

AT THE SUMMIT: JOHN BURKE ON CLIMBING EVEREST

Everest is a mountain that has always fascinated the public, and the extraordinary achievement of having climbed it is universally understood. It endures in contemporary culture as an object of scrutiny, fantasy and intrigue; our imagination as equally inspired by the climbers who return to us from beyond the snow-capped spires as those who don't. To many, it represents not only the pinnacle of physical endurance but the tenacity of human spirit: it is an athletic accomplishment, but, most of all, it is a human accomplishment.

On the 16th May 2017, John Burke summited Everest. It was a moment a decade in the making, but Burke was careful not to celebrate it too soon. Only in the final hour, when the summit was well within reach and success was almost certain, did he allow himself to start "soaking up" a sensation few will ever feel: standing on top of the world.

"Up until that point I was of the attitude that I would give it my best shot," he explains, "so for 10 years, that was my approach to it." A wise mindset, given Everest's grim death toll and the intoxicating effect it has on certain climbers who, made irrational by ambition, may place safety second to glory. Extreme temperatures, volatile weather conditions and lack of oxygen make the upper slopes of Everest its most dangerous. Here, at 8000 metres, begins the final push to the 8,850-metre summit through the notorious "Death Zone", and it's every man for himself. Although Burke didn't suffer along the last leg of the ascent, he knew well enough that the summit is no place to switch off. The perils of the descent are all too real, with most deaths on Everest occurring on the downwards journey from the summit. "When I knew I would make it there, I allowed it to settle in, and I basked in the moments [...] After about 5 minutes on the top I tuned in to the descent, as I knew how serious that was and the risks it presented."

Five minutes, distilled from ten years.

I wondered what he had felt, feared and learnt along the way. I even wondered what food he missed from home, and how all the climbers went to the loo. But above all, I wondered what he would make of the phrase "no mountain is worth dying for", a line favoured by those who don't believe Everest is worth the risk. Burke's answer would be especially interesting given that he met world-renowned alpinist Ueli Steck on the mountain a few times and was nearby when, in news that shocked the climbing world, Steck tragically fell to his death on a traverse on Everest's west peak, Nuptse. When I asked Burke, he boiled it down to this: "Of course I know things might not go to plan. But really, I feel I wasn't living unless I went for Everest. I really mean that — it was like this regret I knew I would always have." His final thought? "I'm willing to fail, but I'm not willing not to try."

Everest, a land of contrasts. Harsh and beautiful, dream and nightmare. A place where people face death to embrace life. That's just one of many images I draw from my conversation with John Burke, the first man from County Clare Ireland to summit Everest. And if you're still left with a burgeoning desire to know how climbers use the bathroom on Everest (amongst other indispensable knowledge), read on.

—

First of all congratulations on climbing Mount Everest. Not many people can say they've done that, it's a spectacular achievement. When did you know you wanted to climb it, and what made you do it?

In all it was 10 years preparing, but considering I had never climbed a hill before setting off on this journey it was always going to take some time! Prior to this I had given up sports at about 16, and focused on work and career very much. That all went well, but I soon realised the work/life balance was missing and to be honest my lack of balance was affecting my leadership skills, productivity and creativity. I run my own business in the hotel and tourism sector on the west coast of Ireland and it presents lots of challenges, but the work/life balance I found from mountaineering allowed to be a far better leader and to bring a lot more energy and drive to the business that really helped during the recession. I remember the initial light bulb moment when I thought I'd prepare and try and aim for Everest. I was reading an article about Irish people on Everest and something about it really appealed to me. One reason was for sure —and that was that I really felt like I had never tested myself physically under pressure. When I was growing up I wanted either to join the army or work in the hotel business, and I felt like I took the easy option! So it was time to see what I was made of. I loved the idea of the extremes of the outdoors, and nature, and the hardship I could test my body under. And of course it was an extra bonus that my age (29 at the time) wasn't a factor like it might have been in many sports.

How long did it take?

10 years in all. I took about 2 years off in the middle where I didn't fully focus on it. It hit me bad during that time, and I really missed it. We had a tragedy in my family and I felt that I couldn't put them under the stress of it all, but soon I realised that I wasn't much use to them if I was unhappy in myself.

What kind of previous mountaineering experience do you have?

As part of the prep, I focused a lot on climbing in Ireland for all my training, then for big mountains I went to the Alps and climbed many there such as Matterhorn, Eiger, Mont Blanc, Mont Blanc du Tacul, Gran Paradiso, etc, along with some technical routes out there. I got Kilimanjaro early on, and I hit Scotland every year and got some great routes in there around Ben Nevis on the 'other' side of it. I really know I should have hit 8000 metres before Everest and it was a gap for me, so I over-prepared in other areas where possible. I got to the Himalayas twice before Everest also, and managed to climb the spectacular Ama Dablam 6812 meters — the most spectacular mountain of them all!

How did you prepare for Everest?

So outside of building experience on mountains abroad, I had a solid 12 month physical and mental preparation plan. Towards the last 3 months the intensity peaked, and it took about 20 hours a week, along with about 10-15 hours on research and planning etc. At this stage I was hitting the hills about 3 times a fortnight, gym about 3 times per week for long endurance sessions, doing about 3 mobility sessions a week, and a long run maybe 23km or so — along with a few days on rock, the occasional swim, or yoga session. Mentally, I was working with a sports psychologist, and this was a massive benefit to me on the mountain. I realised after Ama Dablam that I needed to work on this, and learn

ways to manage fear and anxiety on the mountain. On an Everest Expedition for 2 months you have no room to falter mentally, so I had my mental tool box going out and it worked well!

