

# On top of the **WORLD**

Claire Pitcher talks to intrepid adventurer James Ketchell about his recent challenges to row solo across the Atlantic and summit Everest

## About Elifar

The Elifar Foundation is a charity run almost entirely by volunteers. It aims to help improve the quality of life mainly of profoundly disabled children and young adults, whether living at home or in residential care. They fund the purchase of a wide range of specialised equipment, therapies and respite, which would otherwise be unavailable because of a lack of funds or because there is no statutory provision.

Find out more about the foundation at [www.elifarfoundation.org.uk](http://www.elifarfoundation.org.uk)



Some might say 29 year old James Ketchell from Basingstoke takes adventure to the extreme.

Avalanches, sunburn, freezing temperatures, storms and even illness don't faze him once he's got the bit between his teeth. In the last two years he has both rowed the Atlantic and conquered Everest to raise money for charities the NSPCC and Waterlooville-based ELIFAR, who find and purchase specialist equipment for disabled children and respite care. "They're such nice people," says James. "I want to continue to work with them and hopefully take it to the next level and make a great deal of money for them."

James had been back from the Himalayas for two months when we spoke and already he was talking about his next challenge. More about that later, what most of us want to know is why he chooses to set himself such seemingly impossible tasks.

## Big ideas

He explains that when he was a teenager he was a bit of a 'dork', "I couldn't speak to women, I had no confidence." He then discovered the gym and at 23 started body building, "It gave me a routine and structure and I started setting goals. I then started riding

motorbikes and when I hit 25 I started thinking about rowing the Atlantic."

Disaster struck when he had a bike accident; broke his ankle and his doctors told him he wouldn't be able to do the physical activities he had been doing up until then. "It was them telling me I couldn't which made me want it more. I thought to myself 'right, you can sit and feel sorry for yourself or you can do something about it.'"

It was when he was recovering in hospital he started planning the row. Soon he started approaching companies for sponsorship and he took a loan out to buy his Roswell and Adkin ocean rowing boat.

## Life is but a dream

On January 5, 2010 James began his solo row across the Atlantic. The 2,700 miles from La Gomera in the Canary Islands to Antigua in the Caribbean took him 111 days, four hours and four minutes to complete and, as you can imagine, it wasn't all plain sailing. He sensibly chose the warmest time of year to go but, as he explains, "The weather patterns were all over the place. You rely on the trade winds to help you across and the North Equatorial Current. If you chose a good year, and you were very patient, then you could just sit,



read a book, and the currents would take you along.” He was hoping to have a bit of assistance then? “The winds were against me a lot of the time – the current wasn’t there, I even got caught in a storm for eight days and lost over 200 miles.”

### Dwindling supplies

Not only that, he had a close call with an oil tanker, suffered from terrible sunburn and was bitten by a fish. And if all that wasn’t enough, he then ran out of food.

“Because the weather was so poor the row took a lot longer than it should have done. I expected it to take about 70 days so I took 100 days of food thinking I would have more than enough and I was 230 miles from

Antigua when I ran out,” recalls James. That equates to about seven or eight days of no food. Luckily he had a satellite phone and he called in a re-supply; however it took two days to reach him, “That’s when I found out what it was like to be truly starving - all I had was water and no energy to burn for rowing.” For many this could have proved too much, but James just shrugs his shoulders and says, “It’s all character building.” James’s days had consisted of rising at 7am for breakfast and a much-needed cup of tea. From 8am he would row for four hours, then have an hour’s break, then repeat until he’d done 12 hours. His day ended around midnight when he would sleep for six hours and let the boat drift.

“Once I gained 20 miles overnight,

but then sometimes I would turn on the GPS and I wouldn’t have moved at all,” he says.

### Star for a day

He first caught sight of Antigua 30 miles out. It was night time, so James kept on rowing so he could arrive around midday the next day.

“When I rowed into Antigua it was the most amazing feeling – it was like being a celebrity for an hour, there were hundreds of people everywhere. It was Antigua Sailing Week and the rich and famous were onboard their yachts. I was rowing in on my little rowing boat and there were super yachts all around me, beeping their horns.”

People still ask James if he ever got bored, rowing - after all, isn’t it all the >

same, day after day? “You know what, it’s not. Every day the sunset is different, the sky would be a different colour, the water would be a different blue. It was such a magical place.”

## Climb every mountain

It was during his preparation for his solo row that James was asked by a friend if he would like to climb Everest and he couldn’t resist another challenge. In October 2010 he went out to Nepal for a month to do a series of training climbs, mainly to see how he would cope with high altitudes. “I hadn’t done a lot of climbing before that,” he admits. “I became hungry for it.”

On his return he turned the project round in six months. This time he was taken much more seriously because of his rowing success and he raised £30,000 in sponsorship.

James left the UK on 31 March for his two-month expedition. He had to do training climbs from camp to camp to get used to the altitude and acclimatise. It took him five days to get to the summit and three days to descend.

“It is so huge you don’t realise – it feels never ending. You climb for hours then look up and see how much further you have to go it’s very demoralising - but you have to get over it and keep moving.”

He remembers what it was like to see the summit for the first time, “When it came in to view it was a good feeling, but then I remembered it was going to be about another 11 hours to get from Camp 4 to the summit and then get down again.”

The weather hampered progress too; they tried twice to go for the summit. The first time they were called back because the weather changed.

“On the second attempt it was a lot better – it was just me and my Sherpa at the top.”

## Fraught with danger

As you can imagine, the climb wasn’t without its perils. James witnessed an avalanche, he had to step across tied-together ladders to cross crevasses, a fellow climber suffered a stroke at Camp 2 and the sub zero temperatures bit at his



Photo captions: It took James five days to reach Everest’s summit.

fingers. But that wasn’t the worst of it; he also picked up a lung infection going up the mountain, which really started to take hold as he came back down.

“I had to be helped down by two Sherpas and given extra oxygen. I didn’t know what was going on and I remember at the time being annoyed with myself thinking ‘why am I struggling so much?’ It wasn’t until I got back to the UK that I was told I had quite a serious lung infection. I was in hospital for five days.”

## Staying positive

It was the money he had raised for ELIFA and the support he’d received that kept him going, but I have a feeling it’s more James’s mental attitude that’s his secret to success.

“It doesn’t matter what you’re trying to achieve, if you just keep tapping away and you don’t stop when you’re feeling like you can’t be bothered, if you just hang on and keep making an effort I can 100 per cent guarantee that what you’re

trying to achieve will come – I just apply that to whatever I’m doing now.”

Wise words. And from one who wanted to climb Everest by the time he was 30, it begs the question – is there nothing he won’t do? It seems not, as his next grand plan is to cycle around the world.

“It has already been done, but it’s a relatively small club. I am hoping it will be interactive and for it to become a documentary. The next few years are going to be interesting. 2012 is going to be a year of planning and prepping to get myself ready, then I’ll look at turning the pedals in 2013.” It sounds like mission impossible but, where James is concerned, never say never.

Discover more about James’s adventures at [www.jamesketchell.net](http://www.jamesketchell.net) and visit his just giving page at <http://www.justgiving.com/James-Ketchell>