

Climb

every mountain

Television presenter **Julia Bradbury** gives *Fiona Shield* the inside track on her extraordinary career, her globetrotting lifestyle and why she has always loved the great outdoors

As fresh and infectiously enthusiastic as when her television career began nearly two decades ago, it's not hard to see why Julia Bradbury's career only continues to flourish. After five years as the voice of the people on BBC's stalwart *Watchdog*, last year saw her and Matt Baker join John Craven as the new presenters of a revamped *Countryfile*. Now in a prime time Sunday night slot, from an outsider's perspective Julia has reached the pinnacle of her career with ease, but the road she's travelled hasn't always been a smooth ride.

You grew up in Rutland. Have you always loved the outdoors?

My dad's a Derbyshire lad and a big lover of the outdoors. He took me walking for the first time when I was six so I grew up appreciating hills and valleys. I went to school in Sheffield – the gateway to the Peak District where we'd walk for hours, and we spent weekends at home in Rutland in a quaint, rural village. My mum was less outdoorsy; she had a fashion business in Sheffield and after school I'd go to the shop and watch the clothes being made. It was a good contrast.

Did you do much travelling abroad when you were younger?

We went on family holidays to Greece, as my mum is Greek, and the Crieff Hydro Hotel in Scotland – that's still our family place, we take my nephew there now.

How did you come to enter the media?

I left school at 16 and after a stint in advertising worked in my mum's business with my sister. After about three years I decided it wasn't for me, and working that closely with the family was a bit too intense, so I declared I was off to be a television presenter. Luckily I'd made some good contacts through working in the family business so I got as much advice as I could and knocked on lots of doors. People write to me now asking how to get into television but I think it's harder these days. There are so many channels, a lot of competition and the whole 'celebrity' thing

has exploded. I was lucky; it was a time when cable stations were just emerging. My first major contract was working for Janet Street-Porter at Live TV, which was one of the first cable stations. I worked there for a year and it was, I imagine, better than any media studies degree; I had a year of on the job training. Live television was thrilling and Janet Street-Porter was a pioneer. It was her idea to get the newsreader sitting on a desk with the newsroom buzzing in the background.

Then you became the GMTV correspondent in Los Angeles?

Yes. I was amazed to get that job – my agent heard about it and I never expected to be successful. It was a massive turning point for me and quite intimidating, as I had to say goodbye to my friends and family and go and live somewhere as bizarre as LA. But it was a challenge and there was no way I would have turned it down. I got to do some incredible blue chip showbiz stories – my first job the day I landed was to interview John Travolta, who was my childhood hero. One of my most bizarre assignments was to chase Michael Jackson's sperm around the city when he was choosing the mother of his children. I also learned for the first time about the politics of television; I wasn't ruthless enough to survive in that environment, so I came back after a year to join the newly launched Channel Five. I like to think I'm ambitious but never ruthless.

How did you come to front television's most well respected consumer affairs series, *Watchdog*?

After some wilderness years in my career, a producer who I'd worked with before on a live series, contacted me to say *Watchdog* were looking for a new female host. It was a really long process before I was accepted, a year at least, so I was cautious with my optimism. When it finally happened I was ecstatic. To this day I think it's one of the best jobs you can have because it's one of those rare programmes that actually makes a difference. It was a fantastic five years. ▶



At the same time you were also filming a selection of travel programmes, including *Ultimate Britain*, *Wainwright Walks* and *Rough Guide*. What made you expand into travel?

While I was doing *Watchdog* the offer I was most interested in was *Wainwright Walks*, because it's so different from *Watchdog* and no one would expect to see me striding across mountains. I've always tried to maintain a contrast in my work so I don't get typecast. I do mountains, I do live, I do studio! The walks series started as a small commission of four walks, which we filmed in three weeks in the Lakes on a tiny budget. Then they became one of the most watched programmes on BBC Four, so more were commissioned and they went on to be shown on BBC Two. Nobody could have predicted it; it was perfect timing for the movement of consumers starting to look closer to home for pursuits and holidays. Walking is one of the country's most popular hobbies but it's got a "bearded cogoules" image, and obviously our format changed that. It's one of the most enjoyable bits of work I do and genuinely one of the best things I've done career wise.

