

Insight

# BORN TO LEAD?

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Does becoming a Mountain Leader lead to the dream career for outdoor lovers or do the downsides outweigh the benefits? **Katy Dartford** investigates...

**W**orking full-time in the outdoors is for many a dream job, and the first step on the path to doing this is registering with Mountain Training to become a Mountain Leader. The organisation was formed to provide education and training in the leadership, instruction and coaching of climbing, walking and mountaineering in the UK and they provide a range of nationally-recognised mountain leadership, instruction and coaching awards and approve training course providers. This year the organisation is celebrating its 50th anniversary and since it all began in 1964 there have been over 143,000 candidates registering for an award.

But what is the reality for those who sign up to become a Mountain Leader? Is there enough work to go round? Tania Noakes has just completed her qualification to become only the seventh-ever British female Mountain Guide – she is now based in Chamonix, but prior to this she worked for five years in the Army before deciding that working in the outdoors as an instructor was what she wanted to do. “Not everyone who registers and does their ML has plans to work full-time with it, that’s certain,” says Tania. “Some already have another job they love – quite often teaching – but want to be sure that they are delivering the best possible standard of instruction if they take students from their school or scout groups out. For those people with good experience who are good at delivering training in the outdoors then they normally find work. However, I would say that it is becoming harder to find enough work to make a living from it full-time. Perhaps you have to combine it with something else, but this isn’t necessarily a bad thing as a broader depth of experience of

the world makes you better at dealing with people, which is vital to someone working in the outdoors.”

Nicola Yalland started out as an apprentice at Haven Banks outdoor education centre (OEC) in Exeter where she spent three years getting qualified and gaining experience. “It’s a great starting place as you have people around you all the time to get ideas from, shadowing courses,” says Nicola. “When my contract finished I went and worked for a mountaineering company in Scotland – this allowed me to see another side of the business and also spend time working in a different environment. The next step was into the world of freelancing. It’s not easy, but I was fortunate to have people around me who encouraged and supported me – all giving me work! It is important to keep training, keep learning, keep taking opportunities and work hard; I have found that keeps the work coming. There is plenty of work out there for people who hold their ML but certainly some regions are busier than others. You will have much more competition for work in areas like Snowdonia or the Cairngorms, for example, but it just means you need to set yourself apart from others – go that extra mile for the companies you are working for. Do a good job and they will employ you again.”

## VERSATILITY KEY

Will Harris is a freelance outdoor pursuits instructor/SPA/ML, based in Manchester. “Work-wise, I do quite a lot with Prince’s Trust participants (12-15 weeks a year), usually some multi-activity stuff with school groups in the summer (4-6 weeks) and overseas expedition (2-4 weeks), the odd three peaks challenge or charity challenge event, some work with Looked after Children –



Mountain Guide Tania Noakes with a client on Mont Blanc



Coasteering is another opportunity for work



Kate Edhouse on Dartmoor



Nicola Yalland on the summit of Ras, Morocco

“There’s plenty of work in peak season, especially when overseas youth expeditions, DofE, summer camps and so on are taken into account, but November to April can be tough”

particularly in the autumn. I started freelancing four years ago, after completing a degree in philosophy at the University of Sheffield and returning from a year in Canada. I come from a strong-ish technical climbing and mountaineering background and now mix freelance outdoor stuff with other odds and ends and travelling/climbing in the winter.”

Will says it’s not hard to work in the summer, but it depends what work you want to do and how much you are willing to work for. “As an ML you are unlikely to spend all of your time leading clients out walking on the hills. Much of your time will be spent doing all sorts of jobs from charity walks or working on multi-activity courses with young people. There’s plenty of work in peak season, especially when overseas youth expeditions, DofE, summer camps and so on are taken into account, but November to April can be tough.”

