

This book is a must-read if...

- you are stuck in a rut
- you like real-life stories
- you are looking for an adventure
- you are looking for inspiration
- you are considering a journey of self-discovery
- you are curious to know what it takes to step outside your comfort zone
- you want to learn what it takes to seize the day
- you want a funny and light-hearted read
- you want to live a whole and fulfilling life
- you are looking for the female equivalent of Bill Bryson

When opportunity comes knocking,
grab it with both hands...

The Impulsive Explorer

One businesswoman's accidental journey
of self-discovery on an expedition
to the Antarctic

Karen Espley



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This book is a memoir. It reflects the author's present recollections
of experiences over time. Some names and characteristics have
been changed, some events have been compressed,
and some dialogue has been recreated.

Every effort has been made to contact the people in this memoir.
The publisher would be delighted to correct any omissions
in future editions.

'The Impulsive Explorer is instantly relatable for anyone of a certain age who's ever been caught in the corporate rat trap and dreamt of a better life. Filled with gentle humour (and the occasional rip roaring belly laugh), it's a book that's underscored with both profound personal insights and universal truths about the fragility of humanity as a whole and of each of us as individuals. At the same time, *The Impulsive Explorer* will awaken even the most dormant of wanderlusts and gently nudges those of us who lack Espley's courage to step out of our comfort zones and into a life of adventure.'

– Lucy Pitts
Editor, *Sussex Exclusive*

'An unputdownable book! Rather like a box of chocolates, you want to finish it all in one go. Highly recommended reading for the armchair adventurer.'

– Sue Stockdale
First UK woman to ski to the Magnetic North Pole

'The Impulsive Explorer is about bravery, of not letting arbitrary limits diminish your potential and opportunities, and living your life to its fullest. Karen demonstrates more bravery and chutzpah than 99% of the UK population. It's a bloody good adventure showing that sometimes you just have to JFDI.'

– Andrew Middleton
Founder of INDY (I'm Not Done Yet)

'A storming ride that grips you from the beginning. A true quest of self-discovery, with a spot of adventure that shows great strength of character, coupled with a soupçon of derring-do. Absorbing from beginning to end.'

– Geoff Douglass

'Few are fortunate of a perfect childhood and adolescence; Karen's was no exception which makes this story all the more inspirational. It made me introspective about my upbringing and showed the constraints that I still hold today.

If you're familiar with the corporate world, you'll recognise the being chewed up and spat out – but Karen demonstrates it's possible to escape from the "golden handcuffs" of that world.

The pictures that Karen conjures of the Antarctic are vivid, not just the scenery and the natural (and "unnatural"!) inhabitants but also of the pollution and how we're very slowly trying to put it right.

A cry, then laugh, then cheer story.'

– Ian Challand

'Gripping and honest dive into the life of a super-doo-per-modest woman with loads to give.'

– Spoon The Voice Guy (spoonsvoices.com)

'Karen Espley guides us on her journey starting from a shaky childhood, via the freedom of university and into the corporate chasm of the 1990s. We follow our impulsive explorer as she stands full height (all 5'2" of it) and faces childhood trauma, depression and sexism to head off on the adventure she'd always dreamt of.

As she joins a research trip to Antarctica, Karen's descriptive writing and humour brings to life the colourful characters she meets along the way, together with the bleak Russian base camp, partying with the Uruguayans, pizza fuelled nights of salsa dancing and encounters with smelly penguins, angry sea lions and ferocious skuas. The confined living quarters, different personalities and difficult group dynamics are balanced by stunning scenery, once in a lifetime events and wonderful memories shared from what was clearly a life altering experience.

I had the privilege of reading this delightfully honest and exhilarating tale before publication and Karen's friendly tone as she describes her physical and mental journey makes it feel as though you're with an old friend, it's one of those books you want to read from beginning to end in one glorious go.'

– Laura Stokes
Cheltenham Lifestyle & Business

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Foreword

by Robert Swan, OBE, BA, FRGS

Raised in Yorkshire, England, Robert Swan is the first person in history to walk to both the North and South Poles. After seeing first-hand the effects of climate change, Robert has dedicated himself to protecting Antarctica and our planet at large. Positive participation and a committed team have enabled Robert to educate and stimulate people across the globe.

I first met Karen Espley at the beginning of 2000 before she set off on the One Step Beyond, Mission Antarctica Expedition to King George Island in the Antarctic Peninsula. The aim of this expedition was to support a Russian team at the Bellingshausen Base that was collecting all of the waste around the base for extraction and removal within the following couple of years.

Karen was very enthusiastic about the project; in fact, I would go as far as to say she was rather overexcited. She reminded me of the Andrex puppy with her boundless energy as she chatted away, hoping to impress me with the amount of research she had done in readiness for

the trip. You will understand this charming image as you read through the pages of *The Impulsive Explorer*.

