



lowest moments," Josh marvels, "there are human beings who can lift me up."

Most of us don't go anywhere without a plan, he says. "I'd associated letting go of control with losing control," Josh says. "And they're slightly different." Far tougher was the tiredness because they slept on buses to avoid the expense of hotels. "After six weeks, when money's running out and you're not able to eat properly, that was difficult," Felix says.

They recall a 24-hour train journey in northwest China, with Muzak at 4am, and when hill tribes boarded, Josh says, "there were 120 people in the carriage, shouting". It was a troubled area, hard to witness. "We were going through towns that had been taken over by the military." He briefly fell asleep and woke to a sunrise and snow. "It was stunningly beautiful, but it looked like the moons of Tatooine. You suddenly realise how alien you are."

More striking was how much was universal. The "loveliest moments" — they all say — were chatting with people on trains — tales of hair-plaiting, exchanging chocolate for chicken, sharing photos, the gesture of a hand on heart. Felix says: "Two months of sketching, playing chess and just looking, seeing the landscape change... you see how cultural, religious, geographical, demographic, political situations meld very slowly. We were able to take the time and synthesise what we were seeing in a way that is very rare."

At first they felt guilt at their privilege while travelling through deprived areas, seeking help from people with very little, but it dawned on them that there

was symbiosis in simply connecting. Felix says, "They were buying into our quest, giving us food, shelter, directions. They wanted to help us. You realise that everyone all over the world is just a human. That was a comfort."

Natalie, an artist liaison manager, and Shameema, a cognitive behavioural therapist, both 39, agree: "We're just really one people." They have been friends for 30 years, having met at school in Harrow. Shameema's parents, who came from Bangladesh, were strict, and her older sister had an arranged marriage, which was a given for Shameema too. "My life was already decided for me," she recalls, but she craved freedom.

At 19 she left home and married a man of her choosing. His family originated from Pakistan, a culture clash that displeased her parents ("They wanted me to marry, but they didn't want me to marry him"). After 19 years the pair recently separated and, with "the way the culture looks at divorce", Shameema felt her parents' disapproval, yet again.

The BBC's call to adventure appealed. She says: "I work, and I have children [daughters aged 15 and 17]. I live around my ex-husband's family and we all have great relationships, but speaking about what's happened was difficult and I've felt like I've needed some time to take a step back from life." What did she learn from the trip? "That I haven't failed."

Neither Natalie or Shameema took part in the race to escape. You sense it was more about understanding themselves when life hasn't been straightforward. Natalie's father died when she was seven. However, he was in Ghana and she only found out about it at the age of nine. Meanwhile, her sickle-cell anaemia, diagnosed at two, worsened. Pneumonia affected her lungs and she was read the last rites. Because her mother worked in Ghana, Natalie lived with her aunts in Harrow, but when she was 14 and had to spend six months in hospital to treat her blood disorder with chemotherapy, then a bone marrow transplant, her mother stayed with her. She died when Natalie was 19.

Just before her application was accepted for *Race Across the World* Natalie found out the chemo meant she couldn't conceive. Every painful childhood memory came with her on the trip, she says, but she shows no sign of it. She laughs a lot, is serene yet exuberant and people respond. Also, from Turkey onwards, "No one had ever seen a black person. It was picture: picture, videos, picture, picture." Unlike Shameema, who didn't own a backpack, Natalie had travelled widely. "Nobody knows you. You can be whoever you want to be. You can be who you actually are."

The teams returned in December. Before jumping back into work, Felix and Josh took a holiday with their girlfriends. Natalie went on a month's silent meditation.

Shameema enrolled in white-collar boxing and won a match in front of 1,000 people (including her daughters and Natalie).

As Josh leaves to meet a friend's new baby, he recalls that at first the production crew tried to gee up the competitive side of the race, but soon, he says, "they realised it was about the human stories. It's always about the human stories."

Race Across the World is on Sunday at 9pm on BBC Two



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How billionaires protect their art from seagulls



Billionaire life is hard. No seriously. The lower-rolling echelons of society may have problems, but the Jean-Michel Basquiat ain't one. Mainly because they don't own one. But for billionaire superyacht owners, the problems of how to preserve fine-art collections that rival those at national galleries as they cruise around a sparkling Mediterranean bay is a nightmare (albeit a first world one). You might arrive on board to find that your rare, crystal Jan Frydrych has been attacked by seagulls on deck. Or that someone has cleaned the cornflakes off the Basquiat assuming your kids had flung them at the work.

"In other situations the staff might not realise that cornflakes on a Basquiat are supposed to be there," says Pandora Mather-Lees, an Oxford-educated art historian, right, who is helping owners to fix these luxury problems. "But he ate them while painting and dropped them on to some canvases, so in those situations, cleaning them off would be the wrong thing to do."

For €295 a day Mather-Lees is offering a fine-art appreciation course titled "The Practical Care of On-Board Art Collections" to superyacht crews who "know nothing" about the millions of pounds' worth of art displayed in the owner's second (third or fourth) home. "A yacht is where the owner goes to relax and enjoy their possessions," Mather-Lees explains. "They have guests coming on board and want to be able to talk about their art, so there are some really beautiful works at sea — Picasso, Dale Chihuly sculptures — but if you know nothing about art, you might not know what you're looking at or how to look after it."

When the £200 million superyacht owned by Joe Lewis, the British billionaire who has a majority stake in Tottenham Hotspur Football Club, moored on the Thames last year, Francis Bacon's *Triptych 1974-1977*, a response to the death of his lover George Dyer, was seen hanging in gold frames on the lower deck (it sold

to an anonymous buyer at Christie's in 2008 for £26.3 million).

Mather-Lees has spent 20 years working as an art consultant for galleries and private clients. The idea for the new course arose at the Monaco yacht show two years ago, where she realised staff were being offered everything from barista training to wine tasting. "I thought it would be helpful for crew to be able to talk to guests about the owner's collection, and also know what they were dealing with, to prevent damaging very valuable pieces," she says.

It's also about preventing things going catastrophically wrong. "I've heard of owners of yachts looking around for paintings they've had shipped over only to be told by the captain that he 'unwrapped it' himself and it's hanging on the wall.

There was a moment of horror when they asked where the wrapping was, to be told it was in the engine room covering the pipes. It was a unique Christo and Jeanne-Claude, whose public projects are renowned, and the wrapping is part of the work, but the captain had no idea it should never have been removed."

Crystal sculptures, which catch the light night and day and can be embedded with as many as 150,000 diamonds, are also popular on board, she says. "But crew don't realise that they're not ornaments but important pieces coming out of the Czech school and commanding six figures. One Jan Frydrych sculpture worth €90,000 was damaged on a £10 million superyacht when a stewardess put it on the floor so she could clean the table it was on. There was some speculation that seagulls had been attracted to the sparkle and chipped it with their beaks and it had to be sent back to the artist's studio for restoration."

Then there's the question of to turn or not to turn? "With chandeliers installations, you must be very careful not to turn it while cleaning, otherwise it will be slowly unscrewed and come crashing down, *Only Fools and Horses* style, from the ceiling."

Lucy Holden

