

# SUMMIT PUSH!

Atte Miettinen reaches his peak

After almost two months on Mount Everest we finally got the news we had been waiting for – a weather window seemed to be arriving, which would allow us to make a push for the summit!

My team of eight Western climbers, each paired with a local Sherpa and led by two Western guides set off from Everest Base Camp (EBC), at 5365m altitude, at 0300 on the morning of May 15<sup>th</sup>, in order to pass the infamous Khumbu Icefall before the heat of the day started melting the snow and ice making it extremely dangerous.

The crevasses and daily avalanches of the Khumbu Icefall had already claimed several lives this season and our Sherpas, who hated the icefall, made the place even more surreal by chanting prayers the entire way through the area last time.

We trekked in pitch-black with our way lit only by our headlamps. As we got close to the Khumbu Icefall, we suddenly heard the sound of a major avalanche on Nuptse, another +7000m mountain just a hundred meters away. Shortly afterwards we were sprayed by snow from the avalanche, but fortunately that's the worse that it got.

A few hours later, we were relieved to be out of the Khumbu Icefall and heading straight to Camp 2, sitting at 6500m. We had been at Camp 2 several times before, but the day's gain of over 1100m in altitude made us all tired, so when we got the news that we would rest a day at Camp 2 before continuing up, everyone was happy.

After the rest day, we continued from Camp 2 to the base of the Lhotse Face, a beautiful but dangerous wall of snow and ice that rises over one kilometre from the end of the Western Cwm towards China. At the base of the face, we put on our oxygen masks, switched on our supplemental oxygen and started climbing.



We were climbing a new route - earlier this season, steady rock and ice fall earlier had forced expedition teams to find a new route up the face.

The Lhotse Face is very steep at places, so we essentially climbed with the help of fixed ropes all the way – first through lower Camp 3 and eventually finding out tents at higher Camp 3. On the way, we came across tents completely destroyed by an avalanche and unfortunately also a Sherpa that had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He was breathing, but in a lot of pain, after a falling serac had broken both of his femurs.

High Camp 3, our home for the next few hours, was located at 7400m on a ledge with just enough space for the tents. We literally

spent our entire time at the camp inside the tents – reminded by a story of a Japanese climber who stepped outside of his tent in 1996 to go to the bathroom, slipped, and slid down the entire 1000 meters of the Lhotse Face.

The following morning we were preparing to make the move to our final camp, Camp 4, at 7900m, when a small avalanche hit my tent. It wasn't dangerous, but enough to remind me of who's king around here.

The morning also brought some bad news. Mike, our lead guide, had gotten sick and was not able to continue. He turned around with one of my teammates who was also sick, so we were now down to seven climbers and one guide.

I was shocked again when I stepped outside the tent to start the way to Camp 4. Over the past years, Mount Everest has become a popular destination, but I wasn't expecting over 200 people moving in a queue up the mountain!

I had no choice but to join the snail train up the mountain – there's only one safety rope on the Lhotse Face, so trying to start passing people is a very dangerous game to play. Not that being stuck to a rope on a steep mountain is that much safer – over the next hours, I watched several oxygen bottles, a water bottle and a camera fly by – and counted my stars for not getting hit by any of them.

Some 6.5 hours later I finally reached Camp 4, on the border of the "Death Zone". The Death Zone is a term used by climbers to refer to altitude above 8000m. Human life cannot be sustained above this altitude, so rather than living, climbers are technically dying slowly the entire time they spend above 8000m, especially if without oxygen.

I could feel the effects of the altitude, despite breathing supplemental oxygen, so I just crawled into my tent, which I was now sharing with two other people.

Concerned about the traffic jam between Camp 3 and Camp 4, we made a decision to start our final summit push early, which meant 2000 the same evening. In light of this, we laid in our tents, breathing oxygen and trying to eat and drink.

We had been warned that during the summit push, the average climber burns around 15,000 calories, six days worth of energy for a normal man, and hence we needed to eat and drink as much as possible.

However, one's digestion system shuts down at this altitude and instead your

body burns fat and muscle for energy, so I didn't have such good luck eating and drinking, with my mind focused on the summit push instead.

I couldn't sleep either, so I started preparing early and was ready well before 2000. This turned out to be great as I was first to set off for the summit from my expedition – some of my teammates left 30 mins later



and were stuck behind a traffic jam of a 100 people.

