

FIRST TO THE TOP

Squash Falconer heads to Nepal with an all-female team, plus Sherpas, to attempt an unclimbed 6,000m peak called Khang Karpo...

WORDS AND PICTURES: SQUASH FALCONER





Changing terrain on the trek-in along the Rolwaling Valley



Paragliding over the village of Na



The girls reaching Base Camp and seeing 'their' mountain for the first time



The sun goes down at Khang Karpo base camp

It was getting dark, the temperature had plummeted, this summit day was up there with the toughest. We were freezing, exhausted and alarm bells were starting to ring in my head. My thoughts were running away with me: “Kath’s got three young children waiting for her at home; what if we can’t get down, what if something happens? How on earth would I explain this to a 4, 5 and 7-year-old?”

Just over a year earlier I’d been chatting to Kath, one of my oldest and closest friends; “Let’s go to Nepal and climb an unclimbed peak,” I said. “I’ve been thinking about doing a trip like this for years.”

We’d met at school when we were 11. We did a lot together: our first ski season; learning to paraglide; and, in 2007, we climbed Muztagata, a 7,500m peak in China. After that Kath started a family and three years later she had a team of three – two girls and a boy. Sport and fitness naturally took a

back seat, but as soon as the children were in school Kath (aka Super Mum) got back into fitness and was ready for another adventure. She gave me the answer I wanted: “I’d love to go and climb a peak in Nepal,” she replied.

I always say if you want to do something, a brilliant way to start is simply to say it out loud and we’d done just that. Our first email was to our friend, Alison Levine, who we met climbing Muztagata – we’d got on brilliantly, our humour was perfectly matched, and we’d promised to do another mountain together. Alison is a remarkable woman – she’s climbed the seven summits, has been to both poles, is a New York Times best-selling author and loves her dog Trooper more than life itself. It took less than a minute for her to reply to our email, “I’m in! What are we doing? Where are we going?”

Unclimbed peaks

In 2014 the Nepalese government released a list of over 100 unclimbed peaks they would give permits for. With our hearts set on a first ascent we got busy over the next few months trying to find both an unclimbed peak and a company to help with logistics and the climb. I was connected with Mingma Sherpa

who runs his own company, Dreamers Destination. He was incredibly helpful and had several suggestions of peaks we could attempt a first ascent of in the lesser known Rolwaling Valley, where he was born.

A few weeks later, after a lot of communication with Mingma, we had a plan. We had permits for an unclimbed peak, we’d set dates and we had our flights booked. But just a week before the trip, with my bags half packed, we got an email from Mingma: “There is a Japanese team on our mountain!” It was definitely not the news we had been expecting, however it wasn’t a disaster. For Kath, Alison and I, a first ascent would be a wonderful bonus, but the trip was ultimately about three friends reuniting after nine years to go off on another mountain adventure.

Confident he could find a solution, Mingma got busy in Nepal and, not only found another unclimbed peak to attempt, but was also able to organise the permits we needed. The peak, named Khang Karpo, stood at the end of the Rolwaling Valley on the border of Nepal and Tibet – despite being shown in a completely different place on the Nepalese map! 6,646m of rock, ice and snow awaited us.

Meet the family

We met our Sherpa team as soon as we arrived in Kathmandu. Mingma wouldn’t be joining us for the whole expedition – he would travel into the valley with us to visit his mum – but would then be leaving us in the capable hands of his ‘cousin brothers’, Nima, Phurba and Tsering, three highly experienced Sherpas, for the ascent itself.

After just one day in Kathmandu our small team left early for the 9-hour drive to Gongur where we met those essential members of our crew – the porters and cooks. From Gongur we had a steady 7-day trek through the beautiful and quiet Rolwaling valley to Base Camp.

