

Brand Ambassador Lakpa Rita Sherpa has 17 ascents of Everest to his credit. As a professional mountain guide, he has safely led over 200 people to the summit.

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BRAND PROFILE: SHERPA ADVENTURE GEAR

Sherpa Adventure Gear makes most of its outdoor apparel in Nepal, using some of the most innovative fabrics on the market, but with traditional respect and a desire to help the communities around it underpinning its whole corporate culture.

Made in the mountains

Outdoor brand SAG, founded in 2003 to celebrate the Sherpa people's part in the first successful summit of Everest, celebrated its own tenth anniversary this year. Founder, Tashi Sherpa, set the brand up partly to honour an uncle who was part of the successful 1953 expedition. But Tashi Sherpa has also been intent since the start on honouring his Himalayan homeland as a whole by making high-end outdoor apparel in Nepal.

Much of his own upbringing was across the border, in India and, later, in the US. His parents were traders and eventually set up a trading post close to Darjeeling, east of Nepal in northern India. Among the products they traded were woollen fabrics, so the Sherpa Adventure Gear chief executive feels he grew up with textiles. One of the first business ventures he started on his own was a small factory in Kathmandu that made cheap cotton shirts. "This is the business I knew before starting Sherpa Adventure Gear," he says.

A famous visitor

It is only natural that his interest should have led him into outdoor apparel in 2003 because his family had ties to Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, the local man who became world famous when he completed the first successful ascent of Mount Everest with New Zealand mountaineer Sir Edmund Hillary on May 29 1953. "We were close friends of Sir Edmund Hillary's, too," Tashi Sherpa recalls, "although the one time I can remember him coming to our home, I was so nervous I ran away without talking to him. However, I say without hesitation that, although Hillary came from New Zealand, we regard him as the greatest of the Sherpas, because of the work he has done to build schools and other benefits for the Sherpa people, and all of this with great humility and compassion and no ulterior motive."

Access to education

This, partly, was the inspiration for a step Sherpa Adventure Gear took in May 2012 when it set up a new charity, the Paldorje Education Fund, aimed at improving access to education for Sherpa children, although from day one the company has set aside funds for education in Nepal. The 2012 project formalised practices the company had in place for years. It now employs hundreds of people in and around the Nepalese capital, Kathmandu, but it started, like many good businesses, in the basement of the founder's house. At least 80% of its production is still in Nepal and the brand also has three stores of its own there, including a flagship store in the capital that has the company's research and development centre in the basement and a nine-room bed and breakfast facility on the top floor to allow customers to enjoy Sherpa hospitality.

Thanks to what the chief executive calls "a tremendously successful relationship" with European distributor Bradshaw Taylor, the brand has begun to make an impression in Germany,





As many as 900 women provide for their families by creating Sherpa Adventure Gear's hand-knit wool hat at their homes in the Kathmandu valley.

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the UK and Scandinavia, and is also becoming strong in the US and in 20 or so other countries around the world. There is no pursuit of growth for growth's sake, but the chief executive believes "all the toolsets are ready" for the company to seize new growth opportunities as they come along. "Growth is coming," he insists. "The darkest days of the economic downturn are behind us."

High-end fabric technology

Products in Sherpa Adventure Gear's latest collection for Spring '14 include Baato pants and shorts, which the company says will work well for trek and travel. The trousers combine durable and stretch nylons in a hybrid design that gives them stretch for comfort, high durability and easy-care qualities, including a fast drying speed and non-wrinkle appearance.

Superlight Mechi baselayer tops also form part of the new collection. The brand describes these as easy-layering, quick-drying and efficient at resisting odour, even on expeditions and long adventures. They come in 100% polyester, in what Sherpa Adventure Gear calls a silk-weight jersey-knit structure. Polygiene's silver-based antimicrobial technology provides the tops with their odour-resistant functionality.

"These products are made with pride in Nepal and do not come cheap. We are not in the price game," Tashi Sherpa insists, "and, certainly for the past few seasons, we have tried to partner with some of the top fabric technology providers, including eVent, Polartec, Pertex, and Polygiene. We can source anything, anywhere, but we have our own team of designers and developers and we will always keep that in house. It gives us the ability to turn things around faster."

Limited-edition sweaters

New product ideas have also come from the company's commitment to corporate social responsibility. A fairly rudimentary knitters' co-operative in a community near Kirtipur, in the Kathmandu Valley, got in touch and said it wanted to do something with the outdoor brand. It has taken 18 months, Tashi Sherpa explains, and a lot of help to the people in the co-operative, but now he is preparing to launch the Kirtipur sweater, with traditional knit on the outside and Primaloft lining on the inside. They will be limited-edition, with only 500 for women and 500 for men coming onto the market.

Across two factories and six satellite partner manufacturing facilities in Nepal, the brand is now responsible for employing around 1,200 people. They are from a mix of Nepalese communities and are by no means all Sherpa. Some have had troubled backgrounds, but Tashi Sherpa says they are hard-working and loyal, grateful to have been given a chance to work for a company that cares. "If you are kind and considerate to workers, they give you more than you expect," he says.



Women's long sleeve crew—part of Sherpa Adventure Gear's new Mechi baselayer range.

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