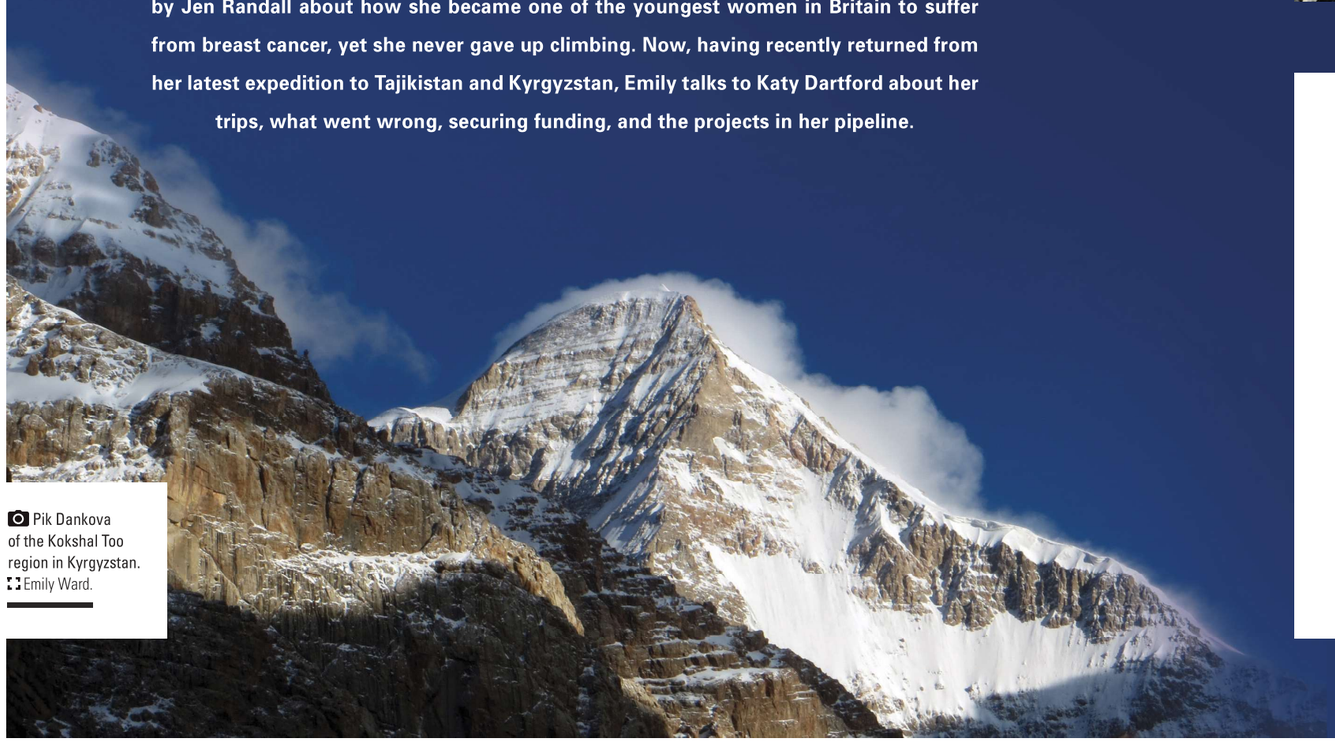
DRAMA IN KYRGYZSTAN:

DREAM TRIPS AREN'T ALL FUN AND GAMES

In early 2015, British alpine climber Emily Ward starred in Patience, a BMC TV documentary by Jen Randall about how she became one of the youngest women in Britain to suffer from breast cancer, yet she never gave up climbing. Now, having recently returned from her latest expedition to Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, Emily talks to Katy Dartford about her trips, what went wrong, securing funding, and the projects in her pipeline.



Pik Dankova of the Kokshal Too region in Kyrgyzstan. Emily Ward.

The Kosmos team: (Left to right) Mikael Abrahamsson, Emily Ward, Harry McGhie, Heather Swift. Harry McGhie.

"I've never seen a serac fall that active. They were coming down maybe seven to 10 times a day and creating big avalanches that would go for a couple of kilometres."

Tell us about your expeditions
They were actually three little trips with three sets of people. The first was Tajikistan, the next a 10-day mini-expedition to Kyrgyzstan, and then I organised a five-week trip to Pik Kosmos in Kyrgyzstan with Heather Swift, Harry McGhie and Mike (Mikael Abrahamsson).

