

TRAVEL & OUTDOORS

ADVENTURE

Scottish climber **Alastair Swinton** relives the moment earlier this year when a successful mission to summit a remote mountain in Pakistan turned into a nightmare

It was September and I was walking out front into an area of the Koyo Zom mountain in Pakistan where it was quite hard to see the differentials in the snow patterns. Before I knew what was happening, I fell straight down into a big ice cavern. When I stopped at the bottom, I felt blood pouring all over my face.

It certainly was not the adventure I had planned, after all, I'm a 30-year-old mountain guide. I grew up climbing with my dad. I've got plenty of training and experience. Falling through a snow bridge and seriously injuring myself at very high altitude is any climber's nightmare.

But now the nightmare had become my reality. Blood pouring from my head and barely able to walk, I recalled how it all started as a dream adventure, an ambitious expedition shared with four of my experienced climbing buddies.

We are always looking for quieter mountains, ones that we've never climbed before. My climbing partner, Will Sim, discovered Koyo Zom by being geeky. He discovered this beautiful mountain face in a quiet region of Pakistan and showed us a picture. I told him, "I'm game...I'm in."

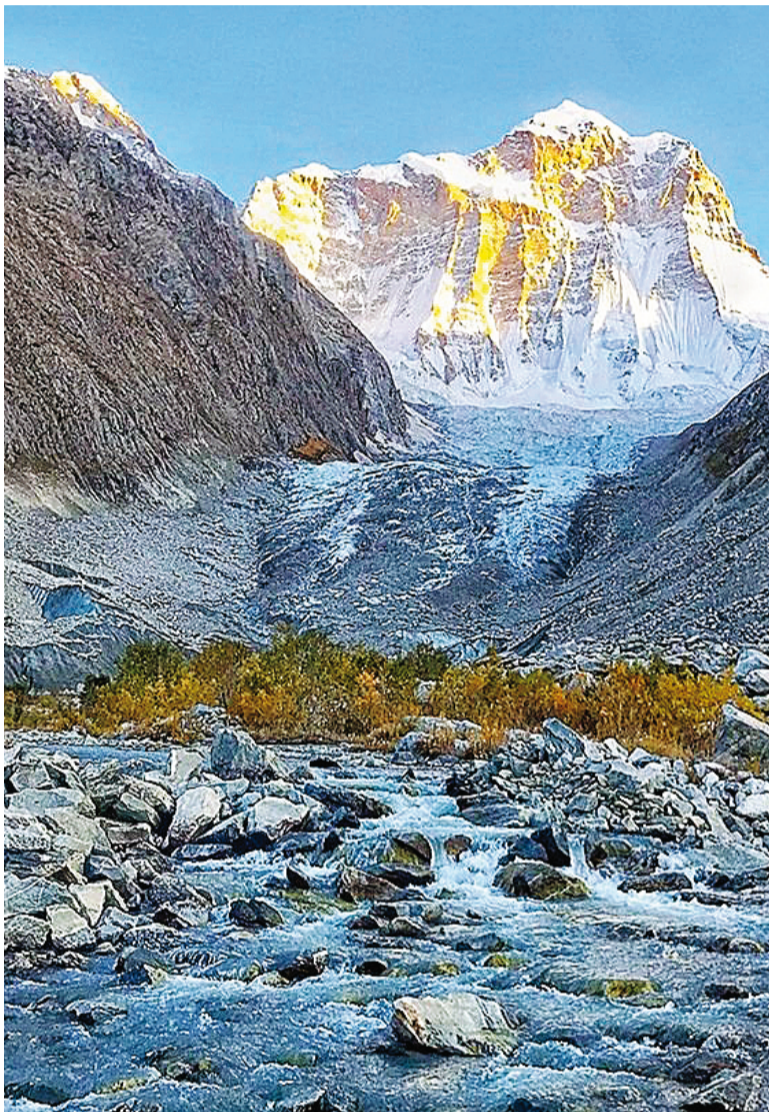
Koyo Zom is the highest mountain in the Hindu Raj range, reaching 22,546-foot at its peak. It was first summited by an Austrian expedition in 1968, and last climbed by a British team more than 40 years ago.

It had all the characteristics we climbers wanted. It's not the highest mountain in the world but we prefer slightly lower altitudes and more technical climbing.

It's a tough mountain to climb. Three of my climbing partners were fatigued and didn't summit. But my friend, Tom Livingstone, and I successfully summited the west face early on a Saturday afternoon. It had never been done before. It was one of the best climbs I'd ever done.

But during our descent things changed. Koyo Zom is resplendent with crevasses, deep cracks, found in glacial ice sheets that cover the mountain surface. Snow often covers a crevasse, hiding it under a bridge of snowpack. We needed to cross over ice and snow covering the surface.

I fell through a snow bridge into a crevasse and dropped about 20



Risk and rescue

metres. My head was gashed badly and I had tremendous bruising over my legs. The fall and injuries were unfortunate. But I was very fortunate that I was roped up so Tom could pull me out.

My injuries were pretty serious. We were not going to get to safety on our own. I was bleeding badly. I could hardly walk. Tom quickly decided to call the authorities for help including Global Rescue, a company that specialises in medical evacuation services from the point of injury or illness.

I was glad to see the quick response from Global Rescue and the local authorities, especially because of the remoteness of the mountain, which is nestled between the Hindu Kush in the west and the Karakoram in the east. A remote mountain rescue is not like waiting for an ambulance

My bloody head and face reeked. My bashed-up legs burned with pain

Clockwise from main: view of Koyo Zom mountain in Pakistan; Alastair Swinton recovering after his 20 metre fall through a snow bridge into an ice cavern; Swinton and his climbing colleague were airlifted off the mountain

to arrive in the big city. High-grade helicopters that can handle the altitude, extreme weather, rough terrain, and in this instance, an hour's long flight to reach us, are needed.

I suspected all of this so I wasn't surprised when we had to stay the night before the rescuers would get to us. It was a very tough night with sub-freezing temperatures. We huddled together for warmth. Tom kept nudging me to make certain I was breathing. My bloody head and face reeked. My bashed-up legs burned with pain. We were running out of food and water, too. We had a few energy gels and some chocolate.

Morning finally came. We didn't get more than an hour or so of sleep. We were exhausted and still in the dark since our communications batteries had totally drained.

I got agitated. I thought, 'if these helicopters don't come then I'm going to have to walk out of here.' I went out of the tent to have a little test. I took a few stumble steps and proved I couldn't walk.

At that instant, the helicopters came shooting over the mountain. It was a Hollywood moment. I felt immediate, massive relief.

I've climbed and trained for years. Tom, too. Training and preparation are the reasons why I'm alive. I was roped up so Tom could get me out of the crevasse. We know basic first aid. We are all members of the rescue organisation Global Rescue. All together it's having a guardian angel who manages to rescue you when you think you're all alone. It was very reassuring. ■

Alastair "Ally" Swinton, from Leven, Fife is an experienced climbing guide who has lived in Chamonix since he was 20, spending a lot of time climbing, hiking, and trekking Mont Blanc. He's been sponsored by Camp/Cassin, TENDON Rope, and Allcord. In 2013, he survived an avalanche that hurled him more than 2,000 feet down a steep mountain face near Mont Blanc, western Europe's highest peak. www.globalrescue.com