



Even after more than ten years of living the life she'd dreamed of, it was only after Squash Falconer nearly died on the top of the world that she knew she wanted adventure to be her career

EVEREST CHANGED MY LIFE. ▶

WORDS: ROGER FULTON. PHOTO: DAVID SPURDENS

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SO DO YOU WANT TO BE AN ADVENTURER?

Squash does have some practical advice for anyone wishing to follow the thrill-seeking path.

- **Surround yourself with people you like who can help you.** ‘Get a mentor or two to inspire you. I got into paragliding because my best friend’s boyfriend was a British champion. He helped me to get started.’
- **Ask for help and offer help.** ‘Go on free courses, borrow kit, and work in exchange for kit or learning opportunities. All my sponsors are people or products that I like or use. When I first looked for sponsors, I just wanted a free pair of trainers and a watch.’
- **Take up internships; help other adventurers.** ‘Join a club, join a team, check out websites such as www.explorersconnect.com’
- **Don't set unrealistic goals.** ‘You can get a good job that will pay for your adventures, or you can just do the things you want and accept that there will be sacrifices. It can take years, but you should ask yourself every day: “Am I living the life I want to be living?”’



Captions to go here



Squash Falconer was just 30 metres from the summit of Mt Everest when her fevered, hypoxic brain calculated that as she might not make it back down alive anyway, she might as well make it to the top. Her plan had been to paraglide off the summit, but the Derbyshire-born adventurer had pushed herself to her limits, and was already digging deep into the reserves she knew she would need just to walk off the mountain, let alone fly off it.

The weather had closed in, winds were gusting at around 60kph, the temperature was -60° and visibility was down to just a few metres. But just 20 minutes later she stood on the summit and in that moment her life changed, although, unable to see the panoramic views that have transfixed climbers and thrill-seekers for nearly 60 years, she didn't know it. Her only thought was survival.

‘There was no feeling of elation. Standing on top of the world was hideous, horrendous, so tough, so hard. I thought I was going to die,’ she says.

She and the two fellow team-members who'd summited with her stayed there for just five minutes, before starting back down. ‘The weather then deteriorated further and we were even more exhausted, but stopping even for a few minutes would have been lethal. We knew we had to keep moving. When you climb at that height you have to push yourself to the limit of your endurance. It's so hard to judge. Push too far and you're dead.’

‘The summit is only halfway; you need 50 per cent of your reserves to get back down. When I

was 30 metres from the top I thought “Well, if I have pushed it too far, another 20 minutes won't make any difference.”

‘On the way down I met a Japanese climber, who was in really bad shape. He was barely conscious, his face was already black from frostbite. We couldn't do anything, and his Sherpa beckoned us to continue on down. But I knew when I walked away that I was walking away from another human being who was dying. And I knew I was not that far from being in the same position. ‘You climb physically, then mentally and finally emotionally. Stumbling down to Camp 4, I just kept thinking of all the people in my life I knew and loved.’

After a night at Camp 4, Squash was able to stabilise her body enough to make an attempt to fly off the south col. ‘But it was too windy and I was too weak. I knew it was too dangerous, so we pressed on down.’

Only afterwards did Squash realise just how much reaching the summit had meant to her, and only then did she realise that she wanted to make a proper career out of the passion that had driven her to set world firsts on some of the world's highest mountains over the previous 10 years.

‘I'd survived. I'd lived.’ She learnt the most important lesson: to be a career adventurer you must first of all be a *live* adventurer.

‘When I got back from Everest I didn't want to climb a flight of stairs let alone another mountain. But Everest opened a lot of doors for me – especially when it came to after-dinner speaking. One of the ways I'd been funding myself was by giving motivational talks in schools, at corporate

events, and in ski chalets. Everest made a big difference and has given me confidence to try things. It amazes me how much impact it has on people when you say you've climbed Everest. It still has that aura.’

One of the most frequently asked questions from audiences at her talks is: ‘How do you become an adventurer?’ And more to the point: how do you make it pay?

‘It's taken me years to figure that one out,’ says Squash, who turned 30 on Everest. She has been following her dream since she was 18, when she did her first ski season and found herself gazing in awe at Mont Blanc, a mountain she later became the first British woman to fly off.

‘The thing is, you don't just think “I want to be an adventurer”. You do what you are passionate about and make sacrifices to make it happen. It's not 100 per cent glamorous all the time.’

Squash's own adventure began in earnest in 2004. She had done a couple of ski seasons as a teenager and gone travelling. In 2002 she and her father set up a company importing goods from China. She worked hard at it for a year or so, ‘but it was not really what I wanted to do. I decided I wanted to make “this” my life – even though I had no real idea what “this” was. I just knew I wanted to be fit and have adventures.’

With a group of friends Squash set up an endurance adventure racing team and began her love affair with big mountains, climbing Aconcagua in Argentina in 2004. To fund her climbing she repped at sports events, did sports modelling, sometimes for money, sometimes in exchange for kit, and worked as a leader or

co-leader for climbing companies. More expeditions followed, with Squash adding film-making to her cv as she began to see how she might at least be cash neutral, even if she wasn't making money. Then, after she rode her motorbike from Derbyshire to the foot of Mt Blanc, climbed it and flew her paraglider off it in 2009, she accepted an invitation to talk about her exploits to 600 students at her old school and found she had a talent for motivational speaking. And she has been much in demand since summiting Everest.

‘I'm not extraordinary; not the best, the strongest or the fastest. But it's very rewarding to be able to motivate and inspire others. I want to ignite a spark in people that relates to them – if someone is really unhealthy and unfit, then just going for a 15-minute run is their mountain.’

This winter she gave about three talks a week – some in Italy's Aosta valley, where she is now an Aosta ambassador and where, after skiing in Courmayeur during the winter, she will be climbing and paragliding this summer. Further ahead, Squash is planning to fly off the top of Mt Kilimanjaro next January.

‘This was not a career mapped out at school,’ she says. ‘I just set out to do things I was passionate about. I became an adventurer by default. It's a wonderful life in which the big stuff comes together if you get the small stuff right: I call it my Knickers Philosophy! I don't have a big house and a well-paid city job; my life is good because of the people in it and the things I do day by day.’

www.squashfalconer.com

PEAK PERFORMANCE

Squash, now 31, got her unusual nickname from her baby sister, who couldn't pronounce her real name – Louise – saying ‘ease’, which became peas, then squashy peas and finally Squash.

Her impressive mountain cv includes:

DEC 2004 Aconcagua, 6962m – Highest peak in the western hemisphere. Summited.

JULY 2007 Mustagata, 7546m. Reached 7,400m, but turned back due to bad weather. Snowboarded back down.

SEPT 2008 Cho Oyu, 8,201m – 6th highest mountain in world (600m lower than Everest). Summited. Took her bum board to the top and became the world's highest ever bum boarder!

APRIL 2009 Loubuche East, 6,145m. Summited (co-leader).

APRIL 2009 Everest Base Camp, 5,360m (co-leader).

JULY 2009 Mt Rainier, 4,392m. Summited (co-leader).

SEPT 2009 Mt Blanc, 4,810m. Highest mountain in Europe. Summited (leader). Flew her paraglider from the summit to become the first British woman to fly from the top.

MAY 2011 Mt Everest 8,850m. Highest mountain in the world. Summited.

And at lower level:

SEPTEMBER 2011 Lands End to John O'Groats on a bicycle (1,020 miles)