

On the wings of dreams

Even after completing a unique sea-to-summit journey, Nepal's Babu Sunwuar remains a retiring hero motivated by the welfare of others and of his country



ON MAY 21, 2011, BABU SUNWUAR AND his climbing partner stepped off the summit of Everest, a paragliding wing over their heads. With jet stream winds raging just above and flashing electrical storms in the valleys below, they flew down to the small airstrip above Namche Bazar 20km away, the first staging point on an epic trip.

They were not the first to paraglide from Everest, not even the first tandem. But in an elegant reverse of Australian Tim Macartney-Snape's 1990 Sea to Summit expedition, Babu and Lakpa Chhiri Sherpa were setting out on a month-long journey by paraglider and kayak to the Bay of Bengal – from Summit to Sea.

Several months on and I'm sitting with him at a lakeside pizza restaurant as a monsoon storm

threatens to engulf Pokhara.

Born an only child on May 30, 1983 in the district of Ramechhap, Sano ('small') Babu Sunwuar tells me that his adventurous streak showed itself early.

When he was just eight, he found two vultures gorging on the rotting carcass of a cow. He crawled up the hill towards them and grabbed a leg of each. The startled birds extracted their heads from the innards and flew off carrying him with them. When he finally let go, it was already a long drop. "Big problem!" he laughs, indicating a fall as high as the hotel across the road.

With his home village sat on the banks of the mighty Sun Kosi river, waterborne adventures beckoned too.

"I learned to swim by myself in the Sun Kosi. I didn't know about safety then. I drank a lot of water. I know now that when we were at school we used to swim grade-five rapids. We lost a friend this way – drank too much water and was gone." That was when he was 12.

He was only middling at school, putting his energies elsewhere, "wanting always to do something that no-one else had done before, exciting things," he says. At 15, after completing his SLC, the general school leavers' certificate, and with rural Ramechhap devoid of opportunities, it was time to move on. He travelled to Kathmandu, where he knew no-one, with a small bag and Rs 500 in his pocket "trying to find new opportunities."

There he took what work he could find, firstly as a bus assistant, taking fares and washing vehicles; then labouring in garment factories, a furniture factory and a multitude of other desperate jobs that paid only just enough to eat, and with 18 hours work per day, barely gave time enough to eat too.

His dream, like that of many Nepali youths, was to work in tourism and after a year of toil

he headed to Pokhara with only Rs 20 in his pocket. "It would be easy to get a job working with foreigners," he had heard. After searching for work by day and sleeping in bus-stops by night, he struck lucky with a trekking porter job – if carrying loads of 45kg for wages of Rs 100 per day can be called lucky.

As he, unlike many Nepalis, knew how to swim (in the whitewater sense at least) his target was to become a rafting guide. Despite often being told that he was too small for that, he persevered and after leafleting and other menial jobs with one rafting company, he was offered a job by Charlie of the famed Ganesh Kayak Shop. This brought real opportunities: learning to kayak, a professional rescue qualification, the chance to paddle and guide rivers all across Nepal, a connection with a future equipment sponsor.

At 17 his family arranged his marriage to a girl of 14. It's perhaps indicative of how taken Babu was by kayaking, that he then set about encouraging his wife to become the first female kayaker in Nepal, eventually going so far as to be two times national champion and even travelling to compete in Switzerland. This is undoubtedly

not what their parents had had in mind when they arranged the marriage!

Entering competitions however was not his interest – as he says, "my life is already a competition with myself." He's paddled 31 of Nepal's rivers and describes himself as more of an "explore paddler".

In 2005 Babu met David Arufat, a Swiss national, on a kayaking trip. They became friends realising they both were drawn to new and difficult things on the river that nobody else attempted. David later offered Babu a job at his company and taught him to paraglide. He showed a natural aptitude and became a qualified pilot and teacher.

In February 2010 came Babu's first formal expedition: the Cross Nepal Paragliding Expedition. Eighteen pilots were attempting to fly from west to east across Nepal, starting in Baitadi on Nepal's border with India. After the first day his Blue-Sky team members had become separated: they all had to make their own choices from then on.

