



THE ROOF OF THE WORLD

Of the hundreds who have successfully climbed the highest mountains of each of the world's seven continents, Dubai-based climber Atte Miettinen was the first Finn. He talks to MF about conquering the world, and about the realities of staring death in the face at extreme altitude.

Relieved. That's how he feels. Having returned home safe and with all his fingers and toes intact, Atte Miettinen says he's glad that his Seven Summits challenge is over and that he survived one of the most tragic years in recent climbing history. Having successfully scaled Everest in May on what turned out to be one of the most deadly days in recent history, Miettinen's final challenge lay in Alaska on the treacherous slopes of the 6196m high Mount McKinlay, or Denali, as it is better known by the climbing fraternity. Just two weeks after returning from Nepal, he found himself on familiar territory: combatting snowstorms, facing the threat of avalanches and a tortuous uphill slog, dragging a sled.

"It felt good to be on Denali. And mentally, once you've spent two months on Everest, you're telling yourself a) I just climbed a big mountain. The altitude isn't going to be a problem, technically, this isn't going to be a problem, and you're used to living in tents and being wet and tired and hungry." "Denali is a cold mountain. It is very prone to bad storms. Everest tends to get the attention of the press, and this year 11 people died while I was there - but five people died on Denali while I was there. It's dangerous: avalanches, crevasses, the combination makes it a pretty interesting place, and a place you need to respect," he explained.

"A normal expedition on Denali takes between two and three weeks, and you cannot get resupplied when you're on the mountain, so you have to take everything, all your food, fuel, gear, with you. It starts adding up in terms of weight. I had about 70kgs that I either needed to carry or pull in a sled," he said.

"Denali is also famous for crevasses. The glacier moves one metre a day, and massive cracks can open up at any point. There's constant movement, and you constantly hear avalanches. If not twice an hour, then once an hour you hear an avalanche somewhere. And, sometimes in white out conditions, you can hear that it's close but you don't know where it is," he explained.

The conditions and territory requires climbers to move in groups of four, roped together. The theory is that if one member falls into a crevasse, the other three can react quickly and pull them to safety. It happened to Atte's team.

"We avoided crevasses until the last day. We were moving on the glacier when one of our guys disappeared in front of me. Luckily we reacted pretty fast, and we pulled him back – but he has an interesting story to tell his friends back in London," Atte said. Another climber in British-led expedition wasn't quiet so fortunate.

"One of their guys was dragged in to a crevasse by his sled and he broke his neck. That was very sobering," he said.



So too was news that four Japanese climbers had been swept away in an enormous avalanche just a day's climb ahead of Atte's expedition. Atte's team was the first point of contact for the only surviving member of the team as he turned back and headed down the mountain for help.

"He was part of a five man crew, and four of them were killed in an avalanche – in a relatively safe place. They had been hit by a big avalanche. When I left the mountain, they were still trying to find them."

For Atte and his team of eight, progress through the mountain's four advance camps was relatively event free. The team was split in to crews of four, and they each moved up the mountain during the night.

"The logic is that all those crevasses that are warming up during the day,



so it's very easy to fall through. So, in the lower camps we walk at night, and at camp 2 we make the switch.

Much of the trip is spent moving gear. With sleds loaded with 70kgs of essential kit, Atte said it's both too dangerous to carry so much, and too much of a physical demand to haul it all up in one go.

"At times we're walking on ground that is pretty steep, and we're traversing, so the sled is literally hanging off you, trying to yank you off the mountain. I had a couple of cases where I was the anchorman of one of the rope teams because I was one of the more experienced climbers, and I had a very heavy sled, and as we turned a corner, the sled started rolling. It was like a crocodile doing a death roll – and you have to literally stop and get your iceaxe in to the mountain and hope it doesn't rip you off the mountain. It gains so much momentum as it's rolling."

HERE'S HOW ATTE TACKLED HIS SEVEN SUMMITS CHALLENGE*

1) MOUNT KILAMANJARO

Location: Tanzania, Africa
Summit date: Jan 3, 2007
Summit altitude: 5895m
Abiding memory: "I have a combination of feelings for Kilimanjaro. I had met my wife six months before, and it was a weird learning experience for a couple to be on a mountain where you're constant stressed, cold and tired. But it was a great trip. The feeling of standing on the highest point in Africa on a snow covered peak, and thinking about lions walking around below us was pretty cool."



