

The Sky's the Limit

Squash Falconer and her BMW F650GS head out on a ride, climb and fly adventure.

What goes up must come down, as Sir Isaac Newton famously observed, but not necessarily in exactly the same way, as adventurer Squash Falconer recently proved. The 29-year-old is the first British female to climb Mont Blanc and paraglide from the summit, after riding all the way to southern France from her home in Derby on a BMW F650GS motorcycle.

Her unique achievement combined three of her passions in life: climbing, paragliding and motorcycling. "I've been riding a motorcycle from as early as I can remember," says Squash. "I was brought up on a farm and had an electric trike at four, then tried quad bikes and motorcycles—I love everything about them," she adds.

Her mountain-climbing career started after she had completed her first ski season in Les Arcs at 18. "I could see Mont Blanc from my chalet window," she says, "and I remember thinking it would be cool to climb it one day."

She later joined friends on a climb up Acongagua in Argentina, then conquered Mustagata in the Himalayas and Cho Oyu in Nepal. "I got the bug after the first mountain, but I wasn't keen on walking back down," she admits, "so I snowboarded down Mustagata and bum boarded down Cho Oyu!"

By the time Squash had earned her motorcycling license at 23, she had also started to learn how to paraglide and the idea for her record-breaking challenge emerged. "I remember joking, wouldn't it be great to ride to the south of France, climb Mont Blanc and paraglide down from it? People thought I was mad, but I had all the skills to do it. And last year, I decided to just go for it."

Supported by her local BMW motorcycle dealer, Pidcock Motorcycles, and Ozone Paragliders, Squash left for France last September to meet up with her climbing partner, Irwyn Jehu. Despite her excitement and enthusiasm, Squash was fully

aware of the dangers in attempting to reach the summit, let alone paraglide from it. "Only around 30 percent of people who attempt to summit Mont Blanc succeed," she says.

The weather conditions also play a crucial part. "There can be as few as five days a year on which you get perfect weather conditions for paragliding from the summit. You also have to be in the right shape mentally and physically—there were so many factors that needed to be just right."

After two attempts and as the end of the climbing season approached, Squash started to wonder if it would be possible. The first climb was all about acclimatization, and the second included a night sleeping under the stars on the mountainside, with a 3 a.m. rise for the final ascent, followed by a potentially fatal fall. On her third attempt, climbers on the other side of the mountain were turning back due to avalanche warnings. Nevertheless, Squash and Irwyn made it to the top.

"We were the first to reach the summit that day, but the wind was blowing too strongly," she says. "I felt scared about the paraglide, but I also didn't want to climb back down. All of a sudden the wind dropped. I set my wing out, held my breath and off I went. It was incredible."

Despite the feeling of euphoria, Squash quickly had to focus on her 22-minute descent and landing safely, which was tricky due to the midday sun falling on the slopes and heating up the ground.

The easiest part of her ambitious endeavor was the 750-mile (1,200 kilometres) trip from Derby to Chamonix and back. She spent three days traveling to Mont Blanc, favoring the minor routes over the toll roads: "I really enjoyed the ride; the BMW F650GS was so comfortable and I felt fresh as a daisy when I arrived. I had allowed myself a rest day to recover from the journey, but I didn't need it!"

Squash rode a BMW motorcycle because of the brand's reputation. "I liked the upright riding position of the bike, it had

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good balance and was effortless to ride. It had great acceleration and power, but the absolute lifesaver was the heated hand grips. Comfort was the most important thing for me,” she said.

Although climbing up Mont Blanc and paragliding from the summit might be difficult to top, Squash is already thinking of ideas for her next fundraising expedition.

“My ultimate ambition would be to ride to Nepal and climb Everest. People say I’m mad, but they said that about Mont Blanc,” she says, laughing. “Anything’s possible, if you just go for it.” And with an ethos like that, she will undoubtedly succeed in inspiring other motorcyclists, climbers and gliders to scale mountains of their own. ▀



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