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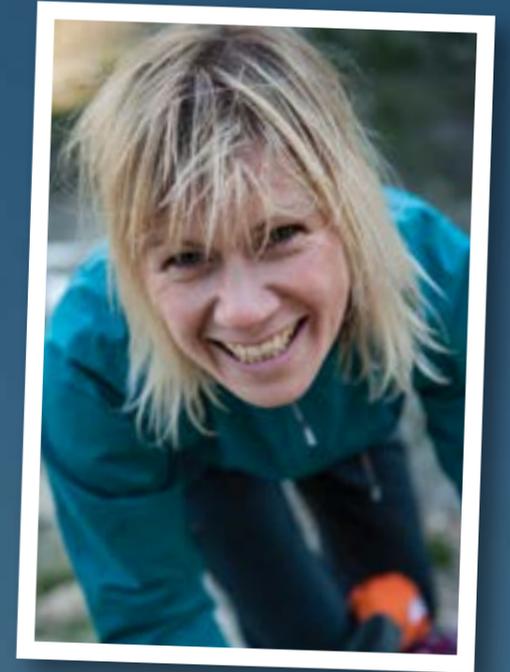


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TREK & MOUNTAIN



words | Chris Kempster | images | Oliver Orram, Ben Winston, Flo Tomlinson



HIGH FLYING BIRD

As the ambitious 'Wings of Kilimanjaro' charity project launches, we talk to **Squash Falconer** about climbing and flying off big mountains...



image | (main) Oliver Orram, (inset) Flo Tomlinson

Squash flying in the French Alps

Since falling in love with the mountains as a chalet girl working in the French Alps, Squash Falconer has been busy honing her skills in the art of climbing to the top of mountains and paragliding – or ‘flying’ – back down again. So far her biggest flights have been from the summits of Mont Blanc (4810m) and Gran Paradiso (4061m), but she aims to go even higher during next year’s mass climb-and-fly event in East Africa, the Wings of Kilimanjaro project. Her high altitude ascents so far include Cho Oyu and Everest, and she is also no slouch on motorbike, skis, snowboard and bumboard either. We caught up with Squash to find out why she likes to throw herself off of mountains so much, and what she has planned for the future...

The Wings of Kilimanjaro project has just been announced – when did you first hear about it?

I first heard about it in late 2011, maybe early 2012. I can’t remember exactly, I heard about it when it was called ‘Kili 2012’.

Did you sign up immediately?

No, in fact I did the opposite – I decided *not* to sign up! I thought it was a crazy idea, knowing how hard it is to organise a team of two to climb and fly, let alone a team of 200. Then I realised if I’d listened to people who thought all my ideas were crazy and not possible, I wouldn’t have gone out and done the things I’ve done. What this event needed was support, and ultimately it is about raising a million dollars for charities on the ground in Tanzania. The climb-and-fly part is a bonus and not a given.

What will be the biggest challenges of the attempt?

I think there are three huge challenges: firstly the logistics of taking such a huge group of people up the mountain are very complicated. On Kilimanjaro there are roughly five porters to each climber so the group will be at least 1000 people strong. I think everybody will need to pack a whole lot of understanding and patience in their luggage! Climbing the mountain itself is a huge challenge – at 5,895m Kilimanjaro is the highest freestanding mountain in the world and the effects of altitude will be felt by all. Then of course the pilots, if they successfully make the summit, still have the biggest challenge of all – flying from the mountain.

Are there dangers involved with 200 paragliders in the air at the same time?

Yes of course. Unlike a competition, though, where regularly you would see huge numbers of paragliders in the air at one time (especially in the starting cone at the beginning of a cross country competition) pilots will be taking off and flying away from the mountain immediately. Pilots must remain highly aware of what is going on, not only around them but also above and below them.

How do you think the Kili experience will compare to your other climb-and-fly expeditions?

“The logistics of taking such a huge group of people up the mountain are very complicated. On Kilimanjaro there are roughly five porters to each climber so the group will be at least 1000 people strong”

I think that it will be wonderful to share the adventure and challenge with so many other people – you meet some incredible personalities doing this kind of thing and I love that. I think it will be a totally different experience to my other expeditions because this isn’t my own trip, I’m not calling the shots and all the planning/decisions are not down to me. Obviously, as with everybody else on the mountain, each individual has two big decisions that are totally theirs: 1. If you will hike to the summit and 2. If you will fly or not. But as for the other stuff, that is out of my control and that will be a very different experience. I’m sure I’ll enjoy having the team input and working with other more (and less) experienced climbers/pilots during the adventure.

When did the mountains first grab your attention?

When I was six. In an old school diary I claimed that I had climbed to the top of a mountain... I don’t remember it though. It wasn’t until I was 18, while I was in the French Alps working as a Skiworld chalet girl that I clearly remember looking at the mountains and feeling passionate about them. I could see Mt Blanc from my bedroom window and I used to look at it and would think, “climbing that would be a cool thing to do”.

Describe some of your early mountain experiences?

As I mentioned earlier I don’t remember the mountain I climbed when I was six. My parents have since told me it was a hill, but I think when you’re small, hills can acceptably be called mountains! My early mountain experiences were on my skis and my snowboard. I remember the first time I went off-piste properly on my snowboard. My friend Mark took me, we hiked to the back of the Sache in Tignes and I was terrified. The terror soon turned to elation and I remember feeling so small in the almighty mountains. I just loved where I was and what I was doing.

Were you also rock climbing at this time?

