able to get by on a chapatti a day, but she's also quite happy to quaff a jug of chang [local barley beer] to lubricate a game of Scrabble or a conversation."

When I tell her all this between mouthfuls of pasta, she laughs. "I think I must be very efficient at metabolising fat, because I can go through a whole race and not eat. It's easy for me to forget to eat early enough. I can easily go 30 or 40 kilometers without eating anything but then it's too late. When I do eat something, it takes a while to get through me."

On her first run from Everest to Kathmandu, she says, beyond the road head at Jiri, she became ravenous. "I'd have eaten anything that appeared in the road," she



LEFT TO RIGHT: Training near Chamonix, France, for the 2009 UTMB.

Hawker negotiates the Gray Tower on Nepal's spectacular Ama Dablam during her successful ascent of the Southwest Ridge in 2007.

says, laughing again. Although given that she's been vegetarian most of her life, I guess it would have to be cheese road kill.

Hawker's attitude to nutrition reveals her approach to running—and life—in general. She'll find her own path. When she won the 2006 100-kilometer World Championships in Seoul, she picked up bread rolls from the breakfast buffet and filled them with chocolate spread and honey.

"Things haven't really changed that much," she says. "I have tried various gels and bars, but still haven't found the answer. I was eating banana bread at the UTMB this year."

She's pretty restrained when it comes to hydration too. "I won't drink much up to marathon distance," she says. "I don't sweat much so I don't need to drink as much as others and I find it hard drinking when I'm running fast."

Doesn't she ask advice on all that stuff? "I haven't talked to a specialist at all. I've tried various things but I still haven't found the answer. Some races I manage quite well but in others I don't manage to take much on. In the UTMB I had an injury in my bum, and because of the pain I wasn't eating as much as I normally do—and on the UTMB it's quite easy because you eat during the ascents and digest. The pain really threw me. I was running on empty for a lot that race."

It's hard to watch someone when you're eating and they're not, but every so often I sneak a glance. She looks a little tired, as you'd expect for someone who has just run 200 miles and then flown a third of the way round the world. She's suffering from ankle tendonitis too. "I haven't had any injuries for ages until yesterday," she

says. “It’s just overuse. If I can give it a week’s rest without running on it, the problem usually goes away.”



LIZZY TURNS 36 THIS YEAR, and I ask her if she feels she’s still getting stronger. “I think so. I’m noticing recovery is a bit different these days. I have to be a bit more careful now, whereas when I started I could get away with anything.”

That’s an understatement. “Even among long-distance runners,” says Stephen Pyke, “Lizzy’s unusual for her speed of recovery.” After their Everest to Kathmandu run, Pyke says his feet stayed swollen for a week. Two weeks after reaching Kathmandu they met again at a local fell race, he says. Pyke and Hartell managed to get round in a time 10-percent down on their usual effort. “Lizzy won the women’s event and set a new course record.”

Hawker is typically modest about this. “I do manage to race a lot more than people say I should,” she says. No kidding. She kicked off last year—on January 1st—with the Annapurna 100, run over the fiercely steep hills above the lakeside resort of Pokhara in Nepal. Then, having trekked in double-quick time around the 300-kilometer Annapurna circuit, she flew to Hong Kong for another 100-kilometer race, on January 15. In March she ran the Trans-GranCanaria, 123 kilometers across the island and 11,000 meters of ascent. As she counts these races off on her fingers, Lizzy doesn’t mention she was the first female home in all of them.

A month after the Canaries she flew to South Africa for the republic’s two most famous ultras, Cape Town’s Two Oceans in March and in April the 89-kilometer Comrades Marathon, run between Durban and Pietermaritzburg. Both draw thousands of competitors. At the second split in the 56-kilometer Two Oceans, taken at marathon distance, Hawker realized she had broken her personal best for a road marathon of 2 hours 45 minutes—and this on a hilly course. (“I really must work on my marathon time,” she says as an aside.) She finished Comrades in seventh place, three places behind fellow Brit (now living in Canada) Ellie Greenwood.

After that it was back to Europe for her favorite Alpine races, the Zermatt Marathon in early July, where she came in second, and three weeks later the 78-kilometer Swiss Alpine Davos, where she holds the course record. Lizzy won, her first victory since 2007, dedicating her success to local

runner Jasmin Nunige, who had beaten her in Zermatt but was reduced to firing the starting pistol at Davos because of illness.

Interspersed with these races were coaching commitments that saw her clocking up huge distances above and beyond what her training program required. Hawker has taught at the Laufschule Scuol in the Engadine Alps of Switzerland for several years, the school’s star tutor in ultra distances. If you want insider tips on running the UTMB, Scuol is the place to go. Apart from her deal with The North Face and occasional writing assignments, this is how Hawker sustains herself.

