

Half-way there!

Atte gets closer to his ultimate goal



Atte is a climber originally from Finland and is currently taking on the Seven Summits. Refer to our past issues to learn more about him and his achievements on the other peaks of the world. Go to www.sevensummits.com and his Facebook page www.facebook.com/Attesevensummits/ for more info!

I began my two-month expedition to climb Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world, in late March and I'm now roughly at the half way point of the expedition.

Words: Atte Miettinen

I'm climbing Mount Everest as part of the Everest Hybrid Team from US-based International Mountain Guides (IMG), one of the most experienced and best known guiding companies not only in the Himalayas but in the world.

My team consists of eight climbers, the seven others are:

- **Karl**, a wealth manager from Santa Monica, California
- **Bandar**, a real-estate executive from Riyadh, Saudi Arabia
- **Brad**, a lawyer from Richmond, Virginia
- **Duane**, a high-tech executive from Portland, Oregon
- **Lisa**, a lawyer from Houston, Texas
- **Vanessa**, a banker from Boston, Massachusetts
- **John**, a parks director from Columbus, Ohio

As I'm 36 years old, I fall well below our team's average age of 47. Having met many of the other teams on the mountain, I'm expecting that the average age is a bit lower in general, but that it also reflects people's ability to take a few months off to pursue a goal of their lifetime.

Our lead guide is 34-year old Mike, with whom I climbed Vinson Massif, the highest mountain in Antarctica, last November. Mike is supported by 35-year old Andy, so we basically have two guides for the group of eight climbers in addition to every climber having a personal climbing Sherpa.

Our expedition started on 28th March with a flight from Kathmandu to Lukla, a small town at 2840m altitude. The Lukla airport is famous for being named after Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay, who were the first to summit Mount Everest in 1953.

Unfortunately, more recently the airport has been named as the most dangerous airport in the world by the History Channel.

The airport has only one runway, which is only 460 metres long and 20 metres wide with a gradient of 12 degrees from north to south. In light of this small size, the runway can only accommodate small short-take-off-and-landing (STOL) airplanes and helicopters.

Further, topography makes go-around impossible: at the north-end of the runway rises a mountain wall and at the south-end of the runway is end of an angled drop of over 600 metres. This means there's no room for error when landing or taking off.

Fortunately our pilot navigated the tricky landing without problems and we finally started our trek towards Everest Base Camp on the afternoon of 28th March.

Our route took us via several small towns including Namche Bazaar, the main trading centre in the Khumbu Valley. We travelled light, carrying only our day packs with water, snacks and rain gear while most of our equipment was carried by Sherpas and yaks.

One day one of my team-mates got a bit too close to one of the yak's carrying a heavy load, which swung its horns, cutting the backpack strap of my friend and almost spearing him with a horn.



The yaks look deceptively docile!

The Sherpas are amazing. They are local people whose bodies have been accustomed to living and working in high altitude environments over generations. Today, the Sherpas are the backbone of every expedition. Each team employs a large army of Sherpas to support the expedition with various tasks from hauling equipment into various camps, cooking, setting fixed-lines to support climbers and guiding climbers to the summit.

After five days of trekking, we finally caught our first view of Mount Everest. It felt great to finally see the reason why we were here. A week or so later, we reached Everest Base Camp, or EBC as we call it, which is



our home for most of the remaining 5 to 6 weeks of our expedition.

EBC is like a little village, catering for both trekkers as well as climbers heading to Everest as well as the nearby mountains of Lhotse and Nuptse. My expedition was the first to arrive here but since then people have been streaming in and now EBC is home to around 800 people!

My team has great facilities. Each member of the team has a small tent all to themselves and we share a mess tent, in which our Sherpas keep us well fed. The food has been pretty normal: porridge, eggs and toast for breakfast; potatoes, beans, yak meat and tuna for lunch and dinner. Funnily, it seems the Sherpas call all fish tuna.