I always love being back in a tent and getting into the simple rhythm of expedition life; rising with the sun, eating, hiking, doing only essential tasks like washing and organising kit and of course talking – to each other – not on mobile phones. Our itinerary allowed 15 days for the climb and the weather forecasts were looking good. We stayed in a teahouse in Gongur and, tired from the days travelling, were looking forward to some sleep. However our arrival in Nepal coincided with Diwali and, with



Navigating one of the many huge crevasses on summit day



celebrations and pop-up karaokes in every village, no one was going to sleep early. Over the next four days we trekked through Simigaon, Dong-Kang, Beding and finally to Na, at 4,180m the last and highest village in the valley. As we made our way through the villages we met many of our Sherpa's friends and family, stopping for tea in their parents' homes and looking at family photos of when they were younger. The villages were small and it was shocking to see the damage caused by the earthquake last year – schools, houses and temples completely destroyed. It was also remarkable to see how resilient and strong the locals have been and how much is already being re-built and restored. We passed a brand new school and Nima told us that the school had been built twice! It was originally donated and built by the Japanese, and the entire village had gathered outside on the day of the opening and that's

when the earthquake struck. The school collapsed but everyone in the village survived because they were all outside.

Flying high

Kath and I had decided to bring our paragliders with us – we thought that if we were lucky we might have an opportunity to fly, and it turned out that our rest day in Na was it. There wasn't too much chat as we hiked up to 4,500m, partly due to the altitude and partly because I was nervous. I've flown from the summit of Mt Blanc, but that was seven years previously. Flying at altitude is a different game altogether; the air is so much thinner. Ideally you need more wind to take off and then once in the air, although glide angles remain the same, you fly faster and everything happens much more quickly. The wind was changing but it wasn't too strong so we set up on the hillside overlooking Na where there were plenty of options for

landing. The flight was short, and as I set up for my landing I was feeling happy that everything was going well... until I decided that perhaps I was a little high and I should put in an extra turn before landing. This resulted in me being too close to a stone wall, which I then focused on and flew straight into! I was lucky I didn't break my legs. The locals had come out to see us and they seemed concerned about my crash landing until they saw Kath, who was laughing so hard she couldn't speak. We were told that we were the first people to paraglide in Na and I was the first to land on a stone wall!

We stayed in a teahouse in Na, owned by Phurba. Our Sherpas were not only mountain men but also business entrepreneurs, with all kinds of enterprises on the go – Minga with his expedition company, Phurba with the teahouse and Nima runs a climbing and gear shop back in Kathmandu. It was a pleasure getting to

The Sherpa team

Mingma, Nima, Phurba and Tsering spent their childhood in the Rolwaling Valley (4,000m) where there were no English schools. Life was hard growing up; they started working from the age of 10 carrying loads of 30kg for trekking teams, which is what they attribute their phenomenal mountain strength to.

Mingma Sherpa is an IFMGA/UIAGM certified Mountain Guide and began his mountaineering career in 2006. Aged 11, sponsored by a Swiss family, Mingma went to an English school in Kathmandu. In 2012 he established Dreamers Destination, with a mission to never compromise service and safety and to establish his company as one of the best expedition outfits in Nepal. Significant climbs include: Everest (five times), K2 and six other 8,000m peaks without oxygen, three first ascents and the first and only climber from Nepal to solo Mt Chobuje (6,685m) via the west face – considered to be one of the most difficult mountains to climb. Mingma Sherpa was named as Honorary Goodwill Ambassador for Nepal Tourism in 2011 and he was also honoured by Bangla Mountaineering and Trekking Club and Bangladesh and Iran Alpine Club.

Nima Tenji Sherpa is an experienced IFMGA/UIAGM certified Mountain Guide and Instructor. He has been mountaineering since 2000 and has climbed Everest six times. In 2015 he was a team member of '3 Men, 3 Mountains', climbing three unclimbed peaks in three days to raise awareness and donations for Nepal after the earthquake. He also runs a trekking and climbing gear shop in Thamel, Kathmandu.