How did you have time to do all that while you were still doing *Watchdog*?

That was the challenge; I've got a very good manager – my sister – who looks after me and the diary. I started doing *Wainwright Walks* at the same time as *Watchdog* and *Rough Guide*

for Channel Five. The past three years have just been back-to-back work; it's very unhealthy from a life point of view. I travelled the world for *Rough Guide* – we did 35 destinations in 14 months – and then I fitted in *Wainwright's* and *Railway Walks*, and the *Kill it, Cook it, Eat it* series on BBC Three. It just became a massive juggling act.

What's your favourite place from the *Rough Guide* series?

I think my favourite places would be Costa Rica or Nicaragua. Both of them are incredibly wild and for the more seasoned traveller, they're not package-holiday heaven. They're both tropical, volcanic, vibrant, the landscape is fantastic, the people are lovely and you just feel like you're on a real adventure. We stayed in an incredible place in Nicaragua called Morgan's Rock, which is an eco-lodge in the true sense of the word. Normally eco-lodges are five-star rustic looking affairs, complete with fridges and full beam lighting. These are beautiful wooden structures made from local sustainable timber. No fridges, solar lighting and heated water, and when you're there you plant a tree that never gets harvested.

Did you come across the effects of climate change when you were travelling?

I remember the final piece to camera in Nicaragua, it's difficult to justify getting on a

plane for an eco holiday but there's a traveller in all of us and we need to explore – without exploration there wouldn't be any discovery or progress. I interviewed a professor in South Africa and he said the major innovation they're all working on is carbon capture. We've gone too far down the line to stop carbon in the atmosphere, so the next thing is how we can store the waste we're creating.

Last year you left *Watchdog* to present another BBC stalwart, *Countryfile*. Was that a natural progression for you?

Before *Wainwright Walks* had happened five or six years ago I would never have predicted that I would present *Countryfile* one day. So I accepted it with genuine enthusiasm and a lot of surprise. After 20 years on air it's become a British institution, so you have to have a great respect for its history when you're presenting it.

When you joined *Countryfile* last year you got caught up in an ageism row. How did you feel about that?

Television is a capricious industry and you have to accept that you'll be "moved on" for a myriad of reasons and it's not always quantifiable or fair. It has happened to me. However I think it's difficult to argue ageism in this case. The entire programme underwent a complete revamp – format, time-slot, presenters, and I'm only a few years younger than one of the ▶

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former presenters, Michaela Strachan. Generally across the board I think we are ageist in this country when it comes to our female television broadcasters. I can’t see an 82-year-old woman presenting *Strictly Come Dancing* in the near future.

Countryfile is more popular than ever with a new prime time Sunday night slot. Why do you think that is?

It’s incredible. Recently we got 7.5 million viewers – it’s regularly the most watched factual programme and sometimes the most watched programme of the day. I think it’s the timing. People are concentrating more inwardly on the UK – walking and the outdoors are zeitgeist. I also think it’s one of the few programmes where the family can sit down and watch it together. There’s something for everyone.

If you had a dream programme you could present what would it be?

It would probably be an eclectic panel show, a QI kind of programme. That’s just a personal challenge for me as it’s so completely different to everything else I’ve done. I’m also looking forward to working in a nice warm studio again!

What’s been the greatest challenge of your career?

The greatest physical challenge was when I did the *Ultimate Britain: Climbing* series and had to rock climb up the Old Man of Stoer, a sea stack in Scotland. It’s so exhausting and everything is amplified because you’re out at sea. I got stuck two or three times and was crying like a baby in a cubby hole saying, ‘I’m not going to be able to do it. The whole thing, including the tears, were filmed, it was all very embarrassing! But I made it to the top and it was such an amazing feeling, it took my breath away.