**GET QUALIFIED**

Kate Edhouse started out with no qualifications – just a passion for the outdoors. For two years she was an apprentice working towards an NVQ Level 2 in Outdoor Education, Sport and Allied Occupations. After six years and a lot of effort she now runs outdoor education programmes for a college and freelances in the holidays for a variety of businesses in the south west. “I hold ML, SPA, BCU UKCC White Water Level 3 aspirant, LCMLA Level1 (caving award), 3 Star Sea Kayak and 4 Star White Water Kayak. “I am now hoping to specialise in mountain sports and am working towards MIA and ML Winter. I personally find that there is plenty of work for myself – being young and female seems to help with getting lots of work, especially for overnights where a female is needed for gender reasons. I do know that many people fight for work and there is a culture of often ‘stealing’ work, where you work for a company once and then try and take the clients to keep work up and money coming in. I think that there are very few people who would be able to survive off just ML and the work they would pull in from it, regardless of how good they were.”

Tania Noakes however points out that since the introduction of university courses, or other ‘fast track’ courses that train you to work in the outdoors, it has made it harder and harder to earn a living. “I think that the explosion in courses around the UK which offer this type of thing hasn’t necessarily been a good thing for ultimately working in the industry. What it generates is a lot of people with high hopes of a long career as an outdoor instructor with a rash of qualifications but sometimes not a great depth or breadth (considering the length of time) of experience. Sometimes when you’re young, without many financial commitments such as a family to support or a mortgage to pay, you may be prepared to work for very little money ‘to get a foot into the industry’, so to speak. This happens in other industries too. This pressure allows businesses to employ them and make money from using them but can drive wages for everyone else in the industry down. It’s okay working for very little money until the point you need to earn a decent wage (to buy a house or settle down for example) and then you realise that someone fresh into the industry is prepared to work for free, or peanuts, and you can’t compete. Combine this with the fact that by law in the UK, unless you are working with under 18s, you don’t need a qualification at all to lead an adventurous activity – it’s not a regulated profession like it is on the Continent.”

So do the benefits of working outdoors outweigh the often low income? “This totally depends on what drives you and what you want from your life,” says Tania. “Of course the benefits outweigh the negatives for me otherwise I’d find another job! However, I have lots of friends for whom the work and lifestyle just isn’t attractive –

MOUNTAIN TRAINING



**50 YEARS OF TRAINING**

We ask **Nicola Jasieniecka** of Mountain Training how the organisation has changed over the years

Nicola Jasieniecka is the media and IT development officer for Mountain Training UK and has been organising events throughout the year to mark the 50th anniversary; “In January we’ll be launching our new ‘Leader of the Month’ award which is sponsored by Sherpa Adventure Gear. This is to celebrate everyone with a Mountain Training coaching/leading/instructing award. We think they do an amazing job and we wanted to make our 50th a celebration of their hard work. We will also be at the Telegraph Outdoor Adventure and Travel Show in London from 13-16 February where we’ll be sharing more information about our new awards, and there will be some regional dinners for board members, past and present, which will coincide with their respective AGMs. We’re also

going to launch a ‘What’s Your 50’ campaign where people can submit their 50 (50 indoor routes in a day/50 peaks in 50 weeks/passing an award at 50 etc) and be entered into a prize draw. We haven’t chosen one big event but will instead be doing as much as possible, as often as possible, throughout the year. Having said that, since discovering the existence of International Mountain Day recently, I think 11th December will be quite special!

**How have things changed over the years for Mountain Training?**

Where do I start? There has been a massive amount of innovation, especially over the past five years. The home nation training boards have committed themselves to working closer as one unit and now share one

database. We also all work closely during the development of new awards, particularly in the climbing wall environment where we have been responsive to the needs of the public demand for training. The Climbing Wall Award, Climbing Wall Leading Award, Coaching Scheme and Hill and Mountain Skills Courses have all been developed as a result of this combined innovation. Since April 2008, 2256 people have passed their Climbing Wall Award or Climbing Wall Leading Award. That’s an impressive number of people. Also, in 2006 the Mountain Training Association was created and has been offering members support through Continued Personal Development (CPD), regional networking opportunities and deals on insurance and gear. That’s quite a step forward for a huge number of candidates who

do not hold the qualifications required to join the Association of Mountaineering Instructors (AMI), BAIML or the BMG.

