



Expedition planning by Izzy Jones

Climbing mountains, rowing oceans, trekking jungles, traversing deserts – expeditions can take many forms. But what binds them together is the need for thorough planning. We’ve all heard the ‘Perfect Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance’ cliché – but, like all clichés, it’s usually true.

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Photo: ?????.

Planning an expedition well prevents accidents happening, and ensures that people know how to cope if they do. Expeditions are often life-changing experiences (in a good way) so it makes sense to do things right – especially if you’re the one that’s going to be in charge and have others in your care.

Real and perceived dangers

There are real and perceived dangers for any venture. When it comes to expeditions people often think that the biggest danger will come from being eaten by a tiger, being bitten by a snake or coming face-to-face with a man-sized spider. But, whilst very dangerous if they actually occur, these things really are very rare and are unlikely to affect those on expedition. The real dangers on an expedition are more mundane: things like malaria and road accidents. They’re pretty likely to happen and have big consequences.

Going remote

Being in a remote place is often the number one joy of being on expedition. However, if

you’re heading somewhere remote, there are some fundamental questions that should be asked during the expedition planning process to stay safe: if something goes wrong how am I going to get help? Who can I contact? When will they come? When they do come, what can they do? Given all of these things, should I be there doing what I want to do? Finding the answers to these often-tricky questions is the reason that expedition planners, leaders and participants produce comprehensive risk assessments.

Assessing the risks

Most of us are familiar with the risk assessment process. It is often a tedious bit of paperwork towards the ultimate goal. But when we’re looking at an expedition, completing a risk assessment is probably more important than in any other situation: it helps us identify risks, assess the overall ‘danger level’ – taking into account severity and the likelihood of risky events – and helps us decide how to reduce the danger to acceptable levels. If the risks are acceptable, you can usually go ahead with the plan. If

not, look at other measures which could be taken to reduce the danger level. If it’s still too dangerous after that, then it’s probably best not to do it.

Team effort

A risk assessment is not worth the paper it’s written on if the team is unaware of it – how can it work to protect them if they don’t know it exists? Working on the risk assessment, as a team, pre-departure means that everybody knows the rules, and why they are in place. Once on an expedition the risk assessment should be dynamically altered to reflect the current environment. It’s usually impractical to update the formal document in the field, but an expedition diary with day-to-day notes to discuss with the whole team is often a good solution.

Become a bookworm

It’s now relatively easy to obtain up-to-date information which will help in the expedition planning process. Google Earth is good for looking at terrain; expedition bodies such as the RGS with IBG have a wealth of

information on their websites; and social media can be a great way to connect with others who have been to the same region that you’re planning to go to. Learning as much as possible about your destination will help no end with the planning and formal risk assessment. Finding out the answers to local questions – what is the political climate like? What is the common flora and fauna? What is the number of a local helicopter company? – can make all the difference.

Don’t be put off

Once you start thinking about all the things that might go wrong, don’t let it put you off going on expedition! Expeditions are meant to be challenging and this challenge starts from the minute you start dreaming up the adventure, not just when you arrive in-country. Seizing the planning by the horns; ending up well off the beaten track, and doing it safely, will lead to success and probably one of the best experiences of a lifetime. **S**

Izzy Jones is an Environmental Biologist and has helped plan research expeditions through to commercial trips around the world. From starting out as a volunteer on a charity conservation expedition in Central America, Izzy now forms part of leader teams taking others to wild places. She currently lives in the Lake District and works for Fieldskills.

Further information

Fieldskills

Fieldskills are an expedition training and support company. They work extensively out in Borneo but also run UK-based training courses designed to provide the basic skills required to work and travel safely overseas. As well as their Expedition Planning & Leadership courses they offer other environment-specific courses for jungle, desert, savannah and mountain environments. www.fieldskills.com/training



Hill walking £16.99

The official handbook of the Mountain Leader and Walking Group Leader schemes. The book is a reference tool for every walker, as well as for those who wish to lead in the hills. www.bmcshop.co.uk



Medical Advice

Get all the essential mountain medicine advice straight from the experts. www.thebmc.co.uk/medical



Royal Geographical Society
Expedition planning advice and more. www.rgs.org

Expert Q&A

Dominic Hall has clocked up over 20 expeditions (and over two years living in his hammock) in Central America and South East Asia. He has led expeditions for a number of organisations including BSES and Biosphere Expeditions. Dom is a First Aid trainer, Mountain Leader, and RGS with IBG accredited Off-site Safety Management trainer. He runs the UK side of Fieldskills heading up the UK training programme as well as continuing to lead groups to jungles, deserts and mountains around the world.



Q Most people hear ‘risk assessment’ and ‘crisis plans’ and are instantly turned off. What are the most fun things about planning an expedition?

A I never thought I’d hear myself say this but I find the risk assessment and planning fun. Well, maybe not fun, but a valuable part of the whole process. If they’re used right they can help you to think about your itinerary, your kit lists, your backup options; they make the whole business of going on a trip more real. Of course the really fun bit is getting out there, but it’s nice to do it knowing that you’ve thought through as many of the ‘what ifs’ in advance as possible.

Q What’s the one key tip you’d give someone planning their own expedition?

A There are quite a few – allow yourself time, think through all the possibilities – but, most of all, don’t assume things. Check things through and work out how they will happen in reality – and once you’ve done that, don’t assume it will really work that way! Have a backup, and a backup for that backup.