

Britain, land of the timid, Libby Purves

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Ellen MacArthur is one of a rare aristocracy of the brave in our risk-averse, safety-first society

Sometime today Falmouth will erupt in celebration. Enthusiasts are travelling hundreds of miles to cheer the return of one small, exhausted young woman from the sea. More private whoops over TV sets and web browsers will happen overnight, as Ellen MacArthur crosses the finishing line off Brittany.

This will make her officially the fastest person ever to circumnavigate the world under sail: let alone single-handed, female and 5ft 2in, in charge of a thundering, crashing, unforgiving, dangerous 75ft trimaran. If the winds hold, this extraordinary person will have broken the record set by Francis Joyon last year: 28,000 miles in just over ten weeks.

When you consider that Joyon himself knocked 20 days off the previous record, the dazzle of MacArthur's achievement intensifies. She has had, it is true, lavish funding and weather routing advice that Joyon did not have. But all the same, one can only gulp. Most of us, confronted with the vicious motion of a trimaran in a rough sea, would search for ways to slow the damn thing down. MacArthur has been concentrating night and day for ten weeks on making it go faster. She deserves every cheer she gets.

I wish I could think of this moment as another kind of breakthrough: a spit in the eye of the over-regulated, handrail culture which threatens to stifle the rest of us. Adventurers on sea and land – MacArthur, Goss, Fiennes, Bonington – certainly cheer us up. I love the story that one tells, of a letter saying "you have inspired me to action. After two years, I am finally going to get that lawnmower mended". But the truth is that these fearless people are an aristocracy of adventure, a tiny minority who assert their human right to push their limits and risk their lives. Meanwhile the rest of us sink ever deeper into a fearful, torpid, timid, risk-averse culture which causes incalculable harm to health, education, mental balance, the spirit of enterprise, even the economy.

Every week we have more evidence of the slimy, choking advance of jobsworth regulation which seeks to make us "safe" but actually makes us weak. The paperwork and implicit threat of "risk assessment" means that one major teaching union, the NASUWT, formally advises its members against taking children off school premises, even to a museum. Innumerable family outings have been torpedoed by stupid new guidance that even in life-guarded pools, children under 4 must be supervised by one whole adult, and 4 to 8-year-olds by one adult per two. Thus, if you have an 8, 6 and 4-year-old, or competent 7-year-old twins and a baby, you need two adults. So you probably can't go.

Or look at the campaign of RALSA, the River and Lake Swimming Association, against the sneaky process whereby councils bar traditional swimming-holes on "safety" grounds. The result is that adventurous youths find less safe places, and others give up swimming. Pleasant inland beaches where our parents and grandparents swam are either closed off or weasellingly transformed into "conservation areas" – no swimming. The law lords robustly ruled in a case a couple of years ago that individuals were free to "engage in dangerous but otherwise harmless pastimes at their own risk" – yet the trend to closure continues. A battle still rages over the desire of the Hampstead Heath authorities to stop people swimming in the Ponds – referred to as a "facility" – without lifeguards. Some hardy people like to swim before dawn in winter: none have ever drowned, and there is actually no legal requirement to patrol open water. Yet still authority plots to save us from ourselves.

Britain is unusually prone to this hysterical "risk reduction"; more than the US, far more than mainland Europe (the Dutch swim in their canals, and in Sweden the "allemansrätten" or "every man's right" law allows you to swim in any lake). Even in the relatively unregulated sailing world, the tiresome claws of risk-aversion bite. You can't buy a boat outside the EU and sell it here unless it meets a complicated European Recreational Craft Directive, even if it has been round the world twice (presumably if Ellen sold her Australian-built trimaran it would be deemed unsafe by Eurocracy). For a period – until sanity prevailed – a regulation laid down that all "marine incidents" must be reported to the coastguard, even if the incident in question was losing an oar while rowing across Lymington harbour, and making do with a dinghy floorboard.

Insurers or courts will come down heavy on anybody who comes to grief on the simplest trip if they have no written "passage plan", even though they have been at it for 40 years and know the coast backwards. And this is a beautiful example of how legal neurosis reduces real safety – it used to be common practice for clubs organising offshore races to "scrutineer" every boat to check that it had sensible safety equipment. Now they dare not scrutineer, lest somebody has a problem and sues the club for having allowed them to go.

Every year it gets harder for those who are not in the aristocracy of adventure sport to test themselves. The countryside is littered with signs prescribing limited "trails", warning signs insult the intelligence at every turn, playgrounds are closed,

simple physical challenges reduced. The worst victims are schoolchildren and those with least money and clout (toffs, as we know, will always manage to find ways to tumble off horses, boats and mountains).

This is bad. It is not enough to follow Ellen MacArthur's website as if it were a video game, and read the books. As the Campaign for Adventure puts it: "Life is best approached in a spirit of exploration, adventure and enterprise . . . Chance, unforeseen circumstances and uncertainty are inescapable features of life and absolute safety is unachievable."

Ellen MacArthur could confirm that. Whatever happens between my writing this and your reading it lies in that glimmering, frightening, stimulating realm known as uncertainty. It is no bad place to live.