**What are your predictions for the future for Mountain Training?**

We’re launching some new awards in 2014 – the Lowland Leader Award and Hill and Mountain Skills Scheme. Both of these were a result of our walking awards review in 2013. The Performance Coach element of the Coaching Scheme is being developed at the moment and we will be hosting a climbing awards review in 2014 so watch this space. It’s exciting to be part of Mountain Training at the moment so the future is definitely something to look forward to.

**More info at: [www.mountain-training.org](http://www.mountain-training.org)**

Ross Worthington of RAW Adventures leading a group on Snowdon



maybe some days it is attractive to them – but on reflection, sober assessment of the whole picture, it isn't for them. You have to be realistic and honest about whether this is something you want. Ultimately, any job that you love doing could be considered 'living the dream' – you just have to love what you do."

Nicola Yalland agrees: "Working as an ML/outdoor instructor does take a certain sort of person – you do have to be willing to work long days, sleep in a tent and deal with whatever weather gets thrown at you, *but* you also get to see some amazing views, and see people achieve things they don't always believe possible. It's worth it and when you are known for doing a good job the pay reflects that."

"When the sun is shining and you are out with a nice group, it's brilliant," adds Will Harris. "The low income doesn't seem to be the main issue for freelancers – it's more lack of job security and the low season." Kate says she wouldn't change the job for the world. "I love it and am happy to compromise the low income for the lifestyle and getting to spend my working life doing exactly what I'm passionate about. I do find it hard though that the industry seems to thrive off people's passions and uses that to pay them such low wages. I work as an apprentice where I was paid £90 a week, and in France as a river leader for 100 euros a week, whereas freelance where I've gone out and got my own work I can earn £120 a day, which seems completely disproportionate. I think better paid low-end jobs would mean that entry-level instructors could find it easier to live and buy kit to gain more experience and in turn more qualifications and better instructing skills."

The opportunity to work overseas is another part of the attraction

**"Some instructors earn enough during the summer that they don't have to worry too much, others will go and do a ski season somewhere. Others get a part time job..."**

of going into the outdoors industry, but how easy is it to get this kind of work? "It is fairly easy to get work leading youth development expeditions overseas," says Will. "Companies look for the ML award alongside experience of travelling to developing countries and of working with young people. The big companies such as World Challenge and Outlook Expeditions send several hundred groups a year overseas, so are constantly recruiting leaders to staff these trips. For overseas work outside of the youth development expeditions market I think that it depends a great deal on personal experience, on top of qualifications. For those with relevant experience there does seem to be opportunities to work overseas, but as with all occupations the perceived desirability of the work has an effect on wages. Tania agrees; "In terms of working overseas with your ML then a lot of expedition companies recognise it (the award), particularly those working with school groups and trekking companies outside Europe. But if you want to work in Europe then most head down the IML (International Mountain Leader) path. This is well-structured and has a clear pathway from ML onwards to successfully gaining the award."

