

INCREDIBLE JOURNEYS

For many airports athletes, the thrill of anticipation is almost as great as the feat itself. Here, Dropzone meets two extraordinary characters in its quest to discover what drives us to achieve the seemingly impossible

WRITER ANNETTE O'NEIL



A crew of BASE jumpers throw their gear on dogsleds and trundle 80 miles into the middle of snowy nowhere, sharpening their crampons in a valley surrounded by titanic, ice-lashed cliffs. A group of skydivers teams up with the Russian Geographical Society, undertaking a three-day mission to join a single helicopter load over the North Pole.

Three cross-country paragliding pilots venture into the craggy overworld of Pakistan, where they tackle gnarly flights within the densest concentration of 7,000-metre peaks on the planet. And that doesn't even start to scratch the surface of what is on the menu for an intrepid skybound athlete at the top of their game. Airsports exist because the human spirit strives for more than what's possible. Though the realm of that possibility has, over the past decade, firmly embraced the practice of these sports, there is plenty of undiscovered country at the edges. The innovators still reach for it. Tirelessly. This is adventure. This is why we fly.

THE JOURNEY IS A HOMECOMING These days, the long overland trek to the top of Angel Falls – the world's highest uninterrupted waterfall, immortalised in everything from Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's 1912 fantasy novel The Lost World to the Pixar

that towers 3,212 feet along the knifelike southern edge of Venezuela's Auyantepui Mountain. Carlos Pedro Briceño, a prominent skydiver and BASE jumper born and raised in Caracas, is one of these outliers. He heard about the earliest jumps from the falls during his childhood in the 1990s, and the haunting combination of danger and majesty stayed with him. He had to see it for himself. Finally, in 2010, he was ready.

"We weren't the first to do Angel Falls," Briceño acknowledges. Over the course of years before he ventured out to the jump, it had already killed legendary French adventure athlete Jean-Marc Boivin and maimed several others. "But in a lot of ways, I feel like Angel Falls is a part of my identity as a Venezuelan jumper. Making the journey – and doing the jump – was very important to me."

Much of the planning for the trek revolved around the process of paring down. "You have to very carefully limit the stuff you bring. When you jump,

you have to jump everything down with you that you want to keep," he explains. "So you only bring your BASE rig, plus the clothes that you're going to hike in every day, plus the clothes that you're going to sleep in. That's it." Sherpas, hired for cash from the local Indian villages – called 'pemones' – carry the expedition's food, tents and gear. "The pemones keep everything we can't jump down," Briceño says. "They aren't cheap, but they're invaluable. Their help lets us all hike light."

Briceño made that first trip with four other BASE jumpers – three of which, rather uniquely, were women. "We were hacking through the heart of the Venezuelan jungle," he remembers. "In a lot of ways making it up as we went along." Due to the challenging rainforest conditions, gear safety is a constant issue on the Angel Falls pilgrimage. "You have to keep everything you aren't wearing in a dry bag," he explains. "Tropical conditions mean you'll always get wet during the day, even if you're doing the trek during the dry season." Rough terrain, insects, hide-and-go-seek pathways and the ever-encroaching weather makes the trail a long, slow slog.

Finally, after several days of demanding trekking up-mountain through dense vegetation, the group made it to the exit point. Briceño still vividly remembers his first arrival to the edge. "The exit point at Angel Falls is one of the most beautiful places I

If you get hurt, you're in for it – the emergency helicopter takes at least four hours to reach the site. "But when you land and you look up," Briceño muses, "you just can not believe how massive and beautiful it is."

"Every step of that journey is magical. While you're hiking, you completely forget about the jump – you are just simply enjoying it, because the trek is wildly different from day to day. Some days you suffer, sure... but it's all incredibly rewarding."

Since that first expedition, he's been back twice. When he shares the story of his Angel Falls adventures, newbie athletes' ears invariably perk up. Over and over, he gives the same advice. "Don't overestimate your abilities, and don't underestimate the power of a good team," Briceño insists. "Make sure to form relationships with the right people to help you to organise any expedition you undertake, because it's never as straightforward as you imagine and what you don't know can end your career."

