



On top of the world

Alresford-based adventurer Holly Budge, 38, has two world records and loves hurling herself out of planes, climbing mountains and snowboarding down them, but she says these challenges have taught her one thing – to love the simple things in life such as *FastEnders*, beer and taking her four Jack Russels for a walk.
By **Karen Pasquali Jones**

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he is what you might call an Instadiv. Holly Budge is the holder of not one, but two world records – for being the first woman to skydive Mount Everest in 2008 and among the first to race semi-wild horses 1,000km across Mongolia in the longest horse race on the planet 12 months later. In the years since she's climbed up, show-boarded down and generally conquered the world's most challenging mountains, and has just spent two months climbing to the summit of Mount Everest, and beaming the entire experience live to her 7,500-strong Instagram audience.

Not bad for a girl who thinks nothing of jumping out of a plane at 29,500ft to free-fall past the world's tallest mountain at speeds of more than 140mph at temperatures of -40degC for fun. 'That was incredible,' Holly, 38, laughs. 'But sitting above the clouds on top of Mount Everest with blue skies all around makes you feel – as it should – on top of the world.' Holly didn't just spend 30 minutes drinking in that incredible view on top of the world's tallest mountain – she also posted about it and did a live feed. 'I had the chance to take a satellite modem with me which only weighed just over a kilo in my backpack, so it would have been silly not to share that moment with everyone.'

It was another first for the Hampshire woman, who decided to become an adventurer after representing England at show jumping in 1999 and realising she needed 'a new challenge'. No-one else has ever posted Instagrams from the top of Mount Everest before, but it's not just about being a pioneer with the technology.

A glance at Holly's feed or hashtag #EverestEverydayExpedition shows she was connecting to her audience and exposing the highs and lows of her challenge from the beginning to the end. 'It was raw and very, very tough,' she agrees. 'I was also scared sometimes, and at other times euphoric and it is all captured forever for everyone to see. I still pinch myself knowing that I managed to get to the summit of the world's highest mountain. I'm glad I have all these pictures to go with >

HOLLY'S HIGH LIFE

Holly works as a big mountain expedition leader and last year successfully led the 'Summit Climb 2016 Expedition' up Ama Dablam (6,812 metres), in the Himalayas. Other climbing achievements include recently summiting Mount Everest (8,848m), Cho Oyu (8,201m), Baruntse (7,129m) and snowboarding from the summit of Mera Peak (6,476m) in Nepal. Last year, she made a successful first ascent in the Mongolian Altai Mountains.



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Holly loves being an adventurer



my memories. It makes it more real somehow. It was hard to believe at the time that I'd done it.

'I'm not action woman or any better than anyone else. I don't have a physical advantage - I just work very, very hard to make sure I'm in the right shape to get to the top and achieve my goals. I go into every challenge with a positive mindset determined it will work out - that's why it does.'

Holly's hard work before the climb involved training six days a week in the Evolution Gym, and with the in-house personal trainer James twice-a-week. She also did a specialist online programme for climbers called Uphill Athlete after having her 'butt kicked' during an earlier climb of Ama Dablam in Nepal. 'I didn't do much training for that and relied on my base fitness,' she says. 'On reflection, that was pretty arrogant and, in fact, ignorant. By the end I was hallucinating and my body was pretty shot. When I got back I vowed that wouldn't happen again. There's this expression, 'train hard, fight easy,' but what I realise is, you've got to train hard, and regardless of who you are, on any big mountain, you've got to fight hard.'

That was apparent during her 12-hour climb to the summit when she passed the bodies of climbers who hadn't made it. 'You have to respect the mountain as it doesn't care about you,' Holly says. 'I was really shocked to see the first dead body on the mountain, a guy who had died probably only the day before. It was haunting. You can't ever relax - there are the perils of the mountain to consider but your own health too. You can't climb alone as you need to recognise when you have signs of high altitude cerebral oedema - when your brain swells. It makes you act as if you are drunk and when those symptoms show you have to get down fast. It's like the bends for divers and is the biggest killer. My Sherpa told

me we passed nine bodies, and there are about 200 on the mountain. It is a stark reminder of the danger.'

Most of Holly's 60 days getting to the summit were spent acclimatising. As the only woman in a 16-strong team, she wasn't going to let herself down. 'I was fit and knew I was strong,' she says. 'But you can never tell what's going to happen.' She had to travel light, moving between camps, and along with the Thuraya modem, which powered an app on her mobile, she took a backpack with a sleeping bag, mittens, beanie, snacks, extra thermal layers, hand warmers, water and a basic first aid kit. 'I only took the essentials,' she says. 'But I had one luxury - my iPod Shuffle. Listening to my favourite tunes made all the difference to my mental wellbeing.'

