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DARE TO BE DIFFERENT

Adventurer SQUASH FALCONER on the art of taking risks — and discovering your best self. p. 18

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Dressed to Thrill

BY LAINE BERGESON

SHE'S MORE ACCUSTOMED to motorcycle leathers, skis, snowboarding helmets or mountaineering gear. But when professional adventurer Squash Falconer got the chance to don an improvised evening gown fashioned from a paragliding sail, she jumped at it.

"Most people don't see paragliding as a very glamorous sport," she explains. "And it's not something a lot of women do."

That's Squash in a nutshell: improvising for maximum effect, defying expectations, and taking the sports world by surprise.

Encouraged to start climbing by some friends in 2004, Squash, whose given name is Louise (she acquired the nickname from her older sister, Jo), has a special gift for designing unique adventures. In 2009, she became the first British woman to ride a motorcycle to the base of Mount Blanc (the tallest peak in Europe), climb to the summit and then paraglide down. A year ago, she reached the top of Mount Everest, where she celebrated her 30th birthday.

These days, she's busy traveling the world, sharing stories of her exploits — and anticipating her next costume change.



VIDEO EXTRA!

Go behind the scenes with Squash Falconer at ExperienceLife.com.

EL | How did you first become interested in outdoor adventure sports?

SF | It wasn't my plan to be a mountaineer. But when I left school at 18, I went to the French Alps during ski season. I did a lot of skiing and snowboarding, and I loved being in the mountains.

When a group of friends (who were experienced climbers) decided to climb Aconcagua in Argentina, they invited me. I really wanted to join them, but at the time I had very little actual mountaineering experience, and it's a huge mountain. They encouraged me, though. They said, "You've got the fitness and you've got the passion, and we'll be there to teach you." So I went along, and that's how it all got started. That was in 2004.

I knew this was really my life's passion a few years later, when I climbed and paraglided off Mount Blanc. I fully realized then that I loved these incredible expeditions, and I wanted to do more of them. I knew that this was what I wanted to do with my life.

EL | What's your advice to someone struggling to figure out his or her life's passion?

SF | Start by eliminating the things you don't like. Even if you don't yet know what you love, you probably have a good idea of what leaves you cold. Be open to trying new things. Say yes to new possibilities when you can. Embrace new experiences. When I was 12, I wanted to be a farmer. By the time I left school at 18, I didn't know what I wanted to be. But I believe my pursuit of those earlier dreams took me in a direction that eventually got me here.

Remember, too, that you don't have to be the best at something to pursue it as a passion. Don't get stopped by fear — fear that you're not qualified enough, not strong enough, not skilled enough. You just have to have the passion. With perseverance and practice, you'll be amazed at what you can achieve.

EL | You've got a knack for choosing adventures that are both fun and exhilarating. How do you know if a risk is worth taking?

SF | When I told people what I planned to do on Mount Blanc, they said, "Squash, you're crazy! That's mad!" But I trusted my gut and went for it. And when I succeeded at this "crazy, impossible" thing, it was very, very significant in changing my way of thinking. My success taught me to trust my gut and follow my dreams.

When assessing if a risk is worth taking, listen to your instincts. Trust yourself. Society and culture teach us so much about what we should do and what we should say — and that is fine, that's good, because we all have to work within society — but I think it also can work to our detriment. As we learn what society expects from us, we also inadvertently learn not to listen to our gut.

EL | What are the rewards of pushing beyond one's own daily patterns?

SF | It's a great way to learn more about who you really are. When I climbed Everest, for example, I learned who I was when I was tired, scared, mentally exhausted, physically exhausted. On the mountain, I was actually living it, so I could see my reactions.

Learning more about who you are allows you to identify your strengths and your weaknesses. Then you can use that knowledge to better leverage your best assets and work on your areas of challenge. That knowledge also gives you a feeling of confidence that is very important not just for life, but for reaching future goals.

Getting past your old self-imposed limits can also give you a huge

sense of satisfaction. You feel like you've achieved something — because you have!

EL | What advice would you give to someone who is very risk averse?

SF | Be gentle with yourself and go slowly. Do something small that pushes you out of your comfort zone, but don't start with paragliding! If that is your ultimate goal, go to a climbing wall, and climb a little way up, and come back down. Just climbing up one step and coming back down would be a big achievement.

EL | You can still relate to that kind of timidity, even after all the crazy adventures you've taken on?

SF | When you climb a mountain, you go from Base Camp to Camp One, and then you turn around and you go back down to Base Camp and you rest. It's like that with all goals: You take one small step and rest. Then another small step and rest. I know it sounds clichéd, but it's true: I climbed Everest by taking one small step at a time.

We've all got our own Everest to climb, whether it's an actual mountain or a career change or writing a book or switching out one cup of coffee a day for a cup of hot water and lemon. Whatever your goal is, whatever your dream is, take small steps. Achieving your dreams is all about the interim goals. ☺

Laine Bergeson is an Experience Life senior editor.

