

‘Walking & nature have saved me’

As Julia Bradbury returns with a new TV show on the joys of walking, she talks to Anna Bonet about family, coping with failure and the power of getting outside

If Julia Bradbury were the UK's Chief Medical Officer, she would be prescribing a daily dose of nature to everybody. 'I genuinely believe we all need it in our lives,' she says. 'If you can spend half an hour in nature every day, your oxytocin levels go up, your cortisol levels go down, you can reduce anxiety, you can elevate your mood. It's powerful. I think we've all come to appreciate that over the past year.'

Julia is a familiar face on our TV screens. In a career spanning more than 20 years, she has presented everything from *Countryfile* to *Britain's Best Walks* and, in the process, has become synonymous with shows that inspire the public to get outdoors. For her new series *Cornwall And Devon Walks With Julia Bradbury*, she explores the rugged landscape of south-west England on foot.

The show was filmed in a series of two-week chunks between lockdowns last year, and Julia says that getting back to work was an incredible feeling. 'It was like being free,' she smiles. The eight-part series showcases the undiscovered corners of woodland and coast that Devon and Cornwall have to offer. 'It's lovely to be able to do coastal walks and get a bit of that blue energy,' she adds. 'They call it the "blue gym" effect, which is the therapeutic impact that the ocean has on human health.'

To be able to take that in, and lots of woodland walks, too... it's wonderful. 'We have some of the most breathtaking landscapes in the world,' she continues. 'I've never lost sight of that, but this series has reinforced my absolute love affair with the great British countryside.'

Her love of the outdoors started in childhood. Born in Ireland, she spent her early years in Rutland, East Midlands, before moving, aged 12, to Sheffield

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with her parents (Julia's sister, Gina, is 10 years older and had already left home). Their father, Michael, was a keen walker, and would take Julia to the Peak District on weekends and after school. 'We'd explore the areas he used to go to as a lad,' says Julia. 'As I've become older, I've realised how precious those moments were, and how special it was to share those times with him.'

While her Greek mother, Chrissi, is 'less outdoorsy', she has always been an enthusiastic gardener and has passed her expertise on to Julia. 'We'd

potter together in our garden for hours,' says Julia. 'She would get me to help move logs, and we'd pot plants and harvest apples from our apple tree.'

Julia's first job was in advertising, followed by a stint working for her mum's fashion business. 'I knew I hadn't found what I wanted to do yet,' she says. 'But I was always fascinated by television and how programmes are made. Dame Joan Bakewell was one of my heroes. So I decided to set off and try to get a job in TV.'

After a series of 'lucky breaks', she joined Janet Street-Porter's newly launched LIVE TV as a reporter in 1995. She went on to present top consumer shows including *Watchdog* and *Are We Being Served?*, but when she was offered the job of presenting BBC Four series *Wainwright Walks* in 2007, everything fell into place. 'I jumped at that opportunity,' she recalls, 'thinking "I'd love to make a programme about that, because I remember those times with my dad."' At the time, these kind of 'outdoorsy' shows were all presented by men, so being the first woman was also a big part of the appeal.

Julia has worked on more than 15 shows, including as co-presenter of *Countryfile* alongside Matt Baker. Inspired by her love of walking, she also founded The Outdoor Guide (theoutdoorguide.co.uk) five years ago, a website dedicated to



exploring the countryside on foot, which is run by her sister Gina.

'I've got to this stage in my life where I genuinely have autonomy,' Julia says of her career. 'I wouldn't say I have total control, but I do have that bit more influence over what I do.' She says she always has 'five or six ideas for a show bubbling away' at any one time, but admits that does mean putting herself out there. 'I feel exposed every single time I've pitched an idea, because you're exposing yourself to failure,' she explains. 'Nobody has a 100% strike rate. But I've learned how to cope with the failure; I've learned how to cope with the rejection.'

