

LISTENING 1

Speaker 1

Monica: I've never been a shopaholic but I absolutely adore online shopping. I love the fact that you can find just about anything you want and then, with the click of a button, have it delivered to your house. That said, I recently bought a tin of paint on the internet and I couldn't help feeling that I'd been ripped off. In the picture, the tin looked large enough to paint my whole lounge, but when it arrived, it was tiny! It was hardly big enough to paint one wall. It just goes to show that you've got to be pretty vigilant when making online purchases.

Speaker 2

Stellan: Some of my friends avoid buying things online because they're afraid they'll get duped into handing over their credit card details to scammers. I can see their point to an extent, but most of the sellers I've come across seem above board and I've never been taken in by any scams myself. What a lot of people also forget is that if you make a purchase with your credit card, you're automatically protected by their insurance. If there's any fraudulent activity, all you have to do is report it to the credit card company and they'll reimburse the money.

Speaker 3

Meera: I tend to do my shopping online, including a weekly food shop through a supermarket website. It's not that I have anything against going to the shops, it's just that it's more convenient to buy things on my laptop at home. The only thing I've got against online shopping is that if anything goes wrong, it can be a nightmare to sort out. I once tried to make a complaint about a purchase using an online complaints form but it was completely futile. It was only when I put a message on social media that someone finally got back to me.

Speaker 4

Jim: I'm a big fan of fashion and there are some amazing online shopping sites. What I love about them is the fact that you can find some real bargains, like prices reduced to half of what you'd expect to pay in the high street. In fact, I've just discovered a new site called 'Wearme', which claims to be for streetwise shoppers. It's got some really cool items, especially the trainers, and the prices are really affordable. I was a bit worried about the quality because it's difficult to know what you're getting from a website, but I was pleasantly surprised when my order arrived. There was absolutely nothing to complain about!

Speaker 5

Nikki: The main appeal of online shopping is obviously the convenience, but you can also find some fantastic bargains. I use a comparison website called 'Nile' where you can assess different vendors side by side and choose the best prices. Not so long ago, I was looking for a smartwatch, but they were all pretty expensive on the Nile website. I decided to look on a different site and immediately found the same watch, but it was nowhere near as pricey. I emailed Nile and told them and they got back to me straightaway, offering to refund the difference if I bought it from them. That sort of service is the way to guarantee customer loyalty.

Speaker 6

Charles: The thing that makes me see red about online stores is the amount of information you have to hand over before you buy something. Imagine you went to buy some groceries from the supermarket and the cashier asked you to fill in a form with not only your name and where you live, but your date of birth, gender and email address. I just can't see why they need to know all that. All they need is your home address in order to deliver it to you. I suppose it's a ploy to add you to their marketing database and keep pestering you to buy things. It's true that the high street is not a patch on the internet in terms of choice, but I'd rather suffer that inconvenience than tell online retailers everything about myself.

LISTENING 2

Francesca: Good evening ... and thank you for inviting me to your athletics club. As you know, I've been asked to give a presentation on the 'Five marathons in five days challenge' I ran last month. As the name suggests, I ran five full marathons – that's 26.2 miles per marathon – in five consecutive days. While you'll be familiar with the famous marathons in places such as London, Paris or New York, I didn't undertake any of those. Instead, mine were solitary runs in the Welsh countryside, with no crowds to cheer me on and no TV cameras waiting at the end. Nevertheless, I pushed myself to the limit during the challenge and it had a transformational impact on my life.

I first decided to set myself the challenge after I heard about one of my favourite comedians, Eddie Izzard, doing something similar. He's actually done several of these extreme challenges, but the one that caught my eye was his '27 marathons in 27 days', where he ran more than 700 miles in less than a month. Needless to say, that sounded like madness, but it did give me the idea to do something similar, albeit on a smaller scale. Given my lack of experience – I'd never run a marathon at all – five marathons in five days seemed far more realistic to me!

As this was a personal challenge, there weren't any official regulations that I needed to follow. If I'd been trying to break a world record, it would have been different, but all I needed to do was work out the routes for each of the marathons, check that the distance was correct and record my daily achievements. For that, I downloaded a GPS app on my phone which recorded my route and the time it took to complete it. On top of that, I had a few personal rules, such as no walking and no stopping for a rest. I managed to get a friend to accompany me, who cycled by my side and made sure I stuck to these rules.

