RISE TO THE CHALLENGE: NORTH POLE EXPEDITION

In April, Berghaus helped an all-female team complete an expedition to the North Pole. In turn, their feedback will help the outdoor brand as it seeks to rethink how it designs products for women.

Berghaus breaks down women's product design

The 11 female adventurers who took part in the Women's Euro-Arabian North Pole Expedition in April came together in an effort to promote greater dialogue and understanding between women from European and Arabian cultures. The team included representatives from a wide range of backgrounds who had varying levels of outdoor experience. They were drawn from a total of 10 different nations: the UK, Qatar, Sweden, Oman, Saudi Arabia, France, Russia, Cyprus, Slovenia and Kuwait.

Their target was to ski the last degree to the North Pole. After starting their journey in Longyearbyen, a town on the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, on April 14 they travelled to a floating ice camp in the Arctic Ocean before setting off from a position of 89 degrees north to ski towards the North Pole.

The fact that just seven days later, at 19:00 on April 21, and with 80 kilometres of hard skiing behind them, they arrived at their destination was testament to their commitment, fitness and teamwork. It was also a reflection of the quality



Berghaus supplied a range of outdoor products for the women taking part in the expedition.

Renan Ozturk

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The expedition team was made up of women from various different backgrounds, with 10 nations represented in total.

Renan Ozturk

of the kit they were wearing, which was supplied by UK-based outdoor brand Berghaus.

Carolyn Harker, women's product manager for Berghaus, tells *WSA* the brand was attracted by the social and cultural message at the core of this project, explaining that it "stood out as an expedition". She describes the all-female team, which was led by the UK's Felicity Aston, as "inspirational women" and says the diversity of the group and their individual stories convinced Berghaus to get involved. It also offered a perfect opportunity to put its products to the test in very challenging conditions.

Kit challenge

Ms Harker says the idea of working with the team only came about around five weeks before they were due to begin their expedition; this meant Berghaus faced a "massive challenge" to organise the kit in time. One of the ways it sped up the process was by asking the women to take their own measurements, which they were able to do with the help of a guide prepared for them by Ms Harker.

They were kitted out with a selection of products from the company's range designed specifically for women. This included a Gore-Tex three-layer shell jacket, which was well suited to the expedition due to its adjustable hood and high number of pockets, and an 850-fill down jacket featuring the brand's hydrophobic down, which it calls Hydrodown. It is made by treating goose down with a durable water repellent treatment that helps keep the wearer warm and dry.

Given the short period of time Berghaus had to put together the appropriate kit for the women, it was a relief for Ms Harker when she visited them just a few days before they set off for the North Pole and found that it all fitted. During her brief time with the team she hosted a gear workshop, made final adjustments to the expedition kits and gathered some initial feedback on the products Berghaus had supplied. This feedback was "really valuable", according to Ms Harker, especially as the group was so diverse. "They were also able to share individual insights about kit, and their own personal experiences and interactions with outdoor brands," she adds.

The company has only received limited feedback from the team since they completed the expedition but will meet with them in due course to get more detailed information. Ms Harker expects their comments to relate to how they feel about outdoor clothing in general, rather than being specifically about the Berghaus products they used. "We supply kit like this to athletes all the time, so we are confident it is fit for purpose," she explains.

Female focus

Ms Harker says the time she spent visiting the team ahead of their expedition was very enjoyable, so much so that she admits she would have been tempted to join them had there been more time to train. She praised the energy of the women as well as their openness in talking about their experiences buying and wearing outdoor gear.

She believes the outdoor industry needs to listen to this sort of feedback in order to

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Berghaus women's product manager, Carolyn Harker (left), visited the women, including team leader Felicity Aston (right) before the set off.

Berghaus

improve how it designs and sells to women as the reality is that there is a difference between products for men and for women. This is something Berghaus is actively working on, with feedback from this expedition just one part of its efforts to expand and improve its range of products for women.

The fact that Ms Harker became the brand's women's product manager at the start of 2018 is evidence of its increased focus on this area of its business. She has been at the company for 18 months now, having also worked at various other outdoor brands. "We are currently in the middle of an extensive programme of renovation and innovation which is very much focused on the female consumer," she says.

Berghaus has previously said it is investing "considerable resources" into refining the design of its range of outdoor clothing, footwear and equipment for women. This includes technical apparel for high mountain activities and kit designed for walking and everyday use. It found the workshop it held with the Women's Euro-Arabian North Pole Expedition team very beneficial and is planning to organise more focus groups to hear first-hand the views of female users of outdoor products.

Change is coming

Its ongoing development work is primarily focused on the fit of outdoor clothing for women. Ms Harker says the outdoor industry is starting to realise that the women who take part in outdoor activities are diverse in terms of body type. The athletic fit is no longer suitable for the majority of women, with a growing understanding that women of larger body types can be fit and active too. Berghaus is also reviewing and updating the colour options it offers, an issue flagged by many of the women on the North Pole expedition team. In addition, it is examining how it engages and communicates with female audiences.

Ms Harker concedes that the amount of time it takes to develop new performance fabrics and changing the way outdoor products for women are made is going to be a long process. This is in stark contrast to what customers have become used to since the rise of 'fast fashion', where new product development seems almost instant. She insists changes are coming, however, and believes the more women who speak up about their needs, the more this process can be pushed on.

Berghaus' design teams have a good balance of male and female members, with designers often crossing over to design products for the opposite gender. Nevertheless, she feels female consumers are more likely to speak openly about what they require in terms of clothing and equipment with another woman. She reveals she has already fielded plenty of questions from female outdoor enthusiasts since taking over as women's product manager earlier this year. As a female outdoor enthusiast herself, she is better equipped than most to answer them.

"We are very excited about the developments that we are planning for our future women's ranges," she says, adding that Berghaus' "amazing lab facilities" give it lots of opportunities to research and test new ideas that have the potential to drive the future of outdoor clothing for women.

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