The route from Camp 4 at South Col to the top of the world is hard. The route climbs all the way to the summit without providing many places for rest.

It took me about 3.5 hours to reach the Balcony, at 8400m, where I changed an oxygen bottle before continuing to the South Summit, at 8750m. Just to put things into perspective, I consider myself pretty fit and I was moving at less than 150 vertical meters per hour!

I struggled to reach the South Summit and after finally reaching the top, I realised why – my oxygen mask had broken and I was now only breathing ambient air – with roughly 30% of the oxygen we're used to at sea-level.

There was no way to fix the mask, so I had to take the mask from my Sherpa, Pemba Dorjee, and send him back down to Camp 4 with the broken one, ending his chance to reach the summit.

I then continued towards the summit and soon found myself staring at the almost vertical 12 foot Hillary Step, at 8760m altitude, named after Sir Edmund Hillary, who was first to summit Mount Everest in 1953. I pushed myself hard to climb the Hillary Step and soon after, found myself on the summit ridge.

I felt very tired and moved slowly. I reached the summit just as the sun began to rise in the horizon and brought with it a beautiful glow around the mountains surrounding Everest.



**Atte** is a climber originally from Finland and is currently taking on the Seven Summits. Refer to our December 2011 issue and learn more about him in our people section.





It would have been great to stay and admire the sunrise for longer, but the weather was much colder than expected, around -40C and combined with heavy winds, made it the "ideal conditions" for developing serious cold injuries, such as frostbite. I preferred to make my descent without a cold injury, so rather than take my chances, I decided to head down early!

I kept reminding myself that the summit was only half way and that I had several hours left before I was back in Camp 4 at the South Col, so after 15-20 mins on the summit, I unceremoniously turned around and started navigating my way back in what had developed into a major traffic jam of people on the narrow ridge leading to Hillary Step.

The ridge has several kilometres of emptiness on both sides and with only one safety rope for the two way traffic to use, I manoeuvred around people very carefully, remembering that most accidents on Everest happen on the way down.

It took me about five hours to reach the relatively safety of Camp 4, where I collapsed into my tent or what I thought was my tent – I found the right one on the third try!

My plan had been to descend to Camp 2 after the summit but my summit push, which had taken me about 14 hours, had wiped



me out, so I decided to spend another night at the South Col. The night was terrible. I ran out of oxygen, so sleeping wasn't going to happen, so I just waited for the morning, lying in my down suit. When the morning arrived, I got a new bottle of oxygen and headed down the mountain. Pemba was now back with me, having been part of two rescues since leaving me at the South Summit, and we were making good time.

We reached Camp 2 in about four hours, tired but happy to be in thicker air, where we no longer needed bottled oxygen.

I spent the afternoon in Camp 2 sitting in the mess tent and trying to rehydrate. I must have had close to 15 cups of juice!

While at Camp 2 I learned that five of our seven climbers as well as Andy, our guide, had made it to the summit. Few of my teammates had experienced similar situations as I did with my oxygen, but fortunately everyone returned alive. Four climbers from other expeditions had perished during their summit bids on the same route as us.

However, not everyone was equally lucky. Duane, a 55-year old American, arrived to Camp 2 and mentioned in passing he couldn't feel his toes. I asked to have a look at them, recognising obvious signs of frostbite we ended up having Duane evacuated by helicopter. He's now at home in the US facing months of recovery, which will hopefully save his toes and thumb.

Early the next morning I led my expedition down towards Everest Base Camp (EBC). Our remaining guide Andy had been forced to stay behind in Camp 2 with one of my teammates, so I volunteered to guide the rest of the team down.

It was a great feeling to pass the Khumbu Icefall for the last time, see our camp and be welcomed by the camp staff – knowing that we were done and out of danger. Get-



ting altitude related problems after returning to EBC is highly unlikely so reaching EBC is kind of like reaching the finish line of a marathon...or well, a series of marathons.

A couple of hours later, I had packed my bags and was sitting on a helicopter on the way to Kathmandu. It was a bizarre feeling, waking up at 6500m altitude and a few hours later having lunch at 1500m in central Kathmandu. I headed straight to lunch at the hotel – before even taking a shower. I looked bad enough for the restaurant manager at the hotel to come and ask me if I actually stayed at the hotel – I didn't tell him that I had just climbed the highest mountain in the world, I'm not sure he would have understood how I felt.