THE JOURNEY IS EVERYTHING Paragliding, like BASE, is a sport chock-full of expeditioners. Scores of pilots delight in emphasising the freedom inherent in 'free flight', from bivouacs on board for long-haul cross-country flights to hike-and-fly missions deep into the wilderness. Some, however, take it further – like Squash Falconer, the relentlessly sunny multisport adventurer.



Opening page: Squash Falconer altitude training in preparation for Everest **Above:** Carlos Pedro Briceño and his fellow BASE jumpers **Left:** Falconer and Jangbu, her Sherpa, on their way to Camp 4 on Everest (bottom) and attempting to fly once they got there (top)

climbing worked its way into her daydreams. From there, there was no going back. When she was 23, Falconer bagged her first big summit: Argentina's Aconcagua, the highest peak in the western hemisphere. Four years later, she summited (and, uniquely, bum-boarded down) the 8,201-metre Cho Oyu located on the Nepal-Tibet border. From there, it was Loubuche East, Mt Rainier and a successful summit of her old friend Mont Blanc – achieved after an epic motorcycle ride to the base of the mountain from her English home. Alongside climbing partner Irwyn Jehu, Squash flew her paraglider from Mont Blanc for that mission, becoming the first British woman to pull it off. After landing from the Mont Blanc expedition, she started to think about the next logical step: Mt Everest, of course. The highest mountain in ➤

'THE EXIT POINT AT ANGEL FALLS IS ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PLACES I HAVE EVER BEEN. YOU FEEL AN ENERGY FROM NATURE'

have ever been," says Briceño. "Just standing there, you feel an energy from nature that is hard to describe." At Angel Falls, the arresting majesty of the exit point is matched by the extraordinary threat of the landing. It's a doozy – by no means easy pickings. The Churún River surges down a cliff that is 15 times higher than Niagara Falls, churning the surrounding air with a deafening blast of water that creates massive turbulence, and the landing area is comparatively small.

"Squashy Peas", whose real name is Louise, was born in the famously flat landscape of central England. Yet her destiny lay waiting at far higher altitudes, because her moment on Mt Everest summarises everything an airsports expeditioner can do right. It all kicked off when 18-year-old Squash travelled to France for a ski season. From the slopes in Les Arcs, she took in magnificent views of dominating Mont Blanc. It wasn't long before the idea of big-mountain



the world. “I was skiing in France with an old friend of mine, Adam Hill, who co-owns Frontiers Paragliding school in Pokhara,” Falconer remembers. “He heard that I’d announced my idea to climb Everest and fly from the summit on BBC Radio, and he was instantly encouraging.”

Hill brought Falconer over to Nepal to train with him at more comparable altitudes to those she would experience in the Mt Everest massif. Falconer also worked with the much-decorated coaching team of Jamie and Isabella Messenger, racking up her first full stalls over Pokhara’s Lake Phewa.

“That training really helped me work through the puzzle of what I had to do,” Falconer recalls. “The athletes I trained with in Nepal helped me break the challenging flying down into small chunks and make it manageable.”

As important as the flying was, it wasn’t the only daunting aspect of the Everest mission. The climb to the summit, of course, is literally a killer.

“I gained a lot of confidence from my discussions about the expedition with Dan Mazur [the owner of the expedition

operation Summit Climb], who knows my climbing well because I co-lead trips with him,” Falconer recalls. “He told me I was strong enough to climb Everest, and I believed him. When he said that, I knew it would happen.”

A few months later, Falconer was on her way, with discounted expedition costs from Summit Climb, a full contingent of gear sponsors, and a brand-new Ozone lightweight system to make her descent from the peak.

The run-up was not without its challenges. For one, it nearly ended before it began: Falconer fell seriously ill while at Namche Bazaar, the very last village before the Himalayan wilderness, losing a dismaying amount of weight and strength.

In response, she focused single-mindedly on healing and recovered her strength startlingly quickly. When she felt well, she pushed resolutely on to base camp to begin the long process of acclimatisation. After 10 weeks – “a very long time to be in your own head,” she laughs – Falconer, with the help of the Sherpas, shouldered her glider and set off for the summit.

