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DISCOVER EXPERIENCES THAT DEFY CONVENTION

HOLD UP

Matt Hambly takes a look inside the audacious – but undeniably well-planned – world of the big-money heist

IN A BITTERLY cold February morning in 1994, the world's eyes were trained on Lillehammer and the opening day of the 17th Winter Olympics. Whilst the skiers, sledders and skaters prepared for the biggest competition of their lives, two men capitalised on the diversion and broke into Oslo's National Gallery, lifted Edvard Munch's *The Scream* off the wall and walked out with it, pausing only to deposit a note that said 'Thanks for the poor security'.

The opportunistic thieves realised that the painting had been moved to a less tightly monitored position in the gallery to make way for an Olympic exhibition and made their move. Quiet and well-prepared, they managed to leave with one of four versions of Munch's work, one of which later sold for \$119 million.

Sounds surprisingly easy really, doesn't it? And therein lies the key. The best heists rely on a mix of startling simplicity, audacity and sheer brass neck. Very often, the traditional image of a gang of heavily armed men barrelling into a bank proves to be a lazy assumption. Heists take months of meticulous planning by a group of highly organised and motivated individuals.

But back to that brass neck. In November of 2000, when a group of men planned to steal a priceless collection of diamonds housed in London's Millennium Dome, they decided not to do things by halves. At 9.30am on a Tuesday morning, armed with a JCB, sledgehammers, a nail gun and even ammonia gas, they burst into the dome, broke through a perimeter fence and used the hammers to smash their way into the reinforced glass case that held the jewels.

What they didn't know, was that The Met police had received a tip-off and were lying in wait. Before they could make their getaway, the gang were arrested,

but even if they had made off, their efforts would have proved futile because unbeknownst to them, the real diamonds, including the priceless Millennium Star, were swapped for duds the night before. Hardly surprising given that blue diamonds, of which this is one, sell for somewhere north of £160,000 per carat. The Millennium star is approximately 203 carats.

Some 15 years later, another gang planned a similarly audacious heist, this time even managing to get away successfully. When staff returned to the Hatton Garden Safe Deposit Ltd after this year's Easter weekend, they discovered that someone had cut their way through half a metre of reinforced concrete into the company's vault.

The group, which had an average age of 61, was able to break into 70 deposit boxes and steal over £200 million worth of jewellery. The police even failed to respond to an alert from the company's alarm system on Good Friday, suggesting it didn't need a response. However, after a month of investigation, the eight-strong gang was tracked down and charged with conspiracy to burgle. They're now awaiting trial.

And what of the men who stole *The Scream*? They were eventually duped into trying to sell it in a sting operation carried out between the Norwegian and British police.

Despite its safe return, *The Scream* was stolen again in 2004 and not found until 2006 and yet, it can still be counted as one of the lucky ones. Priceless works by Picasso (*Le pigeon aux petits pois*), Van Gogh (*View of the Sea at Scheveningen*) and Monet's Charing Cross Bridge, to name just three, remain at large.

Stealing those was the easy part, though. Finding somewhere to hang them is where it gets really complicated.



THE BEST HEISTS RELY ON A MIX OF STARTLING SIMPLICITY, AUDACITY AND SHEER BRASS NECK

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Powering on: Ellie grapples with the course

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

Ellie Ross takes part in Longest Day, Longest Ride and achieves the impossible

DARKNESS and mist engulf me and the torch strapped to my handlebars illuminates the track ahead – but only just.

Then the rain begins. A mere drizzle at first, it quickly escalates to giant splashes, making the ground slippery and soaking me through.

As if this isn't enough to contend with, I'm only halfway through Longest Day, Longest Ride, a 24-hour endurance mountain bike event on the Isle of Man.

I am one of 272 competitors on this gruelling two-wheeled challenge at Conrheny Plantation on the east of the island, a 15-minute drive north of the capital, Douglas.

The concept is simple: ride for as long as you can, clocking up as many laps of the 5km route as possible in 24 hours.

Competitors wear timing chips and enter either as teams of up to six (handing over a wristband like a relay baton) or solo, slogging for an entire day and night by themselves.

No one replied to my desperate Facebook status asking for friends to join me in a team, so I suddenly find myself at the start line, heading for an epic amount of saddle sore as I brave it alone.

Well, not completely alone. Riders are recommended to have a 'supporter', so I brought along my dad, who keeps me going day and night by throwing encouragement and bananas at me from the side lines.

Jostling for a place at the start with a borrowed bike, I'm surrounded by burly blokes with clip-in shoes and Ironman tattoos, swapping tales of mountain biking prowess.

A woman who had also entered for the first time stands next to me. 'I wasn't sure what's harder; riding the whole thing solo and battling with yourself, or taking breaks but having the pressure to do well for your team,' she ponders, clipping on her helmet.

The klaxon blares and we're off – colourful, Lycra-clad bodies pedalling hungrily along the bumpy track that winds its way towards sections of deepest, darkest forest.

The route is a mixture of open paths, riddled with ruts and rocks – and single-track through woodland, complete with boardwalks that are over 2ft high in places.

But there are 'chicken runs' for less confident riders to avoid the boardwalks and the emphasis is on fun, with a final lap of fancy dress.

It's this broad appeal for both elites and dabblers that event organiser Gary Cooper believes has led to the number of competitors growing from 16 in 2010 to almost 300 this year.

'It's a friendly event that's about getting people out on their bikes no matter their ability,' he says. 'Everyone has their own goal, whether it's winning or just completing one lap.'

'Because the course is in loops, amateurs get to ride alongside some of the top riders and that doesn't happen in a linear route.'

I soon see what he means when I'm overtaken again and again by faster riders. 'Well done! Keep going!' some shout as they power past. I plod on, uphill and downhill, one rotation of the pedals at a time, stopping for a break when my legs – and knees, neck, wrists and shoulders – need it.

Sunshine turns to rain overnight, so some competitors nap in the campsite, while those at the top battle on. The following morning, the end is in sight. I pick up the pace, feeling the adrenaline rush as I near the finish.

At last I'm on the final turn into the finishing straight, my name blaring from the megaphone. Gripping the bars, I heave myself out of the saddle, pushing the last remaining joules of energy out of my soul. After 24 hours, 29 laps and 87 miles, I complete my toughest physical – and mental – test.

And I have the aching legs and mud-splattered helmet to prove it.

Next year's Longest Day, Longest Ride will take place on June 25-26 (noon until noon) 2016. Metro readers get 10% off the £45 entry fee (£40.50)

For accommodation on the island, try grouducottages.com
For more information on the Isle of Man, see visitisleofman.com