Early on in this gripping and funny book, you will learn about Karen's challenging early years. Her story immediately draws you into her world and demonstrates her resilience when faced with challenges. Exactly the characteristics needed for a journey to the outskirts of civilisation. An example of which was when the voyage was put in jeopardy early on, when the *Vavilov* (the ship that took them across the Drake Passage) broke down and they had to return to Ushuaia.

Karen's enthusiasm for the expedition as a whole was evident in the additional environmental project she undertook; testing out a new kit for the Water Research Council. In the book, you can see the maps that Karen drew as part of the data gathering needed for the report. It is charming to read about the unexpected; such as the parties, being dive-bombed by skuas and the Russian hospitality that Karen experienced. It is clear to see that Karen was deeply moved by the reality for the Russians that took them to the other side of the world in order to make money for their families back home. There is nothing as enlightening as being on the edge of the world to make you appreciate the wonder and fragility of our planet and our fellow man.

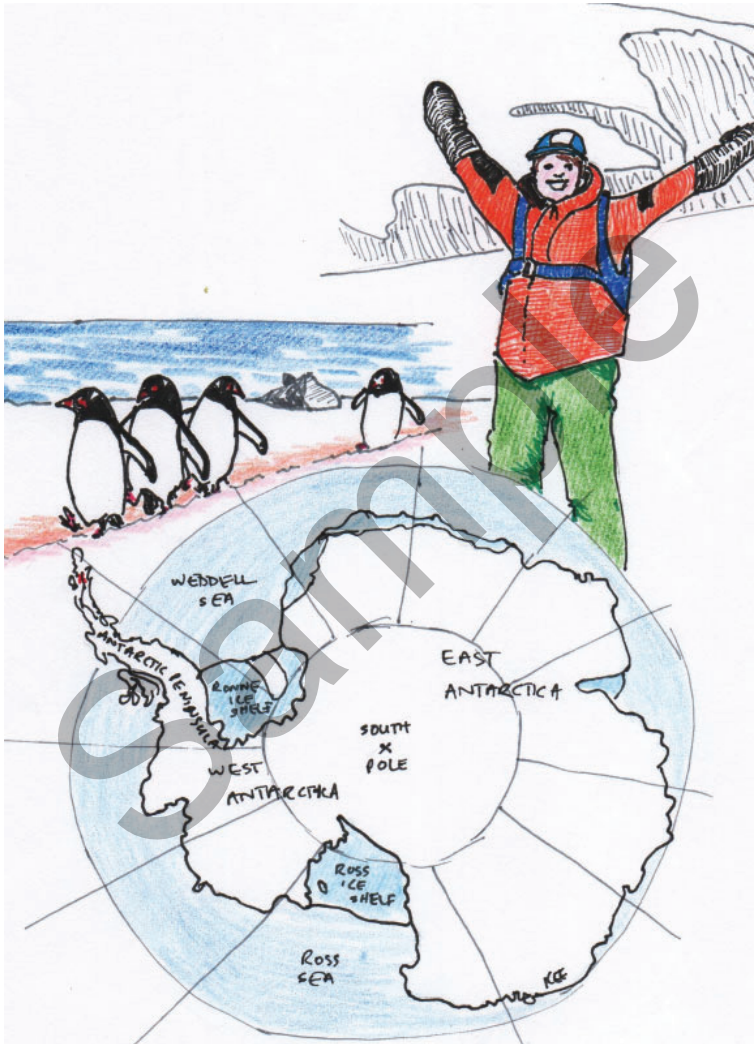
As you turn the last page, you will understand why this book is called *The Impulsive Explorer*. From her spur of the moment decision to apply for the expedition to

hanging up her corporate work shoes, Karen started to live life listening to her instincts. Her odyssey to the Antarctic was the catalyst which accelerated Karen's quest for freedom. You will no doubt resonate with her story and be encouraged to take a look at your life and perhaps be inspired to make different choices. Her JFDI message seems simple to me – you can be the creator of your own destiny and live a life on your terms.

Robert Swan, OBE, BA, FRGS – February 2021

Sample

The Impulsive Explorer



Introduction

'The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.'

Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*

Like many thirty-somethings, reading *Bridget Jones's Diary* by Helen Fielding had struck a chord with me. Not least, the obsession for devouring self-help books in a pathetic attempt at finding the magic answer to 'IT' – love, wealth and happiness.

The obsession with self-help books slowly changed over time to 'downshifting' books as I searched for the secrets of becoming self-employed and fabulously wealthy with minimal effort (and finding the perfect partner as a convenient by-product!).

It started innocently enough with 'I could do anything I wanted if I only knew what it was,' but gathered momentum with countless books from *Who Moved My Cheese* to *Go It Alone*, *Your Money or Your Life*, *Successfully Going Freelance in a week* and so on ad nauseum. Through them, I was hoping to catch a glimpse of that other

world, unfettered by what one colleague so aptly called 'Corporate Bollocks' – the politically back-stabbing, sabre rattling, gung-ho management world that seemed to be part and parcel of corporate life in the 80s and 90s.