“It crystallised, at that moment, the depth of what these expeditions



have taught me about myself and other people,” Falconer remembers. “Before Everest, you could have asked me who I thought I was and how I thought I’d be up there, but it’s only in carrying it out that you really answer those questions. You get to know yourself when you’re scared, ecstatic, intimidated, exhausted. You’re totally exposed.

“When I talk about my Everest experience, there’s only one thing I can really say about it: It was everything. It was wonderful, exasperating,

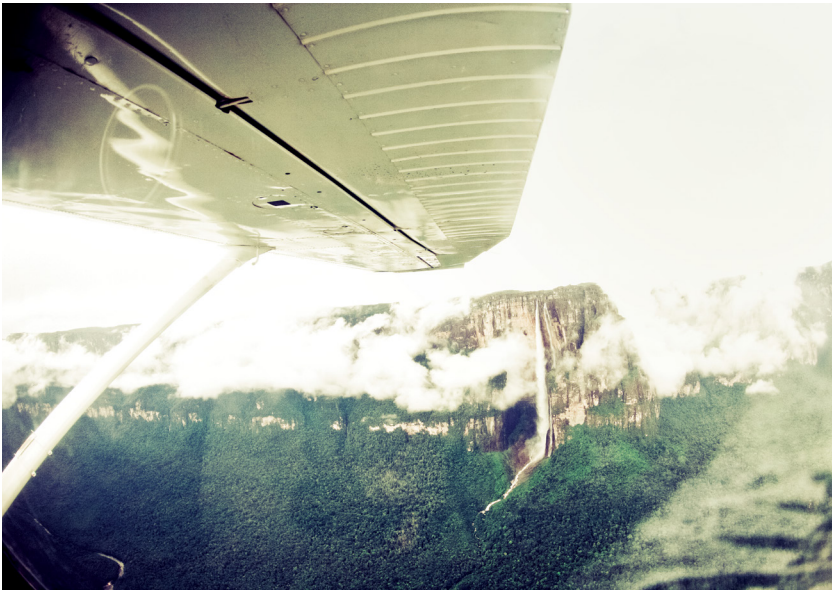
invigorating, awful, brutal, transcendent, miserable, divine. I experienced everything you can experience as a human being during that expedition.”

Falconer summited Mt Everest on 12 May 2011 and stood, with her paraglider on her back, 8,850 metres over the world. Unfortunately, the paraglider was never to come out of the bag. After all that planning, training and preparation, the weather conditions on the summit were totally inappropriate for flight. Falconer

made the punishing choice that every airports athlete must eventually make: she walked back down the mountain with her paraglider stowed.

Falconer stands unwaveringly by the decision. After all, it was the right call.

“On a previous mountaineering expedition [to Mustagata], our group had to turn back before the summit due to weather,” she explains. “It wasn’t even on my mind that I hadn’t summited. A guy we knew had died up there. We got back to tell the



tale. When we did, there was an overwhelming sense of wonderment and gratitude that we had this tremendous adventure and returned safely. It was the same with Everest, in a way – of course I wanted to fly, but we did summit, and we all came down safe and well.

“Everybody has an opinion. Ignore them,” she laughs. “If you just get your head down, find the right team and get on with it, you’ve got this. Know your limits. Be brutally honest about them.”

The journey is art

“It’s about the journey,” Falconer urges. “It’s not about the outcome. When you think about it, the most incredible people have had the most incredible failures. That’s what this is about, at its heart – the faith inherent in opening yourself up to spectacular failure.

“But it’s not even about those words; this judgmental language that we use to describe these experiences,” she continues. “The word ‘failure’ attaches all these negative connotations, but ‘success’ and ‘failure’ don’t really exist in these contexts. They’re adventures and they’re stories. These adventures are how we make art of our short lives.”

An airports expeditioner creates that art with a vast palette of land and sky. For the big-dreaming athlete, fresh canvas is always waiting. **11**

Opposite page: Squash practises flying the Ozone Ultralite in her Rab downsuit in the French Alps (top) and preparing to fly Mont Blanc (bottom) **Left:** The views of the spectacular Angel Falls **Above:** Carlos in action