After a week and a half, Babu and his cameraman reached in Pokhara, almost half way across Nepal. There he learnt that he was several days ahead of the next pilot, and that most others had given up or crash-landed (with one even hanging tangled in a tree for 24 hours). "I thought 'You have to go Babu!'" he says, and he pressed on.

After 35 days – 18 of which were spent flying – two canopy collapses and one backwards landing, Babu arrived on the eastern border. He had achieved something that even renowned foreign pilots had been unable to do, and using an old tandem paraglider with a total payload of 180kg to boot.

"It answered the question, 'what's my country like?'" says Babu, "There are so many things that have to be done, roads, education, political system and so on. It's the only way to see Nepal, and it's many different cultures and castes." Seeing Nepal's impossibly hilly landscape from the aeroplane is one thing, he explains "but paragliding is something else, it's much more hugging the landscape."

His best memory was traversing 125km crossing eight districts of Nepal in one day. That in addition to the daily meeting of villagers

IN HIS ELEMENTS

In a country where many locals aspire to be trekking guides, Babu Sunwuar showed an interest in water-based and aerial pursuits from an early age.





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astounded at seeing two of their own descending out of the sky. “The only other human form we know of that flies is [the god] Hanuman,” exclaimed one older man.

The dream to fly from Everest was born in 2006 on an exploratory trip with a kayaking team to the Dudh Kosi, the famously churning river flowing from the Khumbu. He had a loose plan to try in 2010, but no company wanted to sponsor him due to the risks involved. He laughs this off now: “Sponsorships give tension,” he says, “then my brain doesn't work!”

In February of 2011, he met with Lakpa Chhiri Sherpa who was looking to learn to paraglide. He told Babu: “I am a climber but I want to be able to fly from any peak I climb.”

Not long later Babu had an offer for him, “You take me to summit and I'll take you to sea. We made a deal and started to do it.”

Four and a half months later, on June 28, their toes were in the salt water of the Bay of Bengal.

There were many difficulties along the way, but leaping from the top of Everest at the start was the least of them. “There were no options on the summit, so no need to worry!” Babu says with a smile, referring to the lack of room for a proper take-off, and the fact that their spare oxygen bottles had been stolen so that walking back down would be difficult and dangerous. That plus the fact that once it was unpacked, he'd have to either

use his wing or leave it behind.

The bureaucrats were unable to give them permits simply because there were no rules governing what they were doing. “We told them, ‘first we'll go and explore and give you information, then we can make the rules later,’ and we went.” As he says, “Adventurers are sometimes operating outside the rules.”

While the main physical and technical challenges were in Nepal – not least there being one of the two-man crew who could neither paddle nor swim on a river with notorious whitewater – Babu felt in control.

But India was a different story. “We had 45°C heat, bad food and water, our hands got infected, dead bodies of people and cows floated past, thieves stole all our money, it rained and our tent was broken.”

But none of that overshadows the moment they reached the ocean, a moment he says he will, “never forget before I die! It was my dream since 2006. Wow! This is really Mt Everest!”

Beyond earning a living, Babu is already looking at new challenges. He's been selected for the 2013 Red Bull X-Alps challenge and, knowing I am a runner, asks me if I can teach him mountain running. Then he is interested in paraskiing too – which means learning to ski first.

He sees his work as important for Nepal, helping the country's tourism and the tourists

themselves too. “I see lots of people with ‘new generation’ lifestyles,” referring to their appearance, globe-trotting and endless electronic gadgets, “but they don't seem happy. They want too many things. I hope helping people do these kind of action adrenaline activities can help people forget everything and feel the real life.”

I reflect that there's hardly any sense of ego about him: none of the macho posturing typical of many adventure guides. He's always on the verge of a smile, quick to laugh, bright eyed, respectful – a boyish grownup.

It's pouring outside as we wrap up our conversation. Jacketless himself, Babu generously offers me a lift. We ride through the rain on his motorbike at a snail's pace because, he says, “we must be careful as it could be slippery!” Coming from a man who recently jumped off the top of Everest, this can only make me smile.

After decades of foreigners ‘conquering’ Nepal's peaks and rivers, it's great to see a Nepali adding to their feats – and doing it with characteristic humility. **AA**

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAPS

Seemingly endless peaks beckon as Sunwar takes wing. His feats help showcase the growing appetite and aptitude of local Nepalis for independent exploration of their country and its mountains.