At EBC, we can take showers, wash clothes and also have internet access. However, the satellite based internet access costs US\$100 per 10Mb, which means no surfing the web, but just sending the blogs out and relying on family and friends sending text messages for major news events around the world.

The weather has been pretty good to us. The nights can be very cold and often bring a bit of snow, but the mornings especially are warm when the sun hits the camp. Afternoons tend to be pretty cloudy, which means that particularly by late afternoon many are wearing down pants and jackets. I keep resisting, telling myself that I'm from Finland and used to this...well, it doesn't always work and some evenings I've also had to rely on down pants ;-).

Our acclimatisation process i.e. getting our bodies used to the lower oxygen levels high up on the mountains is also going well. EBC is located at 5,365 metres, which means 6.5 times the height of Burj Khalifa and there's only about 50% of the oxygen compared to sea-level, which we're reminded of every time we try to do something strenuous like taking a shower!

The low level of oxygen is not only a nuisance but also a constant danger to everyone. Just days ago, a young Sherpa developed High Altitude Cerebral Edema (HACE) and High Altitude Pulmonary Edema (HAPE), our two most significant medical threats on the mountain, and died

in his sleep.

At the summit of Mount Everest, the amount of oxygen in the air falls to about 30-35% compared to sea-level, which is not sufficient to support human life. In fact, if you magically flew a helicopter to the summit and dropped off a person there, they would die within 30 minutes.

Some climbers still push their limits and try to summit the mountain without use of supplemental oxygen, but most fail because the effort is simply too much for one's body to cope with. Although my entire team will use supplemental oxygen on the summit bid, i.e. we'll breathe a mix of the ambient air as well as pressurised oxygen from bottles similar to SCUBA diving, we still have a long way to go before our bodies are ready for the challenge posed by the high altitude environment.

In light of this, we've been doing acclimatisation rotations on the mountains. These rotations involve us moving up to high camps, spending a couple of nights there to shock our bodies with the low oxygen levels and then returning back down to EBC to let our bodies recover.

Each acclimatisation rotation requires us to pass through the notorious Khumbu Icefall, a collection of crevasses between two mountain faces complemented by regular avalanches including snow, ice and rocks - often bigger than cars.

The path through the icefall requires crossing over dozens of deep crevasses, using ladders tied together. However, due to the instability of the icefall, the path through it changes almost daily as the glacier moves making the ladders unstable. Fortunately, a group of Sherpas, called Icefall Doctors, look after the route daily to ensure it remains as safe as possible for the climbers heading up the mountain.

However, I can assure you that "as safe as possible" is far from "safe".

We have a total of four high camps on the mountain. We

recently returned from a rotation during which we slept several nights at Camp 1 at 6,150 metres as well as Camp 2 at 6,500 metres. During the nights especially at the camps, most people, including our Sherpas, started developing signs of Acute Mountain Sickness (AMS), which, if not treated, can easily develop into life-threatening HACE or HAPE.

During the rotation, a Sherpa from another expedition fell into a crevasse and lost his life, providing yet another reminder of the constant dangers surrounding us.

We're currently enjoying a few days of rest at EBC before we start our last acclimatisation rotation on the mountain. We'll spend several nights in both Camp 2 as well as Camp 3 at 7,400 metres, before returning back to EBC to wait for a suitable weather window to open for us to start our summit bid.

The summit bid i.e. the round-trip from EBC via our four high camps to the summit of Mount Everest, at 8,850 metres, and back to EBC will take 5 to 6 days for even the strongest climbers, so weather plays a crucial part in our plans. During a normal climbing season, the weather window during which Everest can be climbed is about two weeks, so we need a little bit of luck to get our timing right on the mountain.

Right now if we stay healthy, the weather stays good and there are no negative surprises during our last acclimatisation rotation, we should start our summit push around 7th May. However, based on history, we'll have many surprises ahead of us!