In August Hawker lined up for the race that made her name, the UTMB, winning in difficult circumstances. Europe’s premier mountain ultra had been abandoned in 2010 because of bad weather (see “UTMB Fun Run,” March 2011, Issue 71) and as a consequence athletes were required to carry more protective gear. They needed it. A powerful front moved through the French Alpine resort of Chamonix at the scheduled time of departure, so organizers put back the starting time by five hours. Then there was that hip injury that almost saw Hawker quit at 70 miles. She slipped on ice and the bruise was so painful, she thought she’d suffered a stress fracture in her pelvis, an injury she’s overcome once before, in 2007.

“She is a fierce competitor and an inspiring athlete, but wrapped in a package of humbleness tied together with passion. I don’t think she is chasing medals or titles—she is chasing her dreams.”

Yet when I ask her about the race, her first response is unexpected. “It was beautiful up there. I was bowled over by it. I was on the second high pass when dawn came, and it was magical.”

While the renowned Spaniard Kilian Jornet (see “Just Kilian,” December 2011, Issue 76) was putting on every stitch he owned, and the race organizers were frantically altering the route after an aid station got taken out by the storm, Hawker was running in her own private winter wonderland.

Leading from the start, she took the changes in her stride, as the athletes were diverted via Martigny, adding extra distance and height to the course. “We had all four seasons in that race,” she says. “Rain, snow, ice, cold and, in Martigny, it was like an oven.” Hawker crossed the line in 25 hours 2 minutes, almost two hours ahead of the next woman to become the first person, man or woman, to take four UTMB titles.

Four weeks later and fully recovered from her hip injury, Hawker was in North Wales for her record-breaking 24-hour race. She hadn’t run on the road since South Africa but rather than take the safe option of sticking to the trails, she opted for the 24-hour road race, a discipline she’d never attempted before, running one-kilometer laps in the faded Victorian seaside resort of Llandudno.

Not only did Hawker win, she beat all the male competitors too, and set a new world record. By the time the 24 hours was up, Hawker had run 246.41 kilometers, just over 153 miles, breaking the previous record by 3.42 kilometers. How did she feel about being a world-record holder? “The strange thing is I could have run it a lot better, if I’d focussed on it a bit more. I’d only made the decision to run the week before. I fancied doing something new, completely new. No one could have any expectations of me. I just wanted to see what happened. I didn’t feel I had run extraordinarily well.”

You’ll have got the message by now that Hawker is almost pathologically modest—even to a British ear—and equivocal about her direction. “I’ve watched her wrestle with some of these challenges,” says Hartell. “Should I focus on the marathon, should I aim for the UK 100-kilometer team, should I follow my heart in the mountains?”

She doesn’t talk like a dedicated athlete.

In broadcast interviews after her fourth UTMB she comes across as reserved and thoughtful, where you might expect her to be jubilant and expansive. She is almost apologetic about her determination to win, and deeply reluctant to discuss those she runs against. Mixing it with the opposition away from the trails is just not her style.

When I try and quiz her on her rivals, she’s respectful but won’t be drawn. “People often ask me if I think about the competition. Usually I’ll know the top women. I’m aware of it, whether Krissy Moehl’s is going to the UTMB for example. But I really just put that to one side and focus on my own race.”

But don’t for a moment imagine Hawker lacks the inner steel of a born competitor. “I think it’s quite well hidden, but I can’t imagine you’ll come across anyone more competitive than Lizzy,” says Pyke. “If she hasn’t run the best race she possibly can, she’ll be annoyed at herself.”

For evidence, look no further than her 2006 100-kilometer world crown. Hawker led from the start and, with 20 kilometers to go, led her nearest rival, Italian Monica Carlin, by six minutes. But Carlin fought back and with 200 meters to go—after seven-and-a-half hours of running—was just where she needed to be, almost on Hawker's shoulder. Hawker could easily have folded, but she didn't. She dug in and hung on, beating Carlin by four seconds in a sprint finish, the closest margin in the race's history, and likely to remain so.

By any standards, 2011 was a great year for Hawker—arguably her best. Ellie Greenwood might have been tearing up the trails in the U.S., her win in the Western States 100, the American River 50 and the Chuckanut 50K earning her whispered comparisons with Ann Trason, but Hawker's world record and a fourth UTMB was a classy haul.