No. I didn’t really do a lot of rock climbing until my early twenties and even then I didn’t do loads. I would call myself a mountaineer rather than a rock climber and although I do some (earlier this year I climbed Le Croux in the Aosta Valley for a Rab photo shoot and it was probably the highlight of my rock climbing to date). I’d really like to do more.

How do you get on at high altitude?

The first time I encountered altitude I felt pretty bad. Incredibly tired, headaches, loss of appetite, that kind of thing. But I soon realised that’s quite normal at altitude and that in fact I was doing okay. The key with altitude sickness is to realise how bad ‘bad’ is. For example, if you feel a bit bad, that’s okay, that’s normal. If you feel quite bad, be aware you may need to stop or slow down and drink more fluids. If you feel very bad, stop and if you don’t improve, go down. And if you feel very, very bad – turn around and go back down immediately. The more time I spend at altitude the more I learn about myself up



Preparing dinner in a snow cave high above Chamonix

Filming below the summit of Lobouche East



there and these experiences teach me to look after and take care of myself better.

When you decided to climb Cho Oyu, was Everest already at the back of your mind?

Not really. After Cho Oyu a teammate said to me, "Squash you could climb Everest" to which I said "thanks", inwardly thinking, "Yeah, there's no way I'm doing that". I suppose that comment was the initial seed that planted the idea in my brain. It was never an option until that point, I didn't think I could possibly do it. But when I started to think I could do it, the idea began to grow...

Who did you go with to Cho Oyu, and how did you find the climb?

I went with Suzy Madge and she became the first British woman to ski down an 8,000m peak. I took my bum board instead of skis and was delighted to become the world's highest ever bum boarder! The climb itself was tough, really tough. I'd never pushed myself that hard before. There was vertical ice walls close to the summit that were incredibly difficult to climb. We also experienced extremely bad weather. One night a storm took 22 of our tents at Camp 1 (while we were in them). Using our ice axes we literally attached ourselves to the ground, it was very scary. We also got stuck in bad weather and didn't move from Camp 2 for over a week. I learnt a lot about myself and the mountains on that trip.

Describe flying off of Mont Blanc?

Haha, it was awful! Until I landed safely on the ground, then it was amazing! The thing is when you're doing a climb and fly, at times it's very stressful. Everything you are doing requires so much concentration, thought and effort. A wrong move or bad decision can be fatal. We arrived at the summit of Mt Blanc and the wind was too strong to fly. Part of me was relieved – at least I wouldn't have to take off! But as the wind dropped and it became apparent flying was an option, adrenalin kicked in and I was scared. It was a lovely take off but a committed one, knowing that if I messed up I would probably fall down the sheer face in front me. Once I was airborne the air was rough and my focus was on landing safely. Any pilot will understand the great feeling of relief that landing brings when you've had a difficult or tricky flight.

Describe the conditions needed to safely take off from a summit?

The basics are; good visibility, no cloud cover (or at least not 100% cloud cover, you mustn't fly down into cloud), a good take off place, wind in the right direction relative to your chosen take off and wind that isn't too strong. Some wind is better than no wind. At altitude the air is thinner so more than at sea level wind is your friend and will enable you to inflate your wing and take off.

Is there a precedent for flying off Everest?

Yes, it has been done! Five people have flown from the summit of Everest. French alpinist Jean Marc Boivin did it first on a very basic glider in 1988, tandem pair Claire Roche-Bernier and Seb Roche Bertrand flew from the summit in 2001 and then just last year tandem paraglider pilot Babu Sunuwar and experienced Everest climber Lakpa Tshering Sherpa flew a tandem paraglider from the summit. ➤



Image | (right and above) Ben Winston

Image | Flo Tamlinson

On the summit of Everest in May 2011



Image | Flo Tomlinson

Training for Everest above Chamonix



Image | Ben Winston

“We arrived at the summit of Mt Blanc and the wind was too strong to fly - part of me was relieved. But as the wind dropped and it became apparent flying was an option, adrenalin kicked in and I was scared.”

How did Everest compare to Cho Oyu?

A much longer expedition, Everest was tougher on both a mental and physical level. I also think I found emotional mountaineering on Everest; I didn't experience that on Cho Oyu, or in fact ever before. That's a place I went when I was physically and mentally exhausted. Everest had a bigger impact on me too. It's the only time I've genuinely thought I might not be coming home. Being only 600m higher than Cho Oyu you might think, oh that's not much... but trust me, each metre you climb is harder than the last metre and that 600m was the hardest I've experienced. Both trips were fantastic though.

What next? (after Wings of Kilimanjaro that is)

I used to be shocked how often people asked “what's next then Squash” the second I'd completed something and I soon realised that doing what I do I've totally set myself up for that, but to be asked what's next next! I'd like to follow in Felix Baumgartner's footsteps and jump from the edge of space but I suspect that might be 'next next next next', if at all!

Is the future all about mountains for you, or general adventures?

General adventures. I love mountains and I'm planning on them being a part of my future too, but there's so much to do and so many wonderful things out there in this world we live in.

How much of your time is spent doing talks and appearances?

More and more. I love doing talks and I love meeting new people, so things have gravitated towards doing that. It depends on where I am too. Some months I'm in the UK so I do a lot of talks, and other months I might be travelling/working on other projects so I won't do one talk.

What are your ultimate ambitions in life?

It's a sad fact that the things I do mean that I have seen people die. And there's nothing quite like death to make you realise how precious life is and how important it is to make the most of what you have and to love the people you care about as much as you can. Being happy 100% of the time isn't realistic but I'd like to be as happy as possible as much as possible and in doing so share that with other people. I'm really quite simple. I like being happy and having a giggle. T&M

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