

'I run to live better'

by Kathy Tzilivakis

EXTREME athlete Alexandra Panayotou has run across half of Spain and now has published a book about her experience.

This Greek Irish ultra-endurance sportswoman ran 2,010 kilometres in 31 days two summers ago to promote the 2010 Barcelona European Athletic Championships. She started and finished at the Olympic Stadium in Barcelona. "I ran an average of 70km a day and 30km on Sundays to rest," she says. "It was a solo one-woman promotional campaign. My book is about this challenge."

Panayotou's book is titled *The Smile of Endurance*. She wrote the original in Spanish and presented its English translation at St Catherine's British Embassy School in Athens on June 22.

Writing was a longstanding interest, but the subject remained elusive: "I always thought I'd end up writing. I thought I'd write novels, but the ideas for stories never came to my mind." Endurance running, defined as anything over the classic 42km (26 miles) of a marathon, gave her the subject-matter she needed: "When I started the solo ultra-endurance challenges, I knew that my writing would come from these. The 2010 challenge was so tough and yet so enriching and wonderful experience that I knew that I had to write about it."

But it's not just a book about running. "It's an awful lot more," Panayotou adds. "For me, the most important part of the book isn't the physical journey, but the psychological and emotional journey that I took. I talk a lot about the psychological tools I use to overcome obstacles."

Asked to describe her monthlong, non-stop running experience, Panayotou uses two words: terrible and exciting.

"It carries everything from euphoria - at the beginning, obviously," she explains. "The first few days are usually okay and very exciting. [But] I find that by the third or fourth day that my body goes into an adaptation phase - no matter how well-trained you are, your body isn't ready to suddenly receive these 12-plus-hour days and extreme heat conditions." This stage is "when everything starts to hurt - my muscles, my feet, the soles of my feet, my arms. Every step is absolute agony. That tends to last about eight to ten days ... At some stage, I find that my body becomes adapted. I am actually much better towards the end than half-way through."

Panayotou, however, is quick to stress that running is not her life. "I am not one of those runners who will run myself to the ground," she says. "For me, running isn't my life. I don't live to run, I run to live better." As a child, Panayotou, who was born in Ireland and raised both there and in Greece, was always very athletic - swimming by three and skiing before learning how to multiply.

"My father played a large part in my love of running, of outdoors and adventure - himself having

been an alpine climber and solo pilot, amongst other adventurous things," Panayotou writes in her new book. Describing a highlight in her childhood, she recalls that when she was about 12 years old, "my father took me to the finish line of the Dublin City Marathon. There I found myself surrounded by pure emotion, people celebrating, crying, jumping up and down or collapsed on the ground, all wrapped in silver security blankets. I was transfixed in wonder and vowed that one day I too would run a marathon. Little did I know then where that would eventually lead me, almost 30 years later."

The first marathon

Panayotou moved back to Greece after college to start a dog training business. In December 1999, she stopped smoking and decided to join a small local gym in Kifisia to lose weight and get fit again. There she quickly fell in love with the treadmill.

She ran her first marathon in 2000 - the Olympus Mountain Marathon, 35 kilometres reaching up to 2,700 metres above sea level. Not only did she finish, but she came in second. That's when she set her sights on the Athens Classic Marathon. She's been running ever since. The past several years, however, Panayotou has been running what she calls "ultra-distance challenges". In all of them, she says, "I test my physical and mental endurance. I try to link each



of my challenges with a good cause."

She is now preparing for four new challenges - three in the United Kingdom and one in Ireland - to raise money and promote awareness about a charity helping feed the poor.

On the trail to happiness

WHEN IS it time to leave a country and why?

The 2010 study "At Home Abroad: A Study of Expatriates' Housing and Its Ties to Assignment Success" by the Interchange Institute reveals that those staying in open-plan or "centripetal" housing often have the highest happiness rates. Before moving in, the not-for-profit research organisation suggests people consider the layout: a more open-plan house encourages family members to spend time together and not withdraw to separate rooms. It says the most content folk are those who immediately "nest" and recommends immediately hanging up photos and artwork, organising the kitchen to personal taste and getting to know the neighbours. Typical local housing - not homes off in an expat bubble - also fosters happiness. And decor and the quality of neighbourhood are more important than work proximity.

Eighty-one percent of the study's participants were female, with a third moving abroad because of their own jobs or education. Over a half of the remainder were accompanying spouses.

So what about those not going over on juicy expat contracts? How much does housing affect the decision to stay? Australian Martha Hatzopoulou shares a two-bedroom apartment with her daughter, which encourages, as the study suggests, their spending time together in the living room. Hatzopoulou loves her home as well as her neighbourhood, with easy access to both downtown and a forest.

Work wins out

But that's not enough. A career change opened her eyes to how difficult it is to find a job when over 40. "Leaving Greece has actually entered my mind this year as I am not making it financially any more," says Hatzopoulou, who moved here with her Greek parents in 1984.

"If it weren't for my parents' help, I could not survive. I don't want to leave Greece but might have to, for work." Teresa O'Driscoll has just returned to Wales after two decades of commuting between the UK and Greece. Writing brought her to Greece - she took a career break to focus on writing - and it's taking her away. "I am leaving because it is time," O'Driscoll says. "I now have a book published, *9 Days to Heaven*, and I need to be in Britain to promote it." While she'll miss her cherished 77-square-metre apartment, sunset views and five-minute treks to the beach, they no longer fill her heart - family, friends, and "beautiful Great Britain" beckon.

New report on youth suicide prevention urges early intervention

A new report, 'Before it's too late' has been tabled in the House of Representatives with recommendations to help reduce the rate of youth suicide through early intervention measures.

Suicide is the number one cause of death among young people aged 15-24 and accounts for more deaths overall in Australia than either road traffic accidents and skin cancer as a cause of death.

Chair of the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Health and Ageing, Steve Georganas said that many of the recommendations contained in the report were shaped by the first hand experiences of the young

people who spoke to the committee during the course of the inquiry into youth suicide prevention.

"We have been fortunate during the course of this inquiry to have some very frank and open discussions with some of those young people who have experienced the current system and who have told us first hand what is working and what is not working" he said.

"As a result of those discussions, as well as contributions from a wide range of organisations which promote mental health, well-being and resilience among young people, the Committee has made a number of recommendations which we hope will as-

sist in reducing the rate of youth suicide further.

Steve Georganas said that it was encouraging to note that youth suicide rates had been in steady decline since 1997 but that there was still much more to be done.

"More than 2000 people commit suicide in Australia every year and we know that in many instances the right help at the right time could have saved their lives. This report highlights the need for that help to be given early on so that fewer young people reach a stage where they feel their only option is to take their own life" he said.

The recommendations in the report 'Before it's too late' broadly cover:

- ✎ increasing mental health literacy among young people to help them to better recognise when they need help, and to encourage them to seek that help;

- ✎ more training for professional staff that have regular contact with young people to assist them to better recognise early warning signs and make appropriate referrals;

- ✎ promotion of collaboration across governments and organisations to improve the availability and access to services for young people who are experiencing difficulties; and

- ✎ improvements to data collection, research and evaluation to inform best-practice.