Greenwood describes herself as “a big

“She likes space. She wants to sleep near the window, preferably with it open. At the long trekking-lodge table she sits at the end. She doesn't like being in the lower valleys, she wants to be above the trees and in the mountains. She is friendly to people, but keeps a good distance. When making a journey, she likes the ease of being on her own, not having to compromise with another person.”

fan” of Hawker. “It is so refreshing to see someone who just wants to live a simple mountain life and push herself to the absolute limit just because that's what she loves to do,” says Greenwood. She admires the mental toughness that allowed Hawker to focus on a dull one-kilometer tarmac course to take the world 24-hour record. “The fact that she was prepared to give it a shot and attempt a world-record time shows that must have a solid self confidence. I think Lizzy is an amazing example. She lives an exemplary lifestyle and stays true to herself. She pushes herself to extraordinary limits.

On the home stretch during the Everest Sky Race last year.



If she ever sets herself a challenge but falls short, you know she has done everything in her power to succeed.”

Renowned ultrarunner Kami Semick also holds Hawker in high admiration, saying, “Lizzy wants to get the best out of herself in every single event, whether she is racing the men, for example, at UTMB, or attempting a record in the Himalayas. She is a fierce competitor and an inspiring athlete, but wrapped in a package of humbleness tied together with passion. I don't think she is chasing medals or titles—she is chasing her dreams.”



HAWKER COULD HAVE GONE into winter training full of confidence that she could add a fifth title and take back the course record from rival Krissy Moehl. But she didn't. She headed for Nepal and her dream of running the Great Himalayan Trail. The

question is—why?

The answer to that has its roots in her fascination with mountains. Hawker doesn't just love running up them. From a young age, mountains became her natural habitat, shaping her own psychological landscape. She was born in Upminster in northeast London, as far from wild nature as you could imagine. Her father ran an engineering business, her mother stayed home to raise their four children. “Maybe mountains are a reaction to suburbia,” she says.

Hawker first saw the Alps on a family holiday when she was six. She says she cried on the train home when the Matterhorn slipped from view. That passion for mountains expressed itself more as a hiker and climber than a runner, although she says she “can't remember not running. I enjoyed cross-country more than standing on a netball court. I knew I wanted things I could do alone.”

A top student who loved schoolwork, Hawker won a place at Cambridge University to study Natural Sciences, a popular first degree for doctors. Lizzy thought about medicine but preferred to be outside in nature than stuck inside a hospital. So she studied oceanography as a post-grad. Her

PhD was on the circulation of the Nordic seas. That led to a contract with the British Antarctic Survey, offering oceanographic expertise in modelling biological changes prompted by climate change.

The subject area was right up her street, and she could have settled into a useful career but Hawker quit academic life. “I didn't have enough faith in the research I was doing to move on and get promoted and write papers.” For Hawker, the mesh of workplace politics, of nurturing a career, was a net to trap her. Plotting ocean currents on board an icebreaker and then pounding away on a treadmill after work was a far cry from the freedom of the hills.

She'd run her first marathon in 2000, and began connecting the mountains with running while she was studying for her PhD. She entered races like the Snowdon Marathon and took on challenges like the 15 Welsh 3000ers. Running in the mountains, she realized, was the best way she'd discovered to experience the environment that left her fulfilled and inspired.

Her writing is full of these ideas. After the Annapurna 100 in January, during her fast tour of the Annapurna Circuit, she wrote: “There was solitude, a time to think and a time just to be in the moment. Walking literally from the pre-dawn until dusk, not running in order to save myself for the next race, the journey became for me almost a ‘moving meditation.’”

Some runners find this kind of talk a little whimsical, as though Hawker were avoiding the subject. But it's right at the burning core of what propels her. When she says, “My heart's in the mountains,” she means it, although by “heart” I think she means “preferred state of mind.” There's something genuinely Zen about her. “When I'm moving,” Lizzy tells me, “whether it's running or being in the mountains, that's when I know myself more. Running is just part of me.”

The secret to Lizzy Hawker is her focus on the moment she's in. She's arranged things so there's little to distract her. She doesn't have a car or a house, or many possessions beyond her laptop and her running shoes. She has the loan of her small apartment in Klosters and when that goes, she'll find a perch somewhere else. She makes what money she needs from sponsor The North Face, writing and coaching. She's got lots of friends, is warm and engaging and open to the idea of relationships, but there's something undeniably restless about her, as though anxious that something just out of view might slow her down.

Competing in mountain races is obvi-



LEFT TO RIGHT: Hawker, prayer flags on her backpack, about to cross a suspension bridge in the Kanchenjunga Conservation Area en route to the start of the Great Himalaya Trail. On her way to victory in the 2009 UTMB.

ously important to her. No one runs that far and fast while feeling doubtful about it. Yet the discipline of racing can be constricting. She doesn't seem at all comfortable with the athlete's need to focus on the self, the endless self-interrogatives. How am I feeling? What should I eat? Will I succeed?

