

FINDING THE BALA



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Mick Fowler climbs as a hobby and has won three Piolet d'Or doing so. Uninterested in the glory of professional high-altitude mountaineering, he has spent his career seeking out adventurous, technical and unclimbed routes through the world's great mountains and cultures. Here, he speaks to **Anna Smith** about not quitting his day job and moonlighting as one of the world's greatest mountaineers.



Mick fowler is a retired tax-man, husband, and father of two. He enjoys taking outdoor holidays with his family and participating in fell-races near his home in Matlock, England. He used to use his annual leave to climb unclimbed mountains in the Himalayas and won three Piolet d’Or (known as ‘the Oscars of mountaineering’) for doing so. He’s perhaps the most accomplished hobbyist mountaineer in the world.

Now 68, the London native has racked up an impressive list of summits, many of which are first ascents, including The Golden Pillar on Spantik in the Karakoram, the Prow of Shiva in Himachal Pradesh, India, and the North Face of Gave Ding in Nepal. Along with these significant mountaineering achievements, both in the Alps and the Greater Ranges, Mick is known for an inventive and adventurous list of climbs up sea stacks, ice walls and, famously, a frozen toilet overflow cascading down the side St. Pancras Station.

Recently, headlines about Mick’s climbing and mountaineering achievements have been dominated by the fact that he uses a colostomy bag. He was fitted with the equipment after being treated for colon cancer in 2017. Having lived through food poisoning on a remote high altitude expedition, falling into crevasses, and the sad death of a friend, Brendan Murphy, at high altitude, there isn’t much that seems to phase Mick. As we sat down in June before his three week climbing and sight-seeing holiday in Namibia, he told the incredible story of his climbing career as casually as the career was itself.

Two Loves

“It was my father’s fault, really. He was into hill walking in the UK and scrambling. Then my mother died when I was three. As soon as I was old enough, my father would drag me out hill walking around the hills of mainly Scotland and Wales and the Lake District. As a young lad, hill walking was a bit boring, and I saw these people who were rock climbing, and that looked much more interesting. I started to badger my father to

**Above Far Left**

Mick developed a love for the great outdoors early. Here he is in 1972 at the age of 16.

Above Left

Aged 31 on the walk in to climb Spantik (7027m)

Above

Cresting the summit of Gave Ding (6571m) in 2015, aged 59

Above Right

67-year-old Mick on Parkhor Peak, Tajikistan (6083m) in 2023

take me down to some sandstone outcrops just to the south of London, Harrison's Rocks. He would take me down there and then, when I was a bit older, I started to go down under my own steam, and met like-minded friends and eventually, when I was 17, I got a car. Then we were away climbing every weekend. It became a bit of an obsession."

Rock climbing became Mick's first love, climbing all over the UK and ingratiating himself in the social scene. He continued to climb alongside his mountaineering pursuits, creating routes on different types of rock throughout the country and abroad. Recently, he made the first ascent of a sea stack, typical of his adventurous climbing style, in County Kerry, Ireland. He described the Devil's Castle as "magnificent Jenga tower" that required a "careful, judgemental style". As we talked a little about this climb, his enduring love for

the short, sharp goal of a vertical climb; "You've just reminded me of the sea stacks off the west coast of Ireland that I still haven't climbed yet and I need to go back for".

His second love soon followed though, with his avid-hill-walker father introducing him to the Alps at a relatively early age. A love of mountaineering, that combined his passion for rock climbing, experience hiking, and goal-oriented mindset was the obvious next obsession for him.

"To begin with, my father had introduced me to the Alps, doing some of the easier 4000 metre peaks. Of course, when I started to go out with my friends - I was 20 the first time I went with my friends - we gradually became aware of the Alpine scene and the famous North faces of the Alps. Those Alpine North faces really became our objectives and they stayed

Bivvying high up on Kishtwar Kai-
lash in the Himalayas



our objectives until we'd done them I suppose. Then, when we looked further afield, it was a very fortunate time. Airfares had just dropped to a level where the average person could realistically save up and afford them, so in 1982 we saved up for an expedition (as we rather grandly called it) to Peru, and had a fantastic time. That was my first experience of a different culture and I was hooked. It was from there in Peru onto all Himalayan countries China and everywhere else. Another obsession was born, a mountaineering obsession."