Deciding to climb Everest is a big decision. Did you feel “ready” for it or is it something you never truly feel “ready” for?

Yeah that’s a funny one, I persuaded myself I was ready as I needed to feel confident — really, I needed to climb an 8000m mountain. But ultimately it didn’t affect me, so I was relieved with that. In fact my best day was in the move from camp 4 (7900m) to the summit and back down, but nonetheless it would have to be a key recommendation for any climber. With everything else, I was ready. I had set targets that I met, e.g. heavy pack (45kg) long day (24 hours) long trail runs (23km). In planning I was very ready and spent a long time on that area. I feel I really understood what was ahead before I went out there.

What were the most enjoyable parts of the climb?

I think just being there, being in a place I had read so much about and a place I had dreamed of being for so long. It felt so surreal — just times playing cards or sitting outside and looking up and thinking that I couldn’t believe I was finally there and part of an expedition.

Were there any points at which you were truly scared?

I managed fear really well, and it was something I had to manage. My subconscious was working over time on it! It was crazy really — the first night after descending to base camp, and for about 5 days after I came home, the nightmares happened. I remember them so distinctly, in particular the first one in base camp: [in the dream] I clearly heard a voice shouting at me to get out of the tent. I woke up certain I was going to be hit with an avalanche and hustled outside waiting to be hit. It didn’t come, of course, but it was so strange! There were lots more of them! So I think while I didn’t feel scared, there were truly scary moments. I just managed to not let them register.

Is there a sense of camaraderie between climbers up there?

Within the team it’s all good up until the summit night, then it’s each person for themselves, really. Between teams at base camp there isn’t any camaraderie at all — in fact most camps don’t want people interacting with them to avoid risking the spread of infection, which is a big concern. Myself and another Irish guy, Cian, would like to go wandering and chatting to people, but more often than not we would be met with a cold shoulder. It’s strange! But within our team the atmosphere was really good, we enjoyed cards, rummy, music, chats and singing.

The question we all wonder about... how do climbers go to the bathroom on Mount Everest!?

Hahahaha.... with very little grace! In the tent it’s in a wee bottle, which should be shut tight and can help warm your hands after. The number 2’s are less pleasant. In some camps it’s just wherever you can find a safe spot, so at camp 3 that’s not far from your tent —maybe a few feet — and often in full view. To be honest my digestive system shut down a bit for me up past base camp so I avoided it mainly thankfully!

I hear you're burning upwards of 10,000 calories a day. So what do climbers eat on Mount Everest? And was there anything you were craving to eat?

Some say about 15,000 to 20,000 on summit night. On the final summit push my stomach shut down completely and I couldn't eat anything for 5 days. It was a disaster, and I felt my body caving in. In base camp I tried not to think about home food as it would cause too many negative emotions about the food I had. Up high I would use a mantra when eating as [my] appetite was often gone: "this is my nutrition, my recovery, my energy". So when I started puking on the summit push it was heart breaking, but the body is incredible — and it kept moving! During that time I really craved Coca Cola, as the sherpas would often give out cans at base camp to celebrate some good work, and I really felt it was my life line when my stomach let me down. I honestly would have given my right arm for it. I offered the sherpas \$100 for it — I couldn't insult them with any more of an offer as I knew they might not have had any. Sure enough they couldn't find any, so the lead sherpa when I arrived back at base camp met me at the edge of the ice fall with a big bottle and it was amazing!

What qualities/characteristics are important to have in order to be a successful climber?

I think a commitment to the prep, and being willing to make the time and sacrifices to prepare, along with strong mental skills or the tools to overcome any shortfalls. Of course good pain threshold, and a passion for what you're at — not a passion for the idea of it, but for being there and in the moment and to even take the positives from the suffering. I know when my stomach failed me I kept telling myself that it was great as it meant I would really earn the summit and I wouldn't have gotten an easy ride.

You climbed as a representative for the charity Elevate, which you founded with your wife to promote mental wellbeing in young people. In what ways does the charity aim to do that?

Elevate is an organisation I set up to support young peoples wellbeing in my area, Co Clare, we work on offering free programmes to young people through schools and youth organisations, the programme includes mindfulness, resilience workshops, self discovery workshops, along with some major events like youth Wellfest and others.

Can you describe any mental challenges you faced before/during/after the climb?

Self confidence on mountains was a big issue for me always, managing fear, sleeping, negative self talk. Thankfully with the right tools I made massive improvements on them, and I believe this was one of the my biggest contributing factors to success. I truly believe if we can harness the power of the mind it can take us out of the darkest holes, or to the top of the greatest mountains.

What did you learn from this whole experience?

I learned incredible lessons along the way, some of the key ones that influence my outlook on life now might be:

- Focus on the journey not the outcome
- Harness the power of the mind

- Surround yourself with positive voices including your own
- Dream big, set goals, take action. write it all down
- Don't let the bad days get you down, they pass, and good one might just be around the corner.

Do you have any plans to climb in the near future, or are you enjoying having your feet back on ground level for now?

I do need a new focus on my active life now, I'm missing that. But I'm taking time out to reassess. I'm going to try surfing now, which I like the idea of loving as a hobby, but if it doesn't float my boat I'm back to the hills. Either way I'm going to start some more technical climbing, and if I was to venture on the journey of another big challenge I always fancied the north face of the Eiger, but it would be a long road ahead, maybe not 10 years though this time.