Julia, 50, puts that down to the resilience that comes with age: 'When you're a bit older, you've had a few knocks. What I think I have managed to do is develop a skin that is accepting of the failure that's going to come, and I don't let it absolutely demoralise me.'

She admits, though, that her last series, *The Greek Islands With Julia Bradbury*, was particularly nail-biting as it was one of her own ideas, and her mum was a part of it: 'It was lovely on a personal level, because I was exploring my roots and I got to film with my mum and trace our heritage a little.' Julia's dad had already appeared in many of her series. 'It has been lovely to be able to show my parents off, because I think they're pretty special,' says Julia.

Mum to son Zephyr, nine, and twin girls Xanthe and Zena, five, Julia is familiar with the juggle between career and family. 'When I go away to film, I feel horrible. As they become older, the children like it less and less, because they know what's coming,' she says. 'It's painful, but it's a part of life. I'm a working mother, and I'm proud of that. I want them, especially my girls, to be empowered.' She adds that she's fortunate her partner, Gerard, who runs his own property business, 'is an equal partner. He's a very good and hands-on dad.'

Julia describes motherhood as 'one of the most engaging and magical experiences'. She was diagnosed with endometriosis in her 30s, and her 'miracle twins' arrived after five rounds of IVF. 'Having children for me was a landmark moment at exactly the right time in my life, because it just cemented the importance of life, and of family bonds and love,' she says now.

'It has given me a purpose, because I genuinely feel that my children are an extension of me, because you're shaping them, informing them, loving them.'

Naturally, the biggest lesson Julia wants to instil in her children is the power of the outdoors. 'Nature teaches you so much about life,' she explains. 'It helps children understand where food comes from, how things grow, how things die, how to care and how to nurture.'

Based in London, the family may not have the Peak District on their doorstep, but they do get out to parks as much as possible: 'The kids love being outside. It's so important to me that I share those outdoor moments with them, just as I did with my dad.' Like most families, going for walks throughout lockdown has helped keep their spirits up. Homeschooling the children has allowed the family to get into a routine of going out to the local park after breakfast every morning.

Julia is still very close to her parents, who are now in their 80s and living in Rutland. She has found it difficult not seeing them this past year. 'We met up for a few socially distanced walks in Wakerley Woods, which I used to call Wiggly Woods as a child,' she laughs. 'The kids found it so difficult not to hug their grandparents, which was heartbreaking.'

When it comes to her own wellbeing, nature is crucial. 'There have been many moments of upset and discomfort, when walking and natural landscapes have saved me,' says Julia. 'I was unhappy in my 30s. I had endometriosis and was having issues at work. You find a way of dealing with those things, and walking and getting outside was my way.' She smiles and adds: 'Although, I truly believe that nature is a medicine that can help absolutely everyone.'

• *Cornwall and Devon Walks With Julia Bradbury* is on ITV and ITV Hub now.



Julia explores the 'blue gym' effect on the south-west coast

Julia's favourite British walks



DARTMOOR, DEVON

Where: This circular route takes in Haytor (left), one of the iconic rock formations in Dartmoor National Park.
How difficult: At 10km, it's quite a long route but is fairly flat.

What to look out for: There's a beautiful pond that was once the quarry pit, and a viewpoint at Emsworthy Rocks with the most stunning outlook. Also, don't miss a pit stop at the tranquil Emsworthy Mire Nature Reserve, a haven for wildlife.

PORHCUENO TO LAND'S END, CORNWALL

Where: This linear coastal route begins in the beautiful Cornish village of Porthcurno and ends at Land's End (right).

How difficult: It's 8km long and a bit hilly with uneven ground if you want to go into the coves en route.

What to look out for: There are awe-inspiring sights at the Minack Theatre, a unique open-air theatre built into a cliffside, and do keep an eye out for surfers and seals at Porthchapel Beach. Of course,

there's also an amazing viewpoint once you reach Land's End!