How do you find being in the public eye?

I’ve got quite a pragmatic approach to it. I think it’s because I’ve been doing the job for so long – I certainly haven’t become a star overnight. I’ve never courted the press or done the tabloid thing either. I went through my first bit of tabloid drama last year over an air miles palaver. A colourful array of false allegations were made by one tabloid and some broadsheets followed suit which I was flabbergasted by. They literally strung me up despite evidence to the contrary. Had I been the presenter of anything else, it wouldn’t have made such a good story. One

“journalist” actually admitted they wanted the words ‘Watchdog presenter’ and ‘scam’ in the same sentence. You have to be quite philosophical about it and think, ‘OK, in all these years that is the first time I’ve had a really big sting.’ But the frustrating thing about a story like that is you don’t actually get to put your side of the story across. You have to have a very thick skin and take it on the chin and get on with your life.

Have you ever considered any other career?

I promised myself that the day I couldn’t earn a living in television would be the day that I walked away from it. I’ve been lucky, my career has evolved and at the moment I see opportunities and plenty of things I want to do. I don’t know that I always want to stay in front of the camera, I’m really interested in the production side, so that’s something I’m looking at. You have to be autonomous and adaptable.

What would you say is the favourite travel experience you’ve ever had?

South Africa is the place I love most in the world. I love the African continent. I did a trip to South Africa with a friend when I was in my 20s, and I was completely captivated by it. For me any trip to South Africa is just bliss. To have made a series there now is a dream, and because it’s a walking series you really become involved with the landscape. There’s an expression, ‘You can feel the soul of a country through the soles of your feet,’ and you really can.

Where’s your favourite place to go in the UK?

I love Scotland, and I love Crieff. There’s an area called Glenelg, where my friend has a house. It overlooks the Isle of Skye, so it’s an isolated little idyll with craggy hills and sandy secluded coves, it’s just beautiful. The Lake District of course, the Peak District because of the walks with my dad, and we filmed last year in the Lizard Peninsula, where I hadn’t been before. It’s gorgeous and has a great climate.

Where’s left on your travelling wishlist around the world?

Laos, Vietnam, Cambodia – to travel up the Mekong River. I definitely want to go there, and I really want to do the Himalayas, I don’t mind which of the six countries.

Have you ever felt in danger when you were travelling?

When we were filming in the Drakensberg Mountains. They have a notoriously changeable climate, storms can appear from nowhere. I interviewed an older gentleman who had been walking there for years and he told a story about how his family got caught in a storm and the guide they were with got struck by lightning. The next day we were filming halfway up the mountain and a lightning storm started from nowhere, we all looked at each other and thought, ‘We’ve got to get back down fast!’. But because of the mountainous terrain within minutes there were heavy rainfall streams flooding the trail, which you should really try ▶

not to step in when the lightning bolts strike, otherwise you get frazzled. So we were chased down the mountain by lightning, jumping over streams and puddles as we went!

Do you have any advice for readers travelling to lesser-known countries?

I'm an adventurous person by nature so I'd say still go, but always do your research. You've got to think about the food of the country, if the water is safe to drink, whether you need jabs or visas, and it's always wise to be aware of any cultural or natural dangers. You have to be aware but not paranoid.

What are your essential travel items?

I always take a solar-powered, multi-purpose adaptor charger and a mosquito-bite zapper with me. I don't know if it really works but it feels proactive. I always take family photos with me as well.

What do you miss most when you're away?

I have to pack a bag every single day of my life, so the thing I miss most is not having to pack a bag. I love being in one place. Ten days is a luxury – I haven't done that in about three years.

Do you have a favourite walk in the UK?

That's so hard; either the Monsal Trail in Derbyshire, which was one of my first walks with my dad, or one of the walks in the Lake District. Castle Crag is a little walk that's not too challenging but the summit is beautiful. A bigger challenge is Pillar. I like Pillar as a route.

