

NEW ZEALAND ADVENTURE

WHERE ACTIONS
SPEAK LOUDER
THAN WORDS

JUST
ADD
WATER

+

THE FREEDIVER
THE WATERMAN
THE KAYAKER
THE SURFER

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ABOVE: Daniel breaking through the ice
 RIGHT: Celebrating the Highest Kayaking World Record after covering a distance of over 2.5km

THE HIGHEST KAYAK ON EARTH

Adventurer and explorer Dan Bull has taken out one of the most sought-after titles in the field of extreme adventure, achieving 'The Highest Kayak on Earth', near the summit of the world's highest volcano, Ojos del Salado. And he has been recognised by Guinness World Records for his achievement.

Dan achieved the new world record for 'The Highest Altitude Kayak' at an altitude of 5,707 m, covering a distance of over 2.5 km and using his ice axe to pull himself and his kayak along the surface of the frozen lake to break the ice and prepare a kayaking lane. "I wanted to combine my passion for heights with my love of water and pursue my dream of breaking a new world record," Bull explained.

On a recent climb, standing alone on top of the world's highest volcano, Bull spotted a small frozen lake just near the summit. "I was yet to survive the descent back down the volcano, but somehow I was already dreaming of my next adventure," he said.

Only barely surviving the solo descent, he returned again this year - this time with his kayak - flying back to Santiago, Chile, then onwards to the mining town of Copiapó in the Atacama Desert (the site of the 2010 Chilean mining accident, where 33 men were trapped underground for 69 days) to begin his approach. The unnamed lake, since verified as one of the highest bodies of water in the world, sits on the eastern flanks of the world's highest volcano, straddling the borders of Chile and Argentina.

Ojos del Salado, a stratovolcano whose name roughly translates to "Eyes of the Salty One" from its native Spanish, comes from the enormous deposits of salt that, in the form of lagoons or 'eyes', appear in its glaciers. It is the highest mountain in Chile and the second highest mountain outside the Himalaya.

In addition to the extreme high altitude, the summit towers 6,893 metres tall, the humidity can be as low as 2%. Despite the extremely dry conditions, snow storms can strike at any time, covering the surrounding area with a few feet of snow.

The lake is located in the highest regions of the Atacama desert in the Andes, just beneath the summit. "The surrounding environment is not unlike what you might imagine witnessing if you were standing on Mars, or perhaps the moon," Bull said. Speaking of which, more people have stood on the moon than have reached this lake, let alone stepped foot in it.

Bull achieved the record without the use of supplemental oxygen, which would've been allowed under Guinness World Records rules. The decision to do so was not taken lightly. "I've spent a fair amount of time at altitude, so I'm aware of the risks, but also of the rewards and the self-satisfaction that comes from tackling such a challenge as independently as possible."

Bull is the current World Record holder for being the "Youngest Person to Climb the Highest Mountain and the Highest Volcano on each continent" (known as the 7 Summits & 7 Volcanic Summits). He also completed a successful unguided ascent of Mount Everest in his 20s. "Human beings simply aren't built to function, let alone survive, at the cruising altitude of a commercial airplane," Bull explained. "Your body is literally dying with each step you take."

At the altitude of his new kayaking world record, there is less than 50% of the oxygen than at sea level. "It's like climbing stairs and holding two out of every three breaths. You're absolutely exhausted. And then you've still got to get in the kayak and go for a paddle."

At sea level the air is thick and carries plenty of oxygen around the body. As you ascend, the atmosphere thins, there's less oxygen available for your body, and your organs begin starving for oxygen. Headaches, shortness of breath, coughing, general weakness and confusion ensues. "Altitude sickness can become fatal very quickly, so you have to always be mindful and listen to your body, but at the same time, keep pushing yourself to the limit. It's a fine balance between success and failure, where failure can mean you don't return home."





ABOVE: All fingers in tact, although a little frostnip on the toes
LEFT: Searching for the lake

Despite the risks, Bull is motivated by the life-and-death struggle at extreme high altitude. "What I've realised is that I feel most alive – and appreciate life more – when in extreme environments. The more extreme, the greater perspective I get. It makes me aware of how small and inconsequential my life is. It puts things into perspective."

Executing the Highest Kayak on Earth wasn't the only challenge Bull faced. "As I climbed toward the lake, I experienced the worst snow seen on the volcano in two decades. I was trapped inside my tent, high on the mountain, for 3 days, surviving gale force winds up to 140 km/h and wind chill down to -45° C," he said.

In addition to the extreme weather conditions, he had to battle with carrying his customised kayak up the mountain on top of his usual mountaineering and survival gear, weighing in excess of 50 kg. "I bought an off-the-shelf hybrid inflatable, foldable kayak and customised it, tweaking it where necessary, getting rid of any nonessential items. It originally weighed around 20kg. When you add the paddles, pump, all your usual mountaineering gear, communications devices, cameras, food and water, your pack starts to get pretty heavy. I'm sure I felt my spine compress a few centimetres under all that weight."

The water temperature was just on freezing at 0.1° C. The lake was freezing over as he watched from the shoreline and it was estimated that the lake would be inaccessible within a couple of days.

"Water froze instantly as it splashed onto my gear. I knew that if I fell in, I'd practically be snap frozen," he said. "I didn't like the idea of becoming a permanent ice block, so it was a good motivator to retain balance as I paddled".

Paddling for over an hour in this inhospitable environment, Bull acknowledges that it was very much a mental battle toward the end.

"I was spurring myself on internally, but I also had my support team cheering me on in Spanish from the shoreline. This definitely helped get me over the line."

"Exhausted after completing the paddle and getting out of the water mostly unscathed, it would've been the easiest thing to just leave my gear and the kayak behind and get off the mountain", explained Bull. "But it was important for me to leave nothing behind but footprints."

They managed to recover the kayak and bring it back to base camp. The success has taken its toll. "I've torn a tendon in my elbow which still needs fixing, I've lost some sensation in the tips of my toes and I feel like my back is yet to fully recover from the compression. But I'm happy that my body is still in one piece."

In terms of what's next? Bull explains that whilst he's actually very content being back at sea level, he's considering whether to head back to the lake and have a shot at the Swimming World Record. "I'm not a swimmer, so I'd have to undertake a dedicated training regime. I'm not fully convinced it's a great idea. I've done a lot of things people would consider foolhardy, but this would take the cake. Rather than adding layers as you do when climbing higher, I'd be taking everything off and then diving into subzero waters. That's if I can crack open the layer of ice that guards the lake throughout most of the year. It'd be pretty epic!"

You can check out Bull's latest adventures and discover if he decides to take a dip in the highest lake on Earth at www.DanielBull.com