LOCH LOMOND, SCOTLAND

Where: This route is located at Loch Lomond (left), which,



Julia is a firm believer in the power of nature to heal and restore



Her latest TV series takes her to unspoilt spots in Devon and Cornwall



at 24 miles long, is the largest loch in Scotland by surface area.

How difficult: The linear 7km route is pretty flat, except the moderate incline up to the summit of Inchcailloch.

What to look out for: The village of Balmaha on the eastern side of the Loch is a picturesque pit stop, and the walk includes a quick boat trip to the island of Inchcailloch, which has magnificent views across the water and out to the surrounding hills.



ANGLESEY, WALES

Where: This walk along part of the Anglesey Coastal Path runs beside the Menai Strait overlooking Snowdonia.

How difficult: At 19km, it is quite a long route but is pretty flat and not too difficult to navigate.

What to look out for: The scenery is spectacular, and the walk ends on romantic Llanddwyn Island (below left), home of Wales's own female equivalent of St Valentine, as well as a lighthouse cove with stunning sea views. There are also plenty of spots en route for a sunset beach picnic.

PLUS, AN ACCESSIBLE WALK FOR THOSE WITH A WHEELCHAIR, PUSHCHAIR OR LIMITED MOBILITY

Where: The Loe lake, Penrose, Cornwall

How difficult: A 5km stile-free walk along a flat tarmac track.

What to look out for: Starting at Penrose National Trust car

park, walk beside The Loe (right), one of Cornwall's most beautiful freshwater lakes.

• *For route details of each walk, visit theoutdoorguide.co.uk*



Where else to get outdoors

THE EDEN PROJECT, CORNWALL: These botanical gardens are world class. Inside the two biomes are the most amazing plants that are collected from really diverse climates and environments. It is truly breathtaking and a must-visit.

KEW GARDENS, LONDON: My children love it here; you can spend hours on end exploring. The trees are absolutely giant and the gardens and lake are beautiful.

WESTONBIRT ARBORETUM, TETBURY: I filmed here many times with *Countryfile* and it is one of my favourite places. It's a magical woodland with more than 15,000 trees and shrubs.

TRESCO ABBEY GARDEN, ISLES OF SCILLY: The climate at Treco is temperate, so they can grow plants from all over the world here. You can see plants from Western Australia or South Africa; it's spectacular. There's nowhere else quite like it.

Iconic Kew Gardens in London



PHOTOGRAPHY: TWOFOUR PRODUCTIONS, ALAMY, GETTY, THE OUTDOOR GUIDE

How to make the most of nature (wherever you are)

Have a daily mindful moment in nature; you don't even need to go outside! Every morning, I open a window and spend 10 minutes looking out, spotting wildlife and observing the way the leaves are rustling in the wind or the way rain is pattering on the grass.
Have the right mindset. When you go out, intend to make the most of it. Take your phone, because you might need it, but zip it up and don't use it unless you have to. Observe different colours of trees, notice the fractal patterns in the leaves, listen out for birdsong.

Get involved. Even if you live in a city, there will be local parks and gardens for you to seek out. And get involved: if there's a verge that needs planting with wild flowers, you could set up a group to do it within your community. Doing something that creates nature in your environment is good for the soul.
How to encourage kids to enjoy the outdoors
Engage with them and give them things to do. That could mean playing I-spy, or collecting leaves or naming trees or bugs. Also, make it competitive: who can get to that rock first? My dad did all that and it has stayed with me.

Dress for it

All you need are comfortable walking trainers and a cagoule. Don't let obstacles get in your way! So what if it's raining? One of my favourite outings last year was when we went out in the rain with the kids. We had a leaf fight and got mucky and they loved it. The children still talk about it.
How to walk with purpose
Walk to get fit: stride out, tuck in your tummy, clench your bottom and engage your leg muscles. Set a goal, whether it's 10 minutes, half an hour, or more. Get sweaty and out of breath; your doctor will thank you for it. □