Do you prefer coastal or countryside walks?

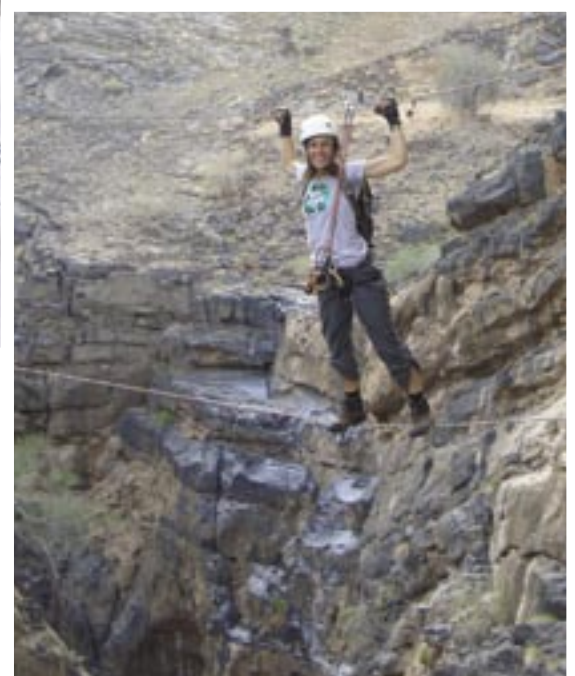
I love coastal walks but I also really love walking through woodland. I did a fantastic coastal walk in Germany along the Baltic coast and that was gorgeous. In South Africa the Garden Route is stunning – you take in stretches of long white sandy beaches and at the right time of year you can whale watch. It's lovely when a walk gets broken up with a combination of landscapes. Coastal craggy walks in Cornwall are always lovely too; I think most people find the sea very calming.

Who's your favourite walking companion?

Easily my dad, though he needs to get his knees done. I'm trying to persuade him so we can keep walking for at least another 10 years together.

Do you know where you'll be holidaying this year?

I'll be going back to South Africa and probably Ibiza, near Siesta, the quiet part of the island. I think I'll also go on a big, long holiday in Greece with my family as well.



How has the travel industry changed through your career?

I think the most obvious change is people are now doing their own planning, and booking their own trips. Lots of travel agents have gone out of business and unless you're going for real niche travelling, most people do it themselves now. We've also become our own guidebooks – now we can go to a website and read the top ten reviews before making up our mind, although that has its own problems as you can't necessarily rely on the sources. That's why I always say if you can ask people, do, rather than relying on websites.

What about people who want to travel on a budget?

I think this is the year that people can do that more than ever. First of all, a lot of the travel companies have got a hangover from the recession and they're desperate just to get numbers on flights and in hotels. If you search well the bargains are absolutely there. Or try glamping [glamorous camping], it's not for everybody, but there are so many campsites now with excellent facilities, nice shower blocks and mod cons – it's not as *Carry on Camping* as it used to be!

Do you think the cheapness of airline seats to Europe and beyond makes people in this country forget the beauty they have on their doorstep?

Yes, as somebody who's travelled the world

because of their work I think we're really lucky with the diversity that's on offer in the UK. In Scotland you've got the Cairngorms, in Ireland you've got the Mourne Mountains, in England the Lake District. We've got the coast, we've got incredible landscapes, stunning architecture, picturesque little villages, and if your holiday isn't just about sunshine, the list is endless.

What projects do you have coming up next?

My *Africa Walks* series is out in April, we've just filmed a series walking in Germany, which will be on air after that, and the *Countryfile* behemoth rolls on. We're also doing a book about the *Railway Walks*, but really my focus this year is staying in one place and to get out walking with more people. It's such a simple pleasure; all you need is a good pair of boots. There is a very well-known mountaineering expression, 'It's never the wrong weather, it's just the wrong kind of clothes.' ■