3) MOUNT KOSCIUSZKO

Location: New South Wales, Australia
Summit date: April 9 2010
Summit altitude: 2,228m
Abiding memory: "It's the least challenging of the Seven Summits. It's really a gentle stroll on well marked tracks with paved sections. It seems a little strange to be doing it for climbing reasons when you see people with small kids and strollers walking up too. But the views, like all of these mountains, are great."



2) MOUNT ELBRUS

Location: southern Russia
Summit date: July 7, 2009
Summit altitude: 5642m
Abiding memory: "The main memory from Elbrus is that the location is in a very explosive area. You're in southern Russia close to the border with Georgia. To your east you have Chechnya, to your Upcasia. Everybody wants independence, the border is disputed, you have military everywhere, so you're kinda like not sure that it's really the place you want to be. It's an interesting place. Not the most beautiful mountain, but an interesting place, and a great trip."



4) CARSTENZ PYRAMID

Location: Papua, Indonesia
Summit date: May 3, 2011
Summit altitude: 4884m
Abiding memory: "It was one of my favourite trips, along with Everest. It was so exotic, a true Indiana Jones story where you take a private plane in to the jungle and trek 100km to the mountain with locals who are naked apart from little guard over their private parts. The mountain is basically just rock. Wet rock. Rain all the time, you're in the jungle, there's a Tyrolean traverse between two peaks with a wire hanging between them with 100m of nothing below you."



5) VINCENT MASSIF

Location: Antarctica
Summit date: Nov 26, 2011
Summit altitude: 4897m
Abiding memory: "Flying on to the glacier in a Russian military plane, then a smaller ski plane to the Vincent base camp, seeing all these mountains and the captain saying nobody has set foot on these mountains before. About 1200 people have climbed Vincent, 3000 people have climbed Everest. But the mountains around, no one has set foot on."



7) MOUNT EVEREST

Location: Nepal - Tibet, Asia
Summit date: May 19, 2011
Summit altitude: 8850m
Abiding memory: "For me, reaching the summit just as the sun was rising was a magical moment. The red glow all around, and knowing that you were only half-way. I just climbed the highest mountain in the world, and that was a great feeling. The other aspect of the mountain is that you remember the sad part. You remember that a lot of people paid the ultimate price."



6) CERRO ACONCAGUA

Location: Argentina, South America
Summit date: Dec 26, 2011
Summit altitude: 4897m
Abiding memory: "I was a little bit apprehensive about the trip because the mountain had kicked my butt before (in 2009) when I developed a chest and throat infection, but I was determined that it wasn't going to get the better of me. We summited on the last possible day before I had to fly off. Weather was difficult. So it was a great feeling to go back and check it off the list and say you beat it. It gives you a lot of confidence. To be able to say you have conquered it is an amazing feeling."



8) DENALI/MOUNT MCKINLEY

Location: Argentina, South America
Summit date: Dec 26, 2011
Summit altitude: 4897m
Abiding memory: "Compared to Everest, I feel guilty saying it, but Denali was easy. It isn't at all. But I think being acclimatised certainly helped me to get used to the physical demands very quickly. It felt good to be on Denali. And mentally, once you've been two months on Everest, you're telling yourself a) I just climbed a big mountain. The altitude isn't going to be a problem, technically, this isn't going to be a problem, and you're used to living in tents and being wet and tired and hungry."



*It was really eight mountains. There is some debate over whether Mt Kosciuszko, the tallest mountain in Australia, should be counted or whether Carstenz Pyramid, the tallest in Australasia is more worthy. Two lists exist - the Bass and the Messner. Atte did both.



SEARCHING FOR THE NEXT ADVENTURE

> Having summited the tallest peaks on each of the seven continents, Atte is keen to do something a little different.

"I've been resting for a few days by I think I'm going to have to start running because I have a marathon in Finland in five weeks, and a friend told me that I should be able to do well," he explained.

He's also looking a little further afield. Touched by Antarctica's remoteness, Atte is keen to be the first to summit some of the mountains surrounding Vincent Massif and is looking at putting together an expedition to tackle the project next year.



The odd little scare aside, Atte said the upper reaches of the mountain gave him some of the best climbing weather he has ever experienced. Having suffered through -30 degree snow storms which had collapsed their tents, the break in the weather really lifted spirits.

"The beautiful part of the route in the last few days going from Camp 3 to Camp 4, and then from Camp 4 to the summit where you're walking at times on a knife edge ridge. It's really beautiful. One of the most beautiful settings that you see on any mountain. But you look down, and it's a steep fall on each side. One wrong step and it's a long way down."