Phurba Tenzing Sherpa, working as a Guide and climbing Sherpa has successfully climbed Mount Everest 10 times. Phurba was named an Honorary Goodwill Ambassador for Nepal Tourism in 2011. He is the current brand ambassador for "We Will Rise", the foundation for encouraging Nepalese for new beginnings after the devastating Earthquake in 2015. Phurba's brother Pemba Dorjee Sherpa holds the speed record for getting from Everest Base Camp to the summit, in a mindbendingly fast 8 hours and 10 minutes!

Tsering Pemba Sherpa has climbed Everest seven times. He is an aspiring Guide and has been working as a climbing Sherpa.



Mingma Sherpa on Ama Dablam

The team celebrate as they enjoy that 'first ascent feeling'



know the guys and their families and learning about their lives and experiences.

From Na it was a two-day trek to Base Camp, sited at 5,118m. Phurba's wife and mother joined us on the trek. His mother was so strong; she marched on ahead shouting at and steering a yak that she'd loaded with supplies. Nima talked to us about his life growing up in the valley and pointed out a small, old stone building where he'd spent time with his grandfather as a boy looking after the animals.

Just before Base Camp the terrain changed dramatically – we were now on the glacier, and it was all rock and ice. There was no easy way through. I stepped onto a big rock, it dropped down smashing my shin into a sharp point. The pain was immediate and intense but as I walked it subsided. When we stopped for a break I lifted my trouser leg and saw the blood. I'd split my shin open. Nima helped me patch it together with butterfly stitches and I hoped it would be okay as we moved higher. When I climbed Everest I cut the palm of my hand on my crampons at Base Camp – it didn't heal until five weeks later when I finally came down to a lower altitude.

We'd been on the move for just over a week and as we approached Base Camp we had our first glimpse of Khang Karpo. Kath was missing her children, and seeing the mountain brought home the realities of what we were attempting. Despite all our laughing, joking and relaxed approach to the trip, we were all fully aware of the dangers involved in what we were doing. We knew each other so well though, we knew we'd take no unnecessary risks and the success of the

expedition did not lie with reaching the summit. For me this was one of the many wonderful things about doing an expedition with my friends – that a summit would be nice but not essential. The expedition was already a success: time together exploring this remote valley, getting to know Nima, Phurba and Tsering and having a glimpse into their lives and, of course, flying into a stone wall – I'd never done that before!

First base

Base Camp was amazing, nestled almost at the end of the valley. There was no one else, just us. Mountains towered over from all sides. As the sun went down, the temperature plummeted, but with the night came the stars and here, high in the mountains, they shine brighter and are more spectacular than anywhere else I have ever been.

We rested for a day at Base Camp, but not Nima, Phurba and Tsering; they went to check out a possible route. We had planned to attempt the mountain from the South Ridge, but they returned with bad news; it wouldn't be possible as the hanging glacier was too dangerous to navigate. We would make our attempt from the north side instead. Nima smiled and was confident that we would have no problem reaching the summit. Phurba wasn't so sure and said, "We cannot see a way at the moment, we will find out when we get closer."

With the weather forecast on our side, we left Base Camp early the next day and made our way across the crevassed glacier to our high camp, which sat at the foot of Khang Karpo. It was here, at 5,700m, that I got my first headache. Kath had been suffering a

little bit and Alison was showing signs of a pretty bad cold. These are the times when keeping warm, fueled and hydrated matter the most. We kept a check on each other and ourselves and, as only true friends can, offered no sympathy and told each other to "shut up and get on with it!"

Summit time

At 2am the wind was howling and Nima shouted to our tent: "We'll wait one more hour, if the wind calms down, we'll go."

We left our camp at 3.36am. Somehow climbing in the dark feels different to the light; it's surreal. Time passes fast and the distance covered is hard to judge. The guys put a fixed line in the couloir to the col that would get us onto the ridge. Alison isn't as tall as Kath and I, but what she lacks in leg length she makes up in strength and speed, so pace wise we were all pretty evenly matched. The wind picked up as we got onto the ridge and, still dark, I stopped to add a few more layers.