As Alpine style climbing grew in popularity in the Greater Ranges throughout the 80s, many British hillwalkers and climbers developed an obsession with the sport, now more accessible than ever. Though, not all of them became pioneers of the sport in the way Mick and his climbing partners (Paul Ramsden, Victor Saunders and Chris Watts to name a few) did. He admitted he never "looked at [himself] as a pioneer" nor ever considered his first ascents pioneering – they were and are simply a part of the adventure.

"It came naturally. To begin with, before I had transport, I'd be climbing down on the southern sandstone and, in those days, there were obvious lines which had not been climbed. I suppose it was a natural thing to have a go at them. The first new climbs I did were down on southern sandstone, and then gradually, as I climbed elsewhere around the country, equally, I noticed that there were very good-looking unclimbed lines. The fact that they were unclimbed were an additional draw for me. They were challenging, success was uncertain, it didn't matter how difficult the climb would be. It was a rather more adventurous experience than repeating a climb, knowing the grade and knowing that you should be able to do it. So I really liked that idea of finding objectives - start at the bottom, do your best and hopefully end up at the top."

I asked where he thought that mindset came from;

"The attraction of the unknown, perhaps. Particularly nowadays, I think a lot of climbers are brought up on climbing walls and they do sport climbing and everything is prepared for them, whereas I'm from a bit of a different era really, where it was all about the climber and enjoying himself or herself on the rock. To my mind, it was more enjoyable to find a challenging objective, pit myself against it and see whether or not I was able to do it. The fact that these objectives were in all sorts of different places around the country was an additional attraction to me, because it took me all around, and introduced me to climbers in a very good, healthy social scene that has given me an awful lot of pleasure over the years."

The Unknown

Mick has seen the sport change dramatically over his four decades at the forefront of it. He's cited technology as one of the major factors, with Google Earth particularly changing the game. The ability to find and assess an unclimbed route in the Himalayas, for example, without having to fly to the Himalayas makes for easier and cheaper planning (Mick made clear a few times that the planning stage was half the battle of any climb). Mick has even found routes from the shadows of peaks on Google Earth.

"Google Earth is amazing. Firstly, you can do

things like set the time of day. You can set it so it's midday, so the sun's coming from the south and then you can angle the terrain, so that the north faces are in shadow and you can see how long they are. You can pick out the longest and the steepest faces. And then you can tilt the display and actually view into the face in so much detail that you can see individual crevasses and you can pick out hopefully safe lines. It's not 100% foolproof, but you can pick out the sort of line that I'm looking for, which is something like an obvious line that goes direct to the summit of a mountain and is safe from rockfall, from icefalls and avalanches."

He nevertheless reminisces about the days when adventures were that little bit more unknown, in the era that made him the adventurous and exploratory climber that he is.

"To a certain extent I think Google has taken a bit away from the adventure, because it's now easy to get a good view of the objectives that you intend to climb, but it's not always that good. There was a route that Paul Ramsden and I went to do in India in 2012 and Google Earth made it look really easy. It was only because there were photographs we knew that it was a lot more challenging than that. What can I say, it's an invaluable research tool but I think it's helped to make the greater ranges more popular, because people get a good idea of what they're going to be setting out on. It's a little bit sad. It takes away the sense of unknown."

Most of the the routes that I've done I've not found through Google Earth. I've found them through research in journals, speaking to people who have been there, following up leads, contacting people and getting photographs and building up as big a picture as I can. Then you actually arrive and look at the face of the mountain and you've got to decide exactly where you're going to climb and whether or not there really is a realistic, safe route up the mountain. You're using your judgement built up over many years of climbing."

Mick's first foray into the Greater Ranges to a mountain named Noclaraju, was marked exactly by this sense of the unknown, and, highlighting it as the most influential climb of his career, was a sign of the adventures to come.

