GAME CHANGERS: SUN BIN

Mountain man

Sun Bin is China's most famous mountaineer and was the first from that country to complete the Seven Summits, reaching the peak of the highest mountain on seven continents. He's completed expeditions to six of the seven on a number of occasions now, but has only been to the summit of Mount Everest once. That's about to change, though, as he has new Everest expeditions planned for this year, 2018 and 2020. On the last of these, he's taking a special climbing companion with him.

Is mountaineering your job?

Yes, but not all the time. I'm very lucky. I started climbing in 1997 when I went to Beijing to study chemistry and joined the university mountaineering club. Every winter we had ice-climbing lessons. Then I worked as part of the Chinese government's mountaineering team, guiding and teaching, and was part of the Olympics committee for Beijing 2008. After 2008, I decided to launch my own adventure tourism company, Beyond The View.

How popular are winter sports in general now in China?

The reports at the end of 2016 about the government becoming serious about promoting winter sports were true. Even in Beijing, lots of people are playing ice hockey; my son is one many children who have taken to the game with great enthusiasm. It's also true about the development of ski resorts in Jilin province, and Hebei is doing well too. Hebei has lots of ski slopes and, by highway or by fast train, it's only 45 minutes from Beijing. This is all new for most Chinese people and that's part of the appeal. Even running is quite new for us and now people in all of China's big cities have taken up running; people of all ages go running every day and share information about it on social media. And, going by that information, people of all ages are preparing to run marathons or 100k events. It's amazing.



Sun Bin is China's most famous mountaineer and has reached the peak of the highest mountain on seven continents.

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Is this popularity of running good news or bad news for someone running an adventure tourism company?

It's good news for Beyond The View. After running for a time, lots of people want to try something new; skiing, climbing and trekking are good options. Just in the last three years or so it's become much easier for the company to build up clients. For example, in 2016 I announced an expedition to climb Kilimanjaro this year. Within two weeks, 200 people had signed up. I was very surprised. Our society has changed. Most of us have had weekends free from work for the last 20 years or so, but people didn't start doing sports immediately; at first they preferred to stay indoors and play mah-jong or other board games, and if they went out it was to go to a karaoke place to drink. At that time, when we went onto the street with backpacks to go somewhere with the university mountaineering club, people used to stop us and ask what we were doing. They had no concept of it.

To what extent are you and your customers using clothing and equipment from Chinese brands?

There is good product coming from Chinese brands. There isn't much difference any more between what western brands and Chinese brands produce. After all, they're using the same fabrics, the same Gore-Tex membranes and often the same outsource manufacturers.

How much of a challenge is it to complete the Seven Summits?

I can't remember when I completed the Seven Summits. I've done six of them (Aconcagua, Denali, Kilimanjaro, Elbrus, Puncak Jaya and Vinson) at least four times now. The exception is Mount Everest. I've only been up Mount Everest once, in 2007. I was on the mountain for 50 days and did not wash my face once. I can still remember the first shower in Tibet after it.

Why is Everest the exception? This seems ironic for China's most famous mountaineer when Mount Everest is on your doorstep.

In theory, it ought to be the one that we would have most direct access to, but it's not as easy as that; the Tibetan authorities guard access quite carefully. I have three new expeditions planned: one for this year, one in 2018 and one in 2020. This year's will be my first time guiding a group up Everest, but it will start on the Nepalese side. The other two will start in Tibet. And the 2020 one will be extra special because a very famous Chinese actor, Shawn Dou, is going to take part. He has millions of fans in China.



Sun Bin says there is no longer much difference between Chinese and western brands in terms of the outdoor clothing they can produce.

WL Gore

Why has a famous actor decided to climb the highest mountain in the world with you?

We're taking five years to prepare him to climb Everest and we are making a movie about it, which will attract big audiences in cinemas in China. It's not that easy because he is very busy shooting movies all the time. All of this will help make it easier to show what climbing is to the Chinese public. It's a project that has already attracted a lot of attention. I admire him because climbing is very different from his normal life. We've already done Kilimanjaro as part of the preparation and, of course, that means coping with a huge range of conditions because you go from rainforest to glacier. Shawn was really sick near the top and I kept having to check his blood oxygen levels and fight with him to get him to keep moving. This was live on the internet every day and we had half a million people watching.

Will you also be involved in the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing?

Possibly. After the 2020 Everest expedition, I may become involved.

What motivates you to keep going?

I spend six months of the year in the mountains and I want to share the happiness of the experience of being in the mountains with ordinary Chinese people.

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