

First person

Steve Feltham gave up his girlfriend, his house and his job to search for the Loch Ness monster.

Seventeen years on, does he have any regrets?

Nessie and me

To say that I am a patient man would be an understatement. Seventeen years sat watching and waiting on the shores of Loch Ness for one decent sighting of the monster has to be considered dedication in anybody's eyes. To me, however, it is more a dream come true: this subject has fascinated me since a family holiday in 1970, when I was seven. It was then that we visited the Loch Ness Investigation Bureau, a team of volunteers who each summer set up a make-shift camp on the lochside near Urquhart Castle, from where they mounted round-the-clock surveillance in the hope of filming Nessie. What really caught my imagination was the platform they had built, on which they had mounted a cine camera and tripod; the lens alone must have been a metre long. Grown men looking for monsters? Fantastic.

Noticing my interest, and knowing that it would be a long drive back home to Dorset, my father bought me the bureau's information pack, a folder that I still have, filled with copies of sighting reports and reprints of iconic photographs. I was hooked. Over the next decade my interest grew, fuelled by classroom debates and several more family holidays to the Scottish Highlands.

I would return to the loch many times, first as a child and then, when I was an adult, on two-week "expeditions", armed with a very basic camera and my grandfather's second world war binoculars, fully expecting to be able to solve the mystery before I had to return to work. Little did I realise that it could take a lifetime.

I might have been content to visit the loch periodically, get my fix of monster hunting, then return to work, had I remained in the creative occupations that I pursued for the first eight years of my working life, first as a potter, then as a bookbinder and finally as a graphic artist. However, by 1987, when I was 24, I had a house and a steady girlfriend, and when it was suggested that I join my father setting up a company installing burglar alarms, I jumped at the chance to make some serious money.

Pretty soon, I realised I was in the wrong job, but the thing that got to me most while working in people's homes was the number of retired folk who would say, "Oh, I wish I'd gone and lived in America when I was your age", or climbed Mount Everest, or whatever. What would I regret not having done when I reached 70?

It was obvious: I knew where I was at my happiest, and what I was most interested in. So I quit the relationship, and put the house on the market.

To make absolutely sure that what I was planning was right for me and not just a pipe dream, I loaded up the works van and, in the summer of 1990, went on a three-week hunt to the loch. I had the time of my life. The day the cheque from the sale of my house went into the bank, I told my parents I would be leaving the, by now, lucrative family business. "Oh, and by the way, I'm going to search for the Loch Ness monster instead."

"Told you," my mother said to my father.

I needed something to live in. Within days my brother had located the perfect thing, a 20-year-old former mobile library, wood-lined and with a potbelly stove. In this, I would be able to move around the loch between vantage points, and follow up any new sightings.

On June 19 1991, I arrived at the loch and became a full-time monster hunter. I had never been happier.

To fund myself, I hit on the idea of making little Nessie models out of modelling clay, sitting the monsters on rocks gathered from the shore. I was sure that tourists would buy them, but in the first year I found it hard to sell any. The problem was that nobody knew what I was doing, or why.

Fortunately, while planning this quest, I had phoned the BBC for advice about which video format I should use if I wanted my results to be broadcast-quality. I was put through to the team making the Video Diaries series. Spotting the potential for a good story, they kitted me out with enough equipment and batteries to film the whole of my first year in my new life.

As soon as this programme, *Desperately*



Steve Feltham with the clay models of Nessie that he makes and sells to tourists

Seeking Nessie, was aired in August 1992, I knew that everything would be OK. People started turning up wanting to buy a model from the guy who had given up his comfortable life to follow a dream. I still get visitors who remember it.

I never set a time limit, but I suppose I thought that within the first three years I would surely see and film something. I now know that was a wee bit optimistic. The loch is more than 23 miles long and, realistically, one man can only be looking at about a mile of it at any time. I have tried other methods of hunting over the years; using a boat with some fairly decent echo sounders on board I have had contacts with objects in mid-

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Feltham's home, a former mobile library, parked by Loch Ness

shore, from where I had the best view of Loch Ness that anyone could wish for.

About 10 years ago the van failed its last MOT, and so I decided it was time to become static. The Dores Inn car park was perfect, backing on to the beach as it does and, thanks to the owners' kindness, I had permission to spread out a bit, build some decking out of old pallets, and incorporate a large piece of driftwood to display my models on. Utopia.

Now I have my perfect lochside base, as well as my own postcode and council tax bills. There is no running water or electricity, but the pub has an outside tap, and car batteries charged by a solar panel enable me to run my lights, radio and laptop. My shower consists of two buckets of loch water and a saucepan heated on the stove. The loch deposits driftwood for my stove right outside my door, (much needed, as I've seen temperatures reach minus 17C) and a great big concrete patio table on my "decking" makes sitting out on a summer's day my favourite pastime. I breakfast at this table, put my models out for sale, and wait to see what adventures will turn up.

Tourists arrive to ask me questions, friends come to sit and chat, then maybe there is a Mediterranean-style buffet, an evening campfire, a starry night sky, and, best of all, sometimes the northern lights. Then, when everyone has gone and I have the loch to myself again, I stand at the shoreline and feel the energy that pours off the place, before retiring to watch the night sky through the skylight above my bed. That, to me, is a perfect day.

The Highland weather does not always permit such joys, in which case I find that I can keep myself admirably busy inside my van. I make a few models, possibly do a watercolour painting that I can later sell, read, listen to the radio, maybe even watch the occasional osprey feeding right outside my door. As soon as I feel boredom coming on, I change tack, and anyway I have long since realised that in this life the unpredictable is never far away, be it the Chinese State Circus dropping by for a photo shoot or Billy Connolly inviting me to be a guide for half a dozen of his A-list chums for a day.

Film crews and journalists from all over the world turn up on a regular basis, and I answer all their questions, but they are invariably focused on one subject: is there a monster, or isn't there? Which is perfectly understandable, but it frustrates me that I never have the chance to get an equally important point across: that if you have a dream, no matter how harebrained others think it is, then it is worth trying to make it come true. I'm living proof that it might just work.

Have I ever regretted my decision? Never, not for one second ●

Steve Feltham has his own website, www.haveyouseenityet.com, plus several videos on YouTube.

Do you have a story to tell about your life? Email it (no attachments, please) to my.story@guardian.co.uk. If possible, include a phone number.