"It featured on a girlfriend of mine's calendar, it was her father's. I looked at it on the wall and thought 'ooh, that looks interesting', and I asked a lot of questions, and found out where it was and did a lot of research, got a team together. We went out to South America, and it was the first time I'd ever flown. I was 26, which shows you what a different era it was. And so many things happened on that trip that just opened my eyes. I can remember we'd taken the cheapest possible flights, so we zigzagged all over the place. I remember getting out of the plane in Costa Rica and it was so hot I thought that the heat must be coming from the engines of a plane. I'd never been in that temperature before. Then we flew to Caracas in Venezuela, and the Falklands War was in full swing and the Venezuelans were supporting Argentina and so our plane, which was a British Caledonian flight, had an armed guard around it. Then the British Caledonian plane was not allowed to fly to Peru. I think Peru must have stopped British flights in its airspace. So we got an Aero Peru flight that had a mid-air incident on the way to Lima. There



was an emergency announcement over the intercom in Spanish, so we didn't understand it at all and there was mass panic on the plane. We landed somewhere and I can remember just sitting there in the luggage compartment with our legs dangling over the edge while they fixed the plane. They gave us a bucket that was full of grappa for us to drink. We just sat there, chilling, drinking this grappa thinking and then just took off again. We got to Lima and I'd never seen anything culturally like that, from my protected life in Europe. Then we went on to do the climb, which was what we'd set our heart on. It was a challenging climb. It was the longest that I'd been on a steep face like that but all in all, it really tickled the memory buds. I can remember coming home from that trip thinking that was absolutely fantastic."

The cultural aspect of a climb is as important to Mick as the climb itself, which has ultimately meant he's become known for not returning to climbs he had to abandon – for whatever reason that may be.

"I think that comes from the fact that I'm really going to these mountains both for the cultural experience and the experience of going to a new place, and the climbing experience. If I've been right the way up to the mountain, I've experienced going to a new place. I've experienced the cultural side and so all that will be left if I went back would be to do the climb. To be quite honest, once you've crossed a north face, the climbing doesn't vary that much no matter where you are. If I went back to a climb I'd failed on for some reason and got there and failed again, I would feel that that was a complete failure. And I have done that once or twice. Few of us always

stick to our Ideals throughout life. I'd much prefer to not go back to the same objective if I fail on it, so be it, I'll look for a new objective for the following year."

Just a Hobby

This attitude is rare at the cutting-edge of most sports, but perhaps that's because most people reaching Mick's level are full-time professionals in their discipline. Failure may represent more than the personal pain and frustration of having to abandon a once-in-a-year kind of trip. A taxman for four decades until his retirement in 2017, Mick found a work life balance rarely seen in modern, elite climbing circles.

"As the years went by, I rather liked the contrast between the nine to five job. As I gradually rose up through the ranks in the tax office, I was on the valuation side of things, shares in unquoted companies, brand names, all sorts of things, that was quite mentally challenging; climbing in the Himalayas was physically challenging. Staying in my job meant that I got home to see my wife and children almost every night so I was able to be around and lead the family man life, be there with the children growing up, do my best to contribute to that. At the same time, I was very fortunate that, as roads were cut further and further into the Himalaya, I was able to get to good unclimbed Himalayan objectives using up all of my annual leave. I had enough leave to go climbing and enough leave for my family holidays. So it worked very well for me and I stuck with it. I would have struggled to keep up my motivation if I had to do climbing as my job, if I had to go out climbing every day, whatever the conditions."

Above Left

Although he's since retired, when Mick wasn't winning mountaineering awards, he was working behind a desk at the tax office

Above

Immediately post op following Mick's ostomy surgery

Above Right

Climbing Gave Ding (6571m) in the far west of Nepal

Right

Mick emerging from his bivy on Manamcho (6264m). The photo is taken by Paul Ramsden, and together they'd go on to make a successful first ascent of the Himalayan peak



Shortly after he retired, his dreams of further Greater Range climbs were put on hold by his cancer diagnosis. Mick underwent multiple sessions of various therapies as well as a major operation that left him with a colostomy bag. Having recuperated and adjusted to his new equipment, he continued to pioneer new and exciting routes in both climbing and mountaineering. The public perception of his achievements have undoubtedly changed as his circumstances did, with the BBC running headlines that read “Colostomy Bag Climber Makes First Ascent of Kerry Sea Stack” after his successful climb up the Devil’s Castle in 2023.