Even now, sitting in the restaurant in Klosters, I know she wants to get moving. The Nepal-based runner Richard Bull, who runs a blog on running in the Himalaya and trekked in with Hawker to the start of the GHT, puts his finger on it. "She likes space. She wants to sleep near the window, preferably with it open. At the long trekking-lodge table she sits at the end. She doesn't like being in the lower valleys, she wants to be above the trees and in the mountains. She is friendly to people, but keeps a good distance. When making a journey, she likes the ease of being on her own, not having to compromise with another person."

It isn't all plain sailing. "If Lizzy gets her teeth into something you won't meet anyone more determined," says Pyke. "But at the same time she can have bouts of uncertainty." Figuring out her path hasn't always been easy. Sometimes she's hesitated between different priorities. She had a promising academic career, but it didn't fulfil her. She's flirted with road running and had a serious go at the marathon, but working up her speed left her body damaged. The mountains—and the freedom they offer her—are the strongest structure in her life.



THESE DAYS, HAWKER SEEMS to have a clearer idea of what she's after and seems less prone to being buffeted from the course she's set herself. During the 24-hour race, the husband of another runner crewing for his partner offered food to Hawker as well. "He was really into the link between mind and body, and was bowled over by the focus I had,"

says Hawker. "He said he'd only seen that level of focus before in a Buddhist monk." Bull says he saw the single-mindedness trekking into Kangchenjunga.

So much of her success comes down to heeding her strong inner voice. But there are times, she says, when she stops listening. As any Tibetan Buddhist will tell you, mindfulness is not for wimps. "You have to be aware of what your body's saying," says Hawker. "The main thing is learning to listen. And to cut off listening when you're in pain and keep going." During her world-record run in Wales, she says she recalls thinking that if she hurt going slowly she might as well run faster.

When she's not running, Hawker usually has her head in a book, and cites Ralph Waldo Emerson as one of her favorite authors. I can see why. "Standing on the bare ground," Emerson wrote, "my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, all mean egotism vanishes." That's Hawker. Her personality also predisposes her to an extreme form of Emersonian self reliance. Not everyone would be comfortable running the length of Nepal all alone. In fact the State Department has specifically warned U.S. citizens not to, after American Aubrey Sacco disappeared in the Langtang National Park.

That won't put off Hawker. "I'm happy running alone along the trails," she says. "Towns at night are scary because of the dogs. But I'm keen to push trail running in Nepal." Trail running is a new and fast-growing feature in Nepal's tourist industry, and boosting its international profile is one of the ways she hopes to make a difference. That's partly why she ran in the Annapurna 100 and Everest Sky Race this year. But it's more than that. These trail-running journeys are a natural way for Hawker to express herself. They are the realization of her philosophy. They are physical interpretations of who she is.

EIGHT HOURS AFTER SHE took shelter in Bupsa, Lizzy Hawker emerged from her shelter and started running again. She wondered if she should bother, having lost so much time, but felt strong and was running faster than she had the day before. Then the tiredness hit. Luckily, a small team had driven out from Kathmandu to support her on the final section of road. "I was weaving into a ditch or into the middle of the road. At one point I just lay down," she says. Her friends kept jumping out of the van to run alongside her.

Through it all, though, she kept her form. "Even when I was really tired, I was still landing on the front part of my foot, which I couldn't believe." There's something extraordinary about a human on the edge of exhaustion having the mental strength to maintain her technique in this way. Of course, she broke the old record, despite her delay in Bupsa, and by over three hours. "I should have been four hours quicker," she says with a frown. "I slowed up on that last bit of road."

Her longstanding passion for the Alps, flirtations with road racing and demanding trips to Nepal have combined to keep her away from the United States. There's a hint too she might not feel at home in competitive American trail running. "I can't think of any European race where you are allowed a pacer, whereas it's pretty standard in U.S. races, even only 50-milers," she says. "And most long European ultras are semi self-sufficient. You rely on refreshment points but carry a rucksack with what you need to get you between those points—and to carry obligatory equipment. It seems in the U.S. it's customary to have a crew who will meet you at refreshment points."

Maybe one year she'll line up for the Western States. She has the freedom and ability to surprise her friends let alone the rest of us. My hunch is she'll never stray too far from the mountains and that she's not done with her dream of running across the Himalaya.

"It seems to me that you're on a bit of a journey," I say, just before we part. "But do you know where you're going?"

She gives her characteristic slow smile and her face brightens. "No," she says.

Ed Douglas is a writer based in Sheffield, England, who loves fell running in the Peak District. His books include Tenzing: Hero of Everest.