

# Peak condition

Dutch mountaineer Katja Staartjes tells Daniel Allen about living the high life

For someone who grew up in a land renowned for its horizontal topography, Katja Staartjes boasts a remarkable mountaineering CV. The energetic 48-year-old has summited three of the world's 8,000m peaks, and led numerous expeditions into Asia's highest and most inhospitable mountain ranges. In 1999 she was the first Dutch woman to climb Everest, and she and husband Henk Wesselius are so far the only Dutch mountaineers to summit Gasherbrum 1 on the China-Pakistan border. Cho Oyu, also in the Himalayas, completes her hat trick.

A late developer in the world of sky-high hiking, Staartjes was 20 years old when she became addicted to the rarefied air of the mountains. "It was by happy accident that I discovered my passion," she explains. "I was on a hiking trip with friends in Austria when I immediately felt: this is it! After that, not a year passed without a visit to a peak or range somewhere.

"Whether I'm trekking in the Alps or the Himalayas, sleeping out in a tent or in a mountain hut, climbing rocks or snow and ice, I always feel ▶▶

Staartjes in the Mont Blanc massif near Chamonix, in the Alps



ABOVE AND RIGHT  
At Camp 2  
(6,400m) during  
the climb of  
Dhaulagiri,  
Nepal, with the  
Annapurna  
range in the  
background

“Trekking in the Alps or Himalayas, sleeping out in a tent or mountain hut, climbing rocks or snow and ice – I always feel happy”

►► happy,” she continues. “This is where I can truly test myself to the limits. I get a clearer perspective on the hustle and bustle of everyday life, clarifying what’s really important. The need to develop bonds and work closely with teammates is also very motivational.”

Having studied food technology at the Wageningen Agricultural University, Staartjes went on to hold several management positions before the lure

of the high peaks proved too strong, and in 1998 she quit her job and dedicated herself to mountaineering.

After visiting Nepal in 1994, her talent for climbing at altitude quickly became apparent. “I remember how one day, a Sherpa said to me: ‘You very strong – you up to Everest,’” she says with a grin. “At the time I thought this was a joke, an unattainable dream, but gradually I

began to believe it was possible.

“After I climbed the 8,201m Cho Oyu in 1998 – not a technically difficult ascent – I decided I could handle the extra step up to Everest,” she continues. “The next thing was to find sponsors. I needed around \$45,000, which at the time seemed an absurd amount just to climb a mountain. Still, the fact that no other Dutch woman had succeeded was a big help in securing financial backing.”

On 13 May 1999, an exhausted Staartjes reached the top of Everest, spending 45 minutes shooting snaps and taking in the majestic view from the wind-scoured summit.

Nine of her 19-person expedition also topped out, but the subsequent death of one of their team members cast a heavy shadow over the descent.



Photos: Katja Staartjes / Henk Wesselius



ANTI-CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT  
Prayer flags at the  
base camp of  
Manaslu, Nepal;  
rope work over a  
crevasse; the  
comfort of a home  
from home

supplemental oxygen – was very scary. There was a steep gully of around 60 degrees just below the summit and I had to use both my ice axes to come down backwards. At points like these a single mistake is likely to be your last.”

Since 2001, most of Staartjes’ expeditions have been made with her Dutch husband, Henk Wesselius – the couple met trekking in Nepal in 1995.

“We share the same passion and complement each other very well,” she says. “Above all, we trust each other fully, which is vital when you’re putting your life in someone else’s hands.

Teamwork is a huge part of climbing and mountaineering – good teams are those that share the burdens, and everyone, including Sherpas, deserves recognition for collective and individual success.”

Staatjes knows full well that national characteristics can sometimes make teamwork more difficult. “It’s hard to make generalisations, but Korean and Japanese mountaineers generally look on reaching the top as a matter of honour,” she says. “They can leave themselves open to problems by going all out for the summit. The Dutch are very direct – they say what they feel straight out, which is usually helpful, but can sometimes be interpreted as rudeness. The Spanish and French can be relied on to bring wine!”

Between overseas trips, Staartjes spends most of her time back in The

Netherlands, giving inspirational presentations, undertaking managerial work, and keeping in shape. *Peak Performance*, her bestselling book on how to achieve personal goals, was published in 2008. “Henk and I still train as much as possible,” she says. “I love being outside, regardless of the location.”

Staatjes’ current foray into the Himalayas, well away from the crowded slopes of Everest, is a 970km, high-altitude traverse in Western Nepal. “Henk and I, plus our Sherpa Chiree, are trekking from west to east across Nepal in three stages,” she explains.

“Stage one will be in a beautifully remote area – the first 400km have hardly been explored by a Westerner. We are hoping to open a new 40km crossing between two mountain ranges, which has never been done before. Although we won’t be climbing any huge peaks, we’ll spend at least 20 days above 5,000m. With very heavy packs, this will be a two-month endurance and logistical test.

“There will be a moment when I stop pushing for 8,000m peaks,” she continues (the planet has 14 in total). “The body inevitably gets weaker. That doesn’t mean I’ll ever stop journeying to the mountains. I still dream of climbing Afghanistan’s Hindu Kush, of crossing the whole of the Pyrenees. I’m really just an exaggerated hiker,” she says: an understatement of Everest proportions. ■