**MOVING ON UP**

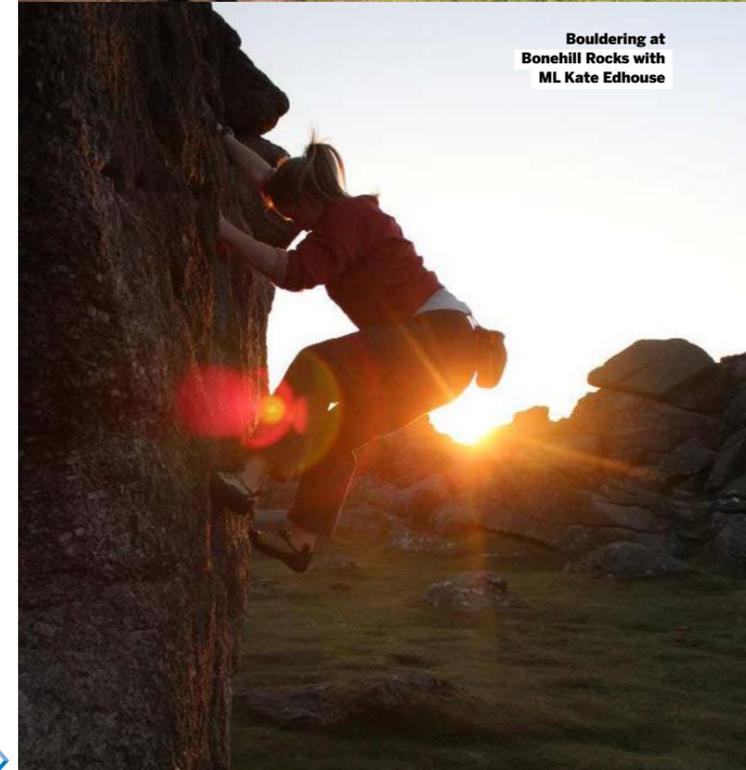
So if the pay is initially low, how hard is it to progress onto being a (higher paid) Mountaineering Instructor? After becoming a summer ML you can go onto Winter ML, MIA and then MIC – but you have to be committed to the training and getting the logged days – moving onto these next tier of qualifications is not a formality by any means. The MIA (Mountain Instructor Award) requires nine days on training courses and nine days of assessment and typically takes people five or six years to complete. Only people with the will to progress will make it onto the higher tiers of the mountaineering



Nicola Yalland on a traverse of Chapelle de la Gliere



A trip to a project in Nepal organised by schools expedition specialists Far Frontiers



Bouldering at Bonehill Rocks with ML Kate Edhouse

“I remember my assessor at SPA saying at the end of the assessment; ‘Well done, you’ve passed your assessment – now go and learn how to be an instructor’”



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**KATY DARTFORD** is a freelance sports and travel journalist living in Chamonix, where she indulges her interests in rock climbing, back country skiing and mountain marathon running.



instructor scheme. “It’s a lifestyle choice,” says Kate, “friends of mine who have gone on to get these do get paid more and have different opportunities for work.” Will agrees; “If you are motivated then it seems to be quite possible if you are willing and able to invest lots of time and money in collecting qualifications. There is only so much work further up the food chain, though – as an ML you often work alongside MIA’s who aren’t reaping the supposed benefits of their qualifications, so maybe getting the ticket alone isn’t the answer. Many people have their ML’s and a host of other qualifications in different areas, which then allow them to pick up a variety of work; SPA, canoe and kayak tickets, leading gorge/hill scrambling/coasteering, teaching first aid and so on. So it’s not always the case that you do your ML, then over a number of years end up as an MIC. That’s probably only true for a fraction of people working in the outdoor industry as a whole.”

**OFF-SEASON WORK**

So the key seems to finding a way of supplementing your income when there is less work. For Tania this was working in the Army Reserves and running adventure training expeditions for companies abroad and for the Services; “It hasn’t been easy to piece it all together though.” Nicola says “some instructors earn enough during the summer that they don’t have to worry too much, while others will go and do a ski season somewhere. Others get a part-time job. Some use the opportunity of being quieter in the winter to work towards the next qualification such as Winter ML.”

“Much of the work that I do is using outdoor activities to engage with young people who can display challenging behaviours,” says Will. “I look after children, Prince’s Trust and so on. This is fairly year-round. I also try and save and take at least three months off in the winter to climb and ski in Scotland and the Alps – sometimes longer. Sometimes I supplement my funds by doing odd jobs in ski resorts. Many people do other stuff, some related, some not – selling Christmas trees seems to be popular this year – but all sorts of odd jobs seem to crop up.”