After three 'rotations' going between Base Camp and Camp 1 to acclimatise and start getting used to using oxygen, Holly and her Sherpa Jangbu were ready for the climb, and the eventual ascent to the summit. 'We had to wait around for three hours to let the Chinese and the Indian teams climb up,' she says. 'Then it took us nine hours to the summit, which is actually very small. There was just the two of us, and the weather was incredible - we sat there in silence grateful we'd made it, and taking in that view.'

'It was a serene half-an-hour after a last hour of tough climbing, when everything in my body had been screaming no while everything in my mind had been screaming yes.' Holly posted from the summit, then began her descent, where the adventure really began. She and Jangbu became stranded in high winds at Camp 3 which is an eagle's nest 8,300 metres high perched on a narrow, rocky outcrop.

'Jangbu was just incredible. You can't even think there is room there to pitch a tent and he's doing it in these high winds and succeeding. I thought the tent would blow >

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By the end of the climb I was hallucinating and my body was shot
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Camp 2 on Mount Everest

away, because of the force of the wind, and I was conscious of still being very high up on the mountain.

'When we looked outside the following morning, most of the other tents had been destroyed. They had been literally shredded by the wind and one man's belongings had been blown away. He lost everything. The next day we descended to Advanced Base Camp which was a long day.'

Now back home, Holly is proud of her achievement and says she wants to continue inspiring women. 'I want to motivate other women,' she says. 'I'd like to inspire them to daydream, meander, run, climb and jump into their own adventures of self-discovery, and in doing so, learn that with self-belief, determination and resilience, even the biggest of challenges can be overcome. Women are incredibly tough creatures and sometimes need to give themselves more credit.'

Holly raised money for local, national and international charities including Naomi House & Jackspace which supports children and young adults with life-limiting and life-threatening conditions in central southern England, including West Sussex, and her own campaign, How Many Elephants. So far she has raised more than €300,000, some of which funds her award-winning charity which is raising awareness about the devastating impact of the elephant ivory trade.

'A staggering 96 elephants are poached each day in Africa and, at this rate, they will be extinct by 2025,' Holly says. Instead of using shocking and graphic images to portray the facts, the adventurer, who has an MA in sustainable design from Brighton University, creates art and jewellery to educate people about the poaching crisis.

She won the prestigious Arts & Crafts Design Award for her statement '96 Elephants a Day' necklace, made out of vegetable ivory to highlight the daily poaching rate. A brass elephant in the piece was made from the bullet shells commonly used by the poachers in Africa. 'One elephant is

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Even the biggest of challenges can be overcome
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Holly at Mount Everest's summit

facing the other way to indicate that there is still hope this crisis can be turned around,' Holly says.

She is also helping support the Black Mamba Anti-Poaching Unit, the first of its kind in that most of the teams are women. They work on the boundaries of Balule and the Greater Kruger Park in South Africa to protect wildlife.

Closer to home, Holly supports local charities. She lives in the area she grew up with her helicopter pilot husband Matt, 42, who she met in New Zealand. 'I went there after dropping out of Manchester university,' she says. 'I wasn't ready to commit to that at that time and went off and became a sky-diving camera woman in New Zealand,' which led to the first world record of sky diving Mount Everest and her other adventures. 'I couldn't believe people were getting paid to jump out of aeroplanes,' she laughs. 'It was a dream job and one my careers adviser had not mentioned! That taught me a lot about facing fear, and on the other side of the coin, listening to intuition.'

They are all skills Holly now uses to teach leadership and give regular talks in schools and to CEOs. 'From Base Camp to the boardroom, my message is simple: Think big, dream bigger,' she says. 'I have first-hand experience of testing my limits and overcoming challenges with flexibility of thought, lateral thinking, skill, confidence and judgement. Even in times of adversity, I cannot reinforce enough the importance of having a positive mindset.'

So what's next for the woman who seems to have done everything? First, she's opening the transformed Old Chapel, in Alresford, which has been made into a new arts and entrepreneurial venue, and then she's doing something much more high-flying. 'I'm leading a climbing and trekking expedition to Ama Dablam this October. I'm taking my mum, Linda, with me who's 66 and incredibly fit. I can't wait to sit with her on the mountain above the clouds - that will be a special moment. She'll see why I'm addicted to this and why I love being an adventurer. ■