“With the cancer diagnosis, it came as a complete surprise to me. I didn’t feel ill in any way. I shared my experience with friends of mine and it was surprising how many of them suddenly went to their GP to get themselves checked out. I have a stoma now and since then a surprising number of people have contacted me for reassurance that they will still be able to do things after a stoma. I’ve ended up working with B Braun, who are a German company that make colostomy bags, and they make bits of kit that help people who have medical problems. I work together with them to try and help people who find themselves in a situation where they might end up with a digestive tract problem and ultimately a stoma. Do I mind ‘Colostomy Bag Climber’? Quite frankly, I do cringe a little bit but it’s all a good cause. I don’t feel uncomfortable about it at all.”

Mick’s pragmatic response to such a difficult scenario seemed to be totally in character. Before speaking with him I’d read his trip report from his and Simon Yates’ 2023 attempt at the East/North Face of Patkhor in Tajikistan (6083m). In the report he describes:

“Poisoning ourselves on freeze-dried food, discovering much of our remaining food had gone off, reduced rations for 4 days, no food for 6 days, deep whiteout snow, no summit, a difficult retreat, a broken Abalakov screw, a failed abseil anchor, 5 broken ribs and 2 crushed vertebrae for Simon, much lost kit, 2 shelterless nights, one shared sleeping bag ... and a painful walk-out assisted by a Tajikistan rescue team.”

Casually summarizing; “It was indeed a most memorable outing, albeit not packed with quite the sort of memories we hope for.”

When I asked about the decision to keep climbing after the first two or three things on that list had occurred Mick assured me that not only were they capable of high-altitude mountaineering on half rations but that he’d done it successfully before. Digging a little further into my disbelief, he summarized his thought process as follows:

“When we realised that we’d poisoned ourselves on the freeze-dried food and when we realised that quite a lot of our other food packets were poisoned, I was confident that we could do it on half rations, but it didn’t leave us any leeway. If anything went wrong, then we would really have to retreat. So by going on to half rations and everything had gone according to plan, we could have got to the bottom of the mountain on the other side and we would have just had to walk out for 30 miles or so to the road without food which wouldn’t really have been a problem. Of course, what happened was the weather became very bad as we left the main technical difficulties and got onto the summit snow slopes. We couldn’t see where we were going, the snow was very deep, and our tracks are being filled in behind us. If we had had enough food, then we would have continued, we would have dug a snow hole, found





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ourselves a safe spot to hole up and continued as soon as the weather improved. But because we didn't have any spare food and we were quite extended anyway, because we'd been on half rations, the judgement call was that the only safe thing to do was to retreat back down the way we'd come up. Which was not a difficult decision. We didn't have to have a long debate about it, we're both experienced climbers and we said this is not working and the most sensible thing to do is to retreat, which can be a hard thing to do because you've spent a year or so organising your climb and sorting out all the permits, sorting out everything else that's necessary. I think you can imagine that we were absolutely gutted when the freeze dried food poisoned us."

The retreat resulted in Yates' aforementioned broken bones after an accident whilst abseiling. He has made a full recovery and describes the incident with as much matter-of-fact pragmatism as Mick does.

A Game of Luck

Mick and climbing partner Paul Ramsden have won an unprecedented three Piolet d'Or, the highest accolade in mountaineering (amongst other awards) for their summits of the North Face of Siguniang in 2003, the Prow of Shiva in 2013 and Gave Ding in 2015. If it isn't abundantly clear by now, Mick isn't in it for the recognition, but appreciates that by rewarding the minimal impact style of climbing that he operates under, others are encouraged to follow suit.

"I think we shouldn't take these awards too seriously. They're very judgmental indeed. It is really extremely difficult to say 'this climb is a better climb than this climb'. That's the first point. The second point is, climbing awards do tend to influence behaviour and I've been very pleased to see the Piolet d'Or has moved towards celebrating a style of climbing that leaves the mountain in the same state as you find it. It doesn't use bolts, it doesn't use fixed ropes. It celebrates Leave No Trace mountaineering and that's exactly the sort of mountaineering that I like to do. I think it's the only way to go mountaineering."