My wildest fantasy of running a beach bar and windsurfing school somewhere hot and sunny beckoned enticingly, but friends who knew me better than I knew myself told me I would be bored witless within a season and besides which, what would I do in the winter? Not to be deterred, I investigated countries with year-round sunshine and finally found the ideal spot. Curaçao. No, not just a particularly noxious blue liqueur beloved of cocktail makers, but an island basking in 365 days of sun just off the north coast of South America. But the seeds of doubt had been sown and as with so many things in my life, this fell by the wayside, tripped up by my upbringing, and remains to this day a pipe dream.

Finally, however, in 2000, I took the plunge and what follows is the first part of my story about my attempts to free myself from the constraints of my family background and the golden handcuffs of full-time employment, to create a life lived on my terms and by my rules. It charts a trip that changed my life forever.

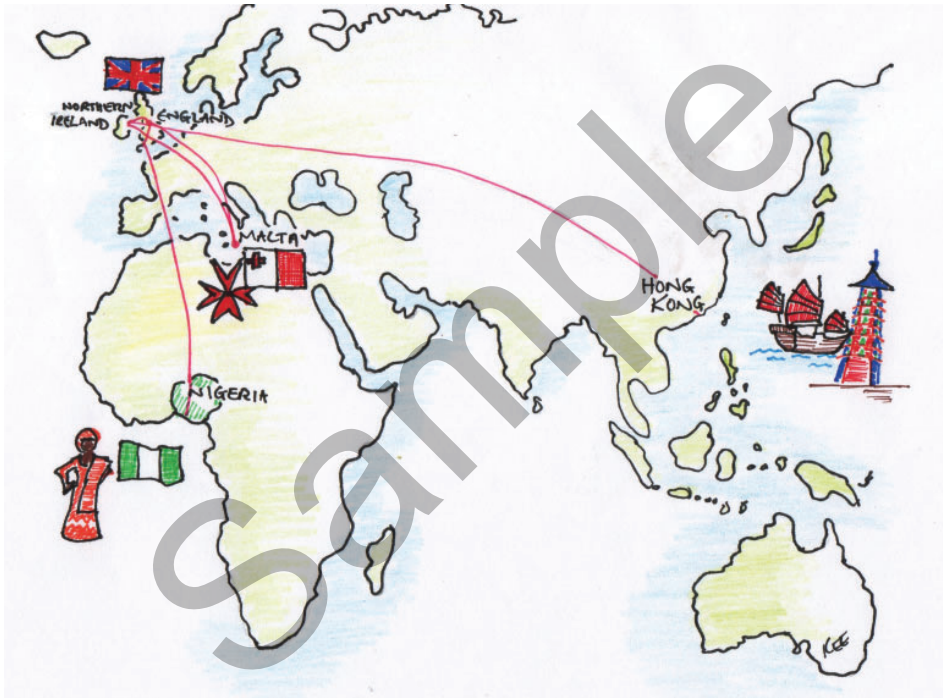
For those of you who are considering taking the same path, you may find some inspiration to help make that decision, or decide that life ain't so bad the way it is after all. But a word of warning: whilst your friends and family

are right to be cautious and concerned on your behalf, 'there is danger in singing someone else's song' (Don G. Campbell) – it's your life and you only have one shot at it.



JFDI*

The Impulsive Explorer



Chapter 1

Back to Before the Beginning

'Yet it is far better to light the candle than to curse the darkness.'

W.L. Watkinson, *The Invincible Strategy*

OK, so I've told you that I wanted to be master of my own destiny; how did it all start? It wasn't a sudden blinding flash of inspiration or a whim brought about by great unhappiness at work. The idea grew on me slowly. It was a bit like building a kit car. It gathered dust in my mental garage for years and every now and again, I would add a bit to it, grapple with the instructions, get overwhelmed with the enormity of the task, put it down in disgust, pick it back up again some time later, until eventually it was built. One day I was ready (and, more importantly, had the courage) to give the car one final flick of the duster, put the metaphorical key into the ignition, open the garage door and scream off down the leafy lanes to who knows where, throwing my trusty map out of the window as I went.

Rewind to the early 1960s. I was conceived in Nigeria where my father was working for a textiles company. Having been born in the UK, I then spent the first few months of my life back in Nigeria before being returned hurriedly along with my older brother to my grandparents when civil war broke out.

Until I was 18 and finally left home, our life was pretty transient as my father constantly moved us on to new countries. We were rarely anywhere for longer than three years and my formative years were spent variously in Northern Ireland, Malta and finally Hong Kong, with the UK thrown in between times for good measure. Hong Kong was where my father finally found his place – he loved it and luckily for me at the age of 13, I had stability at last and remained there until I was 18. Hong Kong was a fabulous place to grow up – certainly as the children of expats. My weekends were spent on the water; sailing, waterskiing, canoeing and windsurfing. There was no loitering about shopping precincts for us at weekends.

This was definitely my happy place. Being outdoors in great weather and doing physical activities I enjoyed, gave me a freedom to excel at doing things I loved without any obligations on the end results; unlike much of the rest of my life.