How did you decide on your objective?
Normally I see a cool photo on the internet. But this year a Polish contact of mine mentioned he thought Kosmos was unclimbed, and he'd just been on an expedition to it. He sent me a photo of the north face and I thought it looked really cool. I had a vague idea of how hard it was from Google Earth, but in the end it didn't really show how bad the seracs were and how dangerous it was.

The trip didn't go according to plan, did it?
Where to start? There was so much drama on all of the trips.

We drove from Kyrgyzstan across the border to Tajikistan all in a day, which I wasn't that happy about. But George and Clay Conlon have real jobs so we were on a strict time schedule. Al wasn't handling the altitude very well; he got really sick and left on the second or third day, hitched back to Kyrgyzstan and flew home. What also didn't go well was our jeep. It got stuck in the middle of this waist-deep glacial meltwater river and the engine flooded. Luckily a yak herder family managed to pull us out and gave us a lift up the valley to our basecamp.

It didn't take long to realise all the routes we were looking at were massively loose and chossy, so we were forced to climb the peaks individually rather than do a massive ridge-traverse as originally planned. James and I tried to climb what we called peak number two on the ridge line, but didn't summit as it was loose. James soloed peak number four which was around 5800m and hadn't been climbed before, so that was quite cool. I'd climbed up to the col between five and six to see if peak number

five would go, but there were large crevasses and a large bergschrund on the way so we decided to solo six instead, which had been climbed before. It probably wasn't that safe as I was traversing very steep scree above a cliff for quite a while, but it was technically very easy.

The next trip was the little one to the Bordobo glacier with James and Heather – a stop-gap trip we planned on the hoof. We headed up into the hills between the Tajikistan/Kyrgyzstan border into a basin we thought no one had been to before and climbed a 5200m peak, but ended up pinned down by storms for that week and spent a lot of time in the tent.

Then it was time for the big one: "Kosmos 2015 Expedition" to the second highest mountain in the western Kok-Shal Too mountain range. We had all sorts of drama here. Firstly, we were told our driver had a heart condition and he couldn't go up to 4000m as it wouldn't be safe for him. We said this was fine and another driver got a taxi from Bishkek to where we were in Naryn.

We left the following day and got an hour from the town up a hill when the gear box totally went – there was no oil in it! So we hitched back to Naryn and another vehicle came the next day to drive us up the hill again, but its gear box went as well. These are old soviet vehicles and we were unlucky they both died, although the driver was not being very economical with his gears and was just grinding through them! They sent another vehicle the day after from Bishkek and that made it despite having a few issues with water leaks. We had to stop by rivers and fill it up again, which was alright, but there had been some Alaskan climbers waiting four or five days without food to be picked up by us.

Then the boys were sick. Mike was very unwell and couldn't do anything and Harry got what we think was Giardia. He was really really sick and didn't pee for three days. His diarrhoea was terrible, he was losing water and getting incredibly dehydrated, but he didn't want to drink and it was four or five days before he started eating again. This meant we were miles behind on the schedule. We eventually got to the Grigorev glacier and had to have a rest day as Harry was sick again.

To top it all off, when we got to the face we realised it was covered in seracs that were constantly falling down. I've never seen a serac fall that active. They were coming down maybe seven to 10 times a day and creating big avalanches that would go for a couple of kilometres. We decided it was not really an option and found other things to do instead.

I soloed a route and the two lads climbed a mixed route up a peak that we thought was unclimbed, but actually it had been climbed two months earlier! It's really funny, it had never been climbed before and then it gets climbed twice in two months, the first by Paul Knott and Vaughan Snowdon no less. But they did it from the other side so it was a new route.

Does all this drama ever put you off expeditions?
I did feel a bit jaded when I came back. I'd been looking at this route for a year and thought it looked cool and doable. And it was in condition and doable, but the bottom half was so threatened by seracs it wasn't a safe option anymore; maybe in another lifetime. It was so frustrating how many things went wrong. Even though we allowed ourselves a good amount of time, we lost three weeks at the start of it because of the vans and Harry's sickness.

How long did the trip take to plan?
Really it takes a year of planning, but that's normally because of the grant application deadlines; around then it's pretty much a full-time job – dealing with emails, booking stuff etc. We got the Julie Tullis Memorial Award grant from the BMC, the Mount Everest Foundation (MEF) grant, the Alison Chadwick Memorial Award, the Goretex Shipton/Tilman Grant, and kit from Mountain Hardwear.