Kate says that working for a college means she has a steady income year round, but when freelancing full-time she worked every day possible over the summer and during winter and quieter times she would often pick up odd jobs; “One year I worked a six-week contract for the Post Office over the Christmas rush! I think I have been fairly lucky that if I need I have two dotting parents who will let me live there rent-free. I feel lots of instructors/freelancers find it hard to move out of home, and support themselves fully, often relying

on parents or other halves to support them in quieter times so that they can follow the passion and have the lifestyle.”

But even if there is lots of work, is working in the outdoors truly enjoyable or satisfying – or is it the same old ‘honeypot’ routes and mountains, such as Three Peaks challenges? “If you like working with people, then the groups are always changing and the challenge is to get everyone to work well within the group,” says Tania. “If you are always needing a different venue to find your excitement then being a Mountain Guide might not be very satisfying... Mont Blanc is a very popular mountain!”

Nicola agrees; “It’s up to you how exciting your work is. I choose not to do the same thing back-to-back – that way I don’t get bored and my groups get the best from me that way too. I could be in the mountains one day, paddling the next, off leading a group overseas or running first aid. It keeps me on my toes and stops me from losing my passion for what I do. You also get the advantage of working with different people every day.” But Will argues that this is not realistically what a lot of ML’s end up doing. “The industry is quite diverse, and whilst some people will end up doing a lot of Three Peaks that doesn’t reflect the breadth of work available. As an ML/SPA you end up picking up all sorts of work in order to fill your diary. As an ML alone you would probably not have a full diary – it’s better to have a diverse range of skills – SPA and ML, canoe, caving. But it’s worth noting that your ML alone won’t teach you how to work with young people; this is very much something learned from experience. I remember my assessor at SPA saying at the end of the assessment; “Well done, you’ve passed your assessment, now go and learn how to be an instructor. Never a truer word said.”

Kate agrees that work in the outdoors is very varied; “Yes running the same old navigation session is the same but the areas, goals of your students and people you are working with constantly change so I personally find the work satisfying. The ML is used so many ways from teaching navigation, supervision, orienteering, Duke of Edinburgh, expeditions, running races/events or daywalks, that I haven’t found I’ve ever got bored, and I don’t think that a truly passionate instructor ever gets ‘bored’ of leading the same route or the same mountain. It’s the people that make the job, the clients and getting to be outside – whether it’s on Snowdon for the 1000th time or a new mountain for the first time, I still find it exciting and varied!” ■ T&M

**Thanks to Tania Noakes ([www.classicclimbs.com](http://www.classicclimbs.com)), Kate Edhouse ([kateedhouse.wordpress.com](http://kateedhouse.wordpress.com)), Nicola Yalland ([nicolayalland.wordpress.com](http://nicolayalland.wordpress.com)) and Will Harris for their help in putting together this article.**

**FAST FACTS**

**OUTDOOR QUALIFICATIONS**

Explaining the key awards in the outdoor activities profession

■ **MOUNTAIN LEADER**

This award trains and assesses candidates in the skills required to lead hillwalking groups in summer conditions on mountainous routes not requiring the planned use of a rope.

■ **WINTER ML**

The Winter Mountain Leader is validated to lead and provide basic skills instruction to parties

on hillwalks within the UK under winter conditions.

■ **INTERNATIONAL ML**

This award trains and assesses candidates in the skills required to lead parties in mountainous areas, including snow-covered Nordic type terrain of the ‘middle’ mountains but excluding via ferrata, glaciers and terrain requiring alpine techniques.

■ **MIA**

The Mountaineering Instructor Award trains and assesses candidates in the skills required for instructing mountaineering, including all aspects of summer rock climbing, including the coaching of lead climbing, and scrambling.

■ **MIC**

This award trains and assesses

candidates in the skills required for instruction of mountaineering, both summer and winter, including snow, ice and rock climbing.

■ **BRITISH MOUNTAIN GUIDE**

This international award trains and assesses candidates in the skills required to guide climbing (inc. the coaching of lead climbing) skiing and mountaineering on rock, snow and ice, and in alpine terrain.