SUMMIT DAY

"The weather was beautiful. There had been a lot of bad weather for a couple of weeks before we got there, so you go through a bit of an emotional rollercoaster as you up the mountain, and there's team coming back down. Guys shaking their heads looking pretty miserable, saying 'we spent nine days in Camp 4 waiting for weather and it never came.'

"You keep going, worrying about the weather but hoping that good weather has to come at some point, And we got awesome weather on summit day. It was great

"We got a small window because the weather started to deteriorate when we descended from Camp 4, but on summit day we couldn't have asked for better weather. It was a little bit windy, but nothing we couldn't handle, it was quite warm.

"I kind of felt that I had earned the good weather because on Everest, it was so miserable on summit day."

We had expected about 9 hours to the summit. We reached the summit in 7.25hrs and a quarter, so we were moving at a pretty good pace despite the fact that we had quite a bit of stuff to carry.

"But it's a beautiful feeling when you hit the last stretch on the mountain. You climb a bill called The Pig Hill, then you have about 40 minutes of summit ridge to go, and it's a beautiful setting because you can see mountains around you in the distance, clouds below you, and you can see the dream of several years right in front of you."

"It's quite a good summit. Everest has a pretty small summit, and the tip of Denali is pretty small too, but it's big enough for a team of eight people to stand there and take a few team photos."

"We spent about an hour on the summit, which is longer than I've spent on any summit, because we were waiting for our second rope team to catch up."

"Your mind is always reminding you that this is only halfway. There's no time for celebrations yet, we still have a long way to go - just to get to the high camp, let alone get all the way down."

FEELING LUCKY

The return trip to Dubai gave Atte a chance to catch up with several Everest team members in LA. Two guys had got in to trouble with their feet during the expedition, one far worse than the other, and both who Atte had helped treat at Everest Base Camp.

"We had two guys: one got proper frostbite. He had issues, so we started treatment on him, and I got an email from his saying that he's going to lose all of his toes on one foot despite what we did."

"But we had another guide who came down and asked us to look at his toes too because they felt numb. They had a little bit of white on them at the tips, so we treated him too, and I saw him in LA and they're totally black. It looks like someone has totally burned his toes. Despite his pretty nasty looking feet, he's going to keep his toes, which is great news.

Having completed the Seven Summits Challenge, Atte is getting used to life back in Dubai.

"My parents are very relieved, especially my mum, who says now I can concentrate on being a dad. But the feeling is excellent. You feel tired, but you took on a big project, finished it, and learned a lot about setting goals, pushing yourself throughout the mountains. It's a great feeling, but at the same time, you have this



kind of emptiness. Now what? Don't tell me I've got to get a real job, now."

Att'e biggest challenge for the immediate future is that of becoming a father. Wife Delanii is expecting the couple's first child later this year, and Atte says he's looking forward to it.

"Compared to Everest, I think it's going to be a huge challenge and responsibility. It's not a two month expedition: it's a lifelong commitment, and a true adventure," he said.

EVEREST: BREWING THE PERFECT STORM IS THE MOUNTAIN HEADING FOR A MAJOR DISASTER?

> **Atte is adamant** that Everest is on the brink of a major climbing catastrophe - and it's only luck which has stopped that from happening so far. Eleven people died on the mountain during his two month expedition, four of them on the day he summited. Traffic jams - where too many people are squeezed into bottlenecks on sections of the mountain - caused several delays, which then led to other problems. But that's just the tip of the iceberg.

"I think Everest is poised for a perfect storm where a lot of things are about to come together which will cause a big accident. I've spoken to a lot of very experienced guys, including Russell Brice who owns HimEx and has put more people on the summit than any other company, and Russell is convinced this is going to happen.

"Not a small accident, but in the scale of 50 people dying

when they get exposed on the ridge," Atte said. Brice was so concerned, he shut down operations on the mountain this year - prior to the casualties occurring. Atte says climber experience varies considerably, and certain instances this year highlighted the dangers of climbing in such huge groups.

"Heading to Camp Four and standing in traffic, someone yelled 'watch out'. Next thing I know, a 7.5kg oxygen went flying past, then another, then a camera, helmets, water bottles. That sort of thing would kill you. You need to have some sort of experience. Even in my Everest team, there were people who didn't know how to use crampons. Everest is not a place to learn these kinds of things."

"The governments involved need to sort this out, but the companies also need to take responsibility before something major happens. I'm convinced of that."