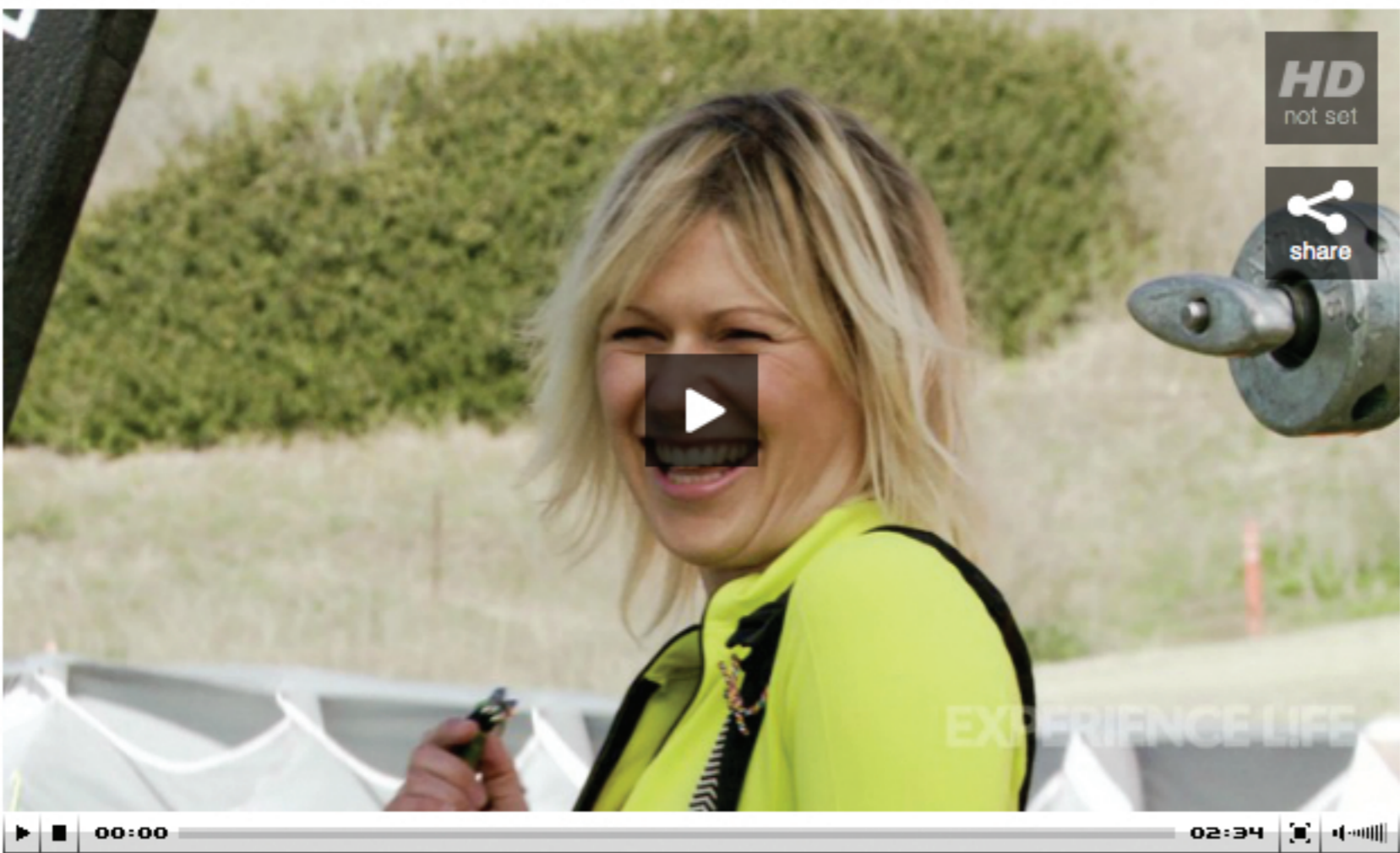


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Behind the Scenes With Squash Falconer

Go behind the scenes at our May cover photo shoot and meet Squash Falconer, mountaineer and paraglider.

May 2012

Find out more about Squash Falconer in our video, and learn how her sense of adventure has helped her learn the value of challenging herself every day.

3 COMMENT TO BEHIND THE SCENES WITH SQUASH FALCONER

Luke says:

April 21, 2012 at 12:26 am

I think that is very sound advice, to steer away from what you know you don't like. I like opposite thinking – often I get caught up in "what do I really want", but really I should know what it is that I don't want so I don't get caught in a deadening job or life without enjoyment. From knowing what to avoid, I can move in a direction of what seems pretty good.

Aristotle once said, "The aim of the wise is not to secure pleasure, but to avoid pain."

That's true when you consider 70% of people are unsatisfied with the job they chose.

Reply

Sophie says:

April 19, 2012 at 12:06 pm

I have had the pleasure of knowing Squash and can absolutely hand on heart say she is a real inspiration to those she meets! She has an energy and spark that are very rare in people and she makes it her job to make people smile.

Amazing to see her being recognised for her utter brilliance, well done.

Reply

DB says:

April 19, 2012 at 7:59 am

This video and this woman are so inspiring! Makes me want to go climb a mountain and fly off the top. Squash – you are amazing. Thank you for sharing your story with us. And to Experience Life – great job on choosing such a perfect cover girl.

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