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My greatest adventure: Squash Falconer

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As if climbing Mont Blanc wasn't intimidating enough, Squash Falconer decided to paraglide from the summit.

Destinations



Squash Falconer, the first British woman to paraglide from the summit of Mont Blanc

Interview by Yolanda Carslaw

10:13AM GMT 30 Oct 2012

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Where did you go?

I rode a motorbike to the foot of Mont Blanc, climbed it and paraglided from the top - two days up and 22 minutes down. I found out later I was the first British woman to fly from the summit.

Solo or with back-up?

I went with Irwyn Jehu, a Welsh friend who runs a b&b in Annecy. He's 65, and one of the original paragliders. He'd climbed Mont Blanc 40 years before, and had long wanted to fly off, but never had the right partner.

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How did the trip come about?

I'd loved gazing at Mont Blanc while working in the Alps aged 18. In my 20s, friends asked me to climb Aconcagua (6,961m/22,837ft), in Argentina, with them. I was into endurance adventure racing, but I hadn't done mountaineering. I loved it, and climbed Cho Oyu in Nepal four years later. I also learnt to paraglide. It occurred to me that flying would be a cool way to get down from summits, and in 2009 I decided to ride France (I grew up riding motorbikes on a farm), climb Mont Blanc and fly down.



I had little money, no bike and no lightweight paraglider. I told the BBC I

had backing from BMW and Ozone paragliders, and I told BMW and Ozone that the BBC was interested. In the nick of time – Irwyn and I had September free – I ended up with the gear and an old BBC handycam. We needed perfect visibility and light to moderate wind. On our first

attempt, via the Cosmique Hut, the wind was wrong, so we flew from the Aiguille du Midi. A week later we took the Tramway de Mont Blanc to 2,000m, climbed higher and bivouacked, but flew from the Gouter Hut after the weather deteriorated. On the third try we walked up the closed tramway, the route Irwyn had

taken 40 years earlier, and stayed in the Gouter Hut. We started at 3.15am in tricky conditions: we heard later most groups turned back because of avalanche danger. We reached the top at 11am but the wind was strong. We couldn't wait long because we needed to descend if we couldn't fly. After an hour the wind dropped. I took off first, because Irwyn didn't want me left alone if I couldn't follow. It was a committed, steep take-off and an uncomfortable, turbulent, scary flight. What was the trickiest moment?

On our second attempt we were ice climbing in the dark, roped together,

when I fell. I stopped myself but then Irwyn fell past me. We were heading for a crevasse but eventually managed to draw to a halt. I looked across in disbelief and apologised – it was emotional to talk about it later. What is your happiest memory?

Landing safely, next to the car – although landing in crampons is tricky: you have to pick your feet up. Both of us felt amazed and exhilarated, and it was the icing on the cake to discover I was the first British woman to do it. The BBC was thrilled, and used my footage for the programme Inside Out.

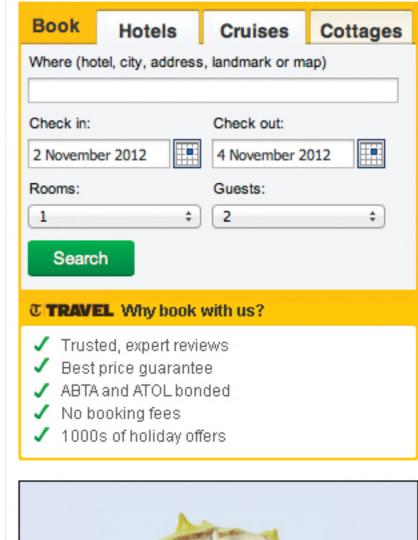
Would you do it again? Possibly. I set Everest as the next goal, and in 2011 I reached the top,

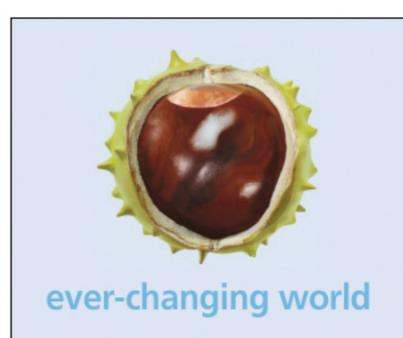
but conditions weren't right to fly. The priority was returning alive and I was very happy with that.

Any tips for someone looking to do something similar? If you want to do something, commit to it, then work out how to do it -

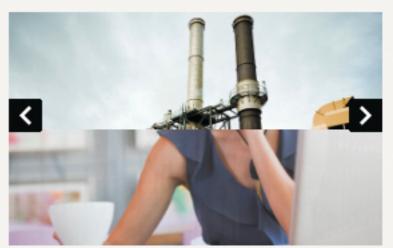
things will conspire in your favour. But don't be consumed by the experience being exactly as you imagine. Squash Falconer (squashfalconer.com) is one of 200 paragliders from around the world taking part in Wings of Kilimanjaro, a mass charity flight

in Tanzania, in January 2013 (wingsofkilimanjaro.com).





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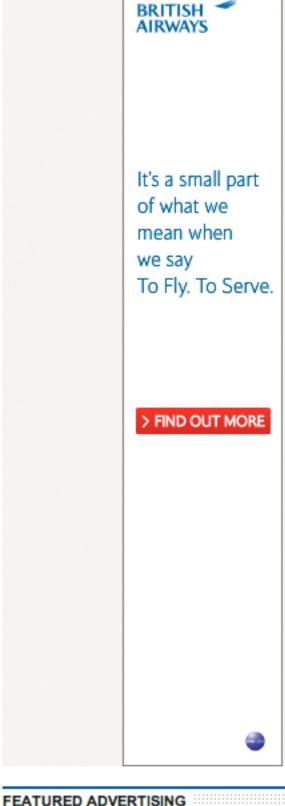


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