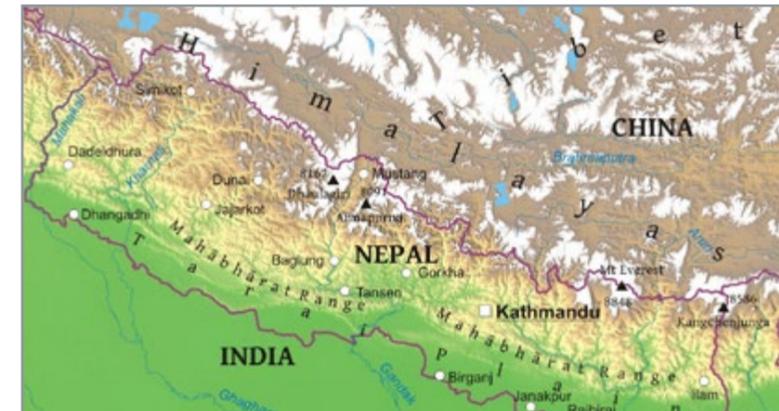
The ridge was steep; we navigated five hanging glaciers, crossed four snow bridges and avoided multiple crevasses. There wasn't a lot of talking going on but when Kath suggested she needed a sleep, we all took a break and made a 'mountaineer sandwich' for warmth. As the afternoon approached I became increasingly aware of our turnaround time. For the first time on the trip I did think perhaps we wouldn't make the summit. Without too many words, slowly, we moved together as a team and made our way upward. A surge of emotion ran through my body as we made the final few steps to the summit. We had done it! The day was clear, with views of multiple 8,000m peaks including my old friends Everest and Cho Oyu.

Sharing this trip and this moment with Kath and Alison and our new friends Nima, Phurba and Tsering – who we couldn't have done the climb without – was very special. Mountains are magical places and standing on the top of them is never a given, but an absolute privilege. We descended from the mountain, the final few hours in the dark. My thoughts were running away with me, worrying if we could all get down safely. Keeping my mental and emotional state in check on a mountain is just as important as my physical state; I knew I was tired so I reminded myself we were all still moving as a team, we all had each other's backs and actually we were all still doing well. Reaching our high camp and collapsing into our tents was heaven.

Days later, back in Kathmandu, we received recognition of our first official ascent of Khang Karpo from the Nepalese government. I thought to myself: "Kath's got three young children waiting for her at home, won't it be amazing to tell them mummy's got a certificate for being one of the first people to climb a very big mountain." 🇳🇵

THE KNOWLEDGE

KHANG KARPO What you need to know before you go



WHEN TO GO

The best times to go are from March to the end of May and the end of August to mid December.

HOW TO GET THERE

Fly into Kathmandu international airport, then catch a bus or hire transport to Gonggur village in Rolwaling Himal.

WHERE TO STAY

Kathmandu offers a wide range of accommodation to suit all budgets. We stayed in the Holy Himalaya Hotel, with a good breakfast included.

HOW HARD

For any trek in Nepal a good level of fitness is required, and for climbing this particular peak (with Sherpas), experience of using crampons and ice axe was a must, with familiarity with jumaring on fixed lines being an advantage. Summit day was long with nearly 1,000m of ascent, so a high level of fitness and motivation was needed to reach the summit.

GUIDEBOOKS AND MAPS

In Kathmandu there are lots of book shops with

plenty of information for the specific region and area you will be going to. We used the Rolwaling Tesi Lapcha Trekking Map 500 series 1:125,000 (map code NE512)

WHO TO GO WITH

The author went with Nepalese company Dreamer's Destination (www.dreamersdestination.com). Expedition Wise, a UK-based company, is offering an unclimbed peak expedition to the same region in Nov '17 (www.expeditionwise.com).



The route to the summit of Khang Karpo