For Tajikistan we got the BMC's Julie Tullis Memorial Award, the MEF grant, funding from the Austrian Alpine Club and the British Alpine Club, and equipment from Alpkit.

Is it hard to get a grant?
There are a lot of people going for them and normally you get asked in for an interview if it's your first application to the MEF – it's a full-time job!

Does it help to be female?
I guess you don't get an awful lot of female climbers, so it's hard to know really. I think the difference is that there aren't many female organisers. There have been a few on other trips – Susan Jensen does a lot but isn't always listed as an expedition leader on the MEF site and isn't a guide. This year there seems to be one or two women listed as expedition leaders on the MEF website.

Are expeditions what you want to do in the future?
I really enjoy organising trips even if it's a headache. I'd like to arrange commercial expeditions and go on new routing trips. My idea is to have an easy expedition company. For some of the friends I've taken out it's been their first expedition and they don't want anything too hard. They just want an adventure and experience and to be safe.

I was speaking to people at the Women's Climbing Symposium (WCS) about the idea of organising female-only trips and getting a female guide or instructor to come on them so it's not like a totally guided experience, but a controlled first expedition with an all-female group. A lot of women at the WCS said they'd be much happier on a female trip where there are no male egos. Having run all-female and mixed trips, I've found that in mixed groups girls often don't want to appear weak and push themselves more.

When I was with three girls we were all really honest when we were having bad days and struggling, but when there's lads about you say "no, I'm fine" and carry on as you won't want to be judged by men. But when it's all females there's less pressure for that competition. I thought there wouldn't be enough girls interested to make a trip viable but after speaking at the symposium there was enough for a group of five or six.

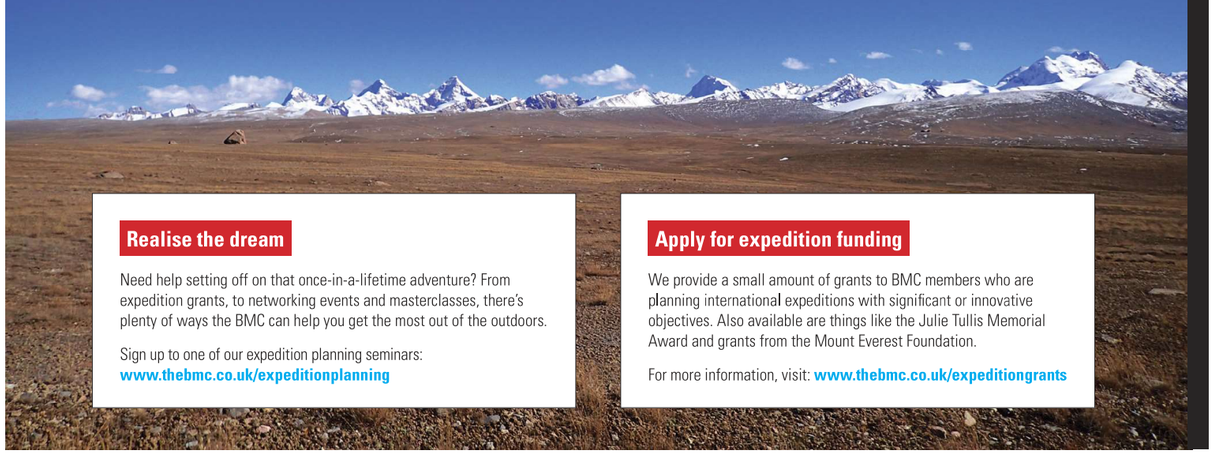
Any ideas for your next expedition?
Lots of things. I want to test my company idea out and run easy expeditions to Kyrgyzstan and maybe have a more technical trip to Nepal or Karakoram with just two or three of us on a small self-supported expedition.

"I really enjoy organising trips even if it's a headache."

WATCH: Kosmos, the film of their expedition by Heather Swift on BMC TV
http://tv.thebmc.co.uk/videos/kosmos-there-and-back-again/

Emily and friends during her first expedition to Kyrgyzstan. (Left to right) Libby Southgate, Imelda Neale, Emily Ward.
Emily Ward.

Load carrying in the mountains.
Emily Ward.



Realise the dream

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Sign up to one of our expedition planning seminars:
www.thebmc.co.uk/expeditionplanning

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For more information, visit: **www.thebmc.co.uk/expeditiongrants**