The first day was undoubtedly the toughest, because I'd just got over a bad cold. I'd thought about postponing the challenge, but that would have meant all my organisation would have been wasted, so I went ahead anyway. For the first few kilometres, it felt like a huge mistake. I thought I was going to collapse, but a voice in my head told me to keep going. Then at some point, I pushed through the pain barrier and began to settle into the run. There were a few problems over the next few days, like when I broke my phone and the GPS app wouldn't work, but I sorted them out quickly, and, on the whole, I looked forward to running each day.

Before I did the challenge, I thought it'd be a once in a lifetime event, the kind of thing you tick off on your bucket list. However, I got such a buzz from it that I can't wait to do another one. In fact, I've already signed up for the World Marathon Challenge next year, which is seven marathons in seven days, with the added twist that each marathon is on a different continent. The organisers point out that it's a logistical challenge as much as a physical one because you spend so much time flying between destinations. It's certainly a daunting prospect, but I can't wait to give it a go.

Before wrapping up my talk, I've been asked to share any tips for undertaking similar challenges. Obviously, training is the key and you need to give yourself plenty of time to prepare. Don't start off running the full distances, but build up to it gradually over several months. A lot of people start off by pushing themselves so hard that they burn out. Given that you've set yourself such a big challenge, it's also tempting to go out running every day. The problem with that is that your muscles don't have time to recover and you risk causing yourself an injury. My recommendation would be to run shorter distances every other day, with a longer run once a week. Now, the next ...

LISTENING 3

Conservationist: For the last couple of years, I've been involved in a project working to boost the presence of one of our rarest mammals, the grey long-eared bat. The project is also part of a wider initiative to rewild our countryside and restore it to its natural beauty.

The grey long-eared bat is easily identifiable by its extraordinarily long ears, which are nearly the same length as its body. In contrast to other native bat species, which tend to have brown fur, this one is grey, and its face is darker in colour. Despite being a southern European species, it also inhabits the countryside along the south coast of England, which is about as far north in Europe as it can be found. As it sleeps through the winter, it's most likely to be spotted in summer, above gardens, wildflower fields and on the edges of woods.

It's not known exactly how many of these bats are left in the wild, but it's estimated that there are no more than a thousand. The fact that it's slow to reproduce, giving birth to only one baby at a time, means it hasn't adapted well to environmental challenges such as climate change. We also know that the disappearance of its natural habitat is exacerbating the decline in the population. Practices such as large-scale farming have had a detrimental effect on the natural resting places of these creatures. Unless urgent action is taken, the bats could well disappear from the south of England in the near future.

For this reason, we work with local communities to ensure that suitable habitats are maintained for the bats. They require areas of grassland able to support a range of insect species, which are their main food sources. As these insects only thrive in areas where there are wildflowers, we advise farmers and landowners on how best to achieve this. The focus is on amending agricultural practices such as the use of pesticides or the removal of man-made hedges in order to promote wildflower growth. At the same time, we're sensitive to the needs of farmers and hope to find sustainable solutions by working closely with them.

While our main area of concern is the grey long-eared bat, the changes to agricultural practices we are proposing should have a knock-on effect for other animal and plant species, such as the bumble bee. In recent years, scientists have noted an alarming decline in bee populations. If the problem is not alleviated, it could be catastrophic for the food chain and the ecosystems we depend on. However, by promoting wildflower growth, we also hope to restore populations of bees and other native insect species to more sustainable levels.

Interestingly, the health of the grey long-eared bat population is dependent on close proximity to humans. While they're sometimes found sleeping in caves, they're more likely to be found clustered together in the roofs of old houses and barns, which are warmer. For this reason, we're raising awareness with relevant homeowners so that the bats' habitats are left undisturbed. Obviously, not everyone is over the moon about having a family of bats in their attic and we sometimes have to work hard to convince them to do this!

We also work extensively with other conservation groups and academic institutions to monitor and gather as much information on the bats' behaviour as possible. This involves counting the population on a yearly basis, analysing what they eat, improving ways of identifying the species and gathering this information on a central database.

As you can see, the health and well-being of the grey long-eared bat is important to the British countryside as an indicator of the overall health of the national ecosystem. Without them, we are one step closer to losing the landscapes which characterise southern England ...