With 2024's Great Ranges trip planned in Pakistan, it's likely Mick will go mountaineering until it becomes physically impossible for him. His obsession for both climbing and mountaineering has endured and whether he would like to define himself as one or not, he is a pioneer. He pins his success on two things: being very goal oriented, "doing his utmost to achieve that objective", and being in the right place at the right time, when the greater ranges meant Alpine style climbing suddenly became accessible outside the Alps. I asked whether the next generation of mountaineers should be so lucky only to be reminded that Mick hasn't been lucky in his success, rather he considers himself lucky to be in the mountains at all.

"I think we should never underestimate the ability of the next generation. I don't see an obvious limit. I've already seen, very, very hard to routes being put up on mountains approaching 8000 metres by small teams operating in Alpine style. I see that at the top end of the game, as the way forward. But I suppose I'm never really interested in the top end of the game. I'm interested in climbing because it's fun, because I've enjoyed it so much over the years. Hence, I can't climb the sort of routes that I used to be able to climb 20 years ago. I'm getting old, but that doesn't mean that I don't enjoy climbing in the mountains just as much as I always have done." 



Chipped teeth and ripped gloves while climbing Taulliraju (5830m) in Peru

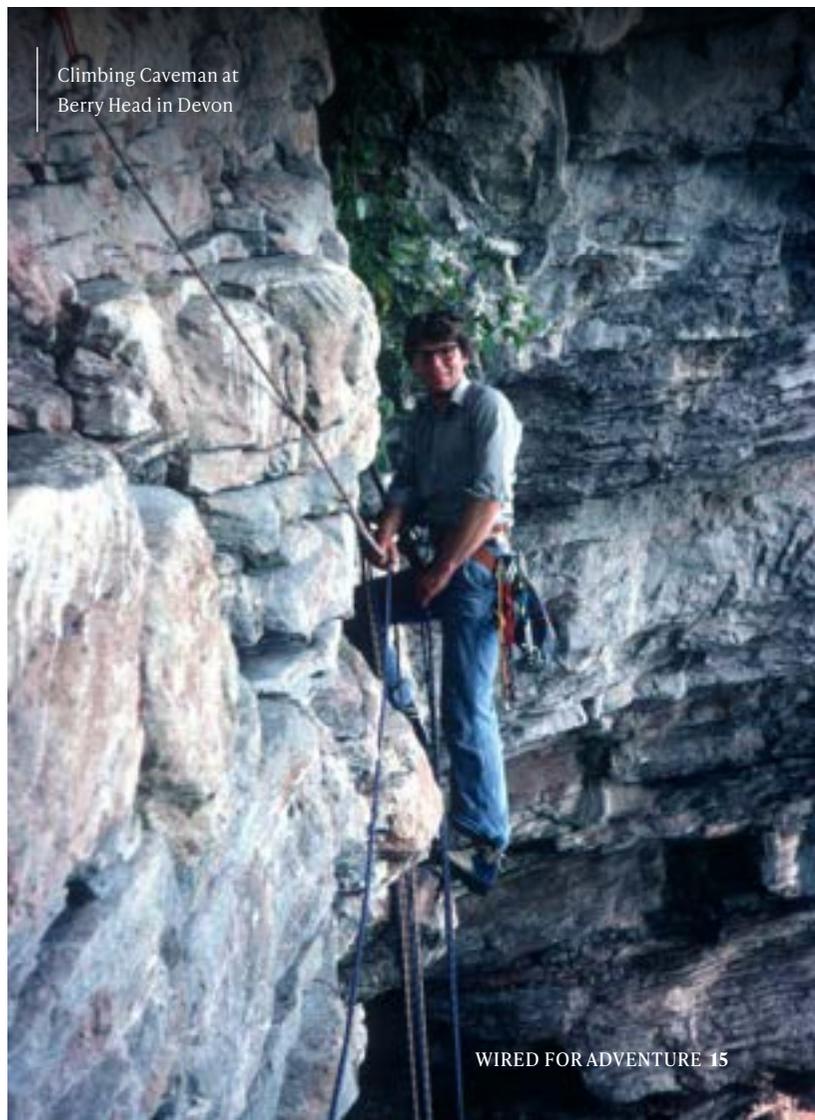


ENCOUNTER: MICK FOWLER

Mick on a traverse while climbing Taboche (6495m) with Pat Littlejohn, who took the photo



Atop the middle needle on the Isle of Wight



Climbing Caveman at Berry Head in Devon