Sean Disney, epic adventurer

With 65 extreme mountaineering expeditions under his belt, Disney still has high hopes for more

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Once the climbing bug bit, mountaineer extraordinare Sean Disney knew the passion was too big to remain a hobby. He had climbed trees as a kid, moving on to mountains soon enough, first the Magaliesberg, then Mount Kenya and, eventually on to Mount Lenin in Russia. Disney and his lifelong climbing buddy, Alex Harris, were the first South Africans to climb above 7 000 metres. “The problem,” smiles Disney, “is that we just couldn’t get enough leave from our jobs to go climbing, so we had to work for ourselves.” And so the two started Adventure Dynamics, the first South African company to offer enthusiasts highly specialised technical mountaineering trips around the world. “Now I can’t really think what else to do,” jokes Disney, who has personally guided about 55 expeditions over the past 18 years.

According to Disney, the North Pole, which he visited in April this year, has been his favourite expedition to date. “You ski on a frozen sea, pulling a sled and watching for polar bears. It’s a fascinating environment.” But, he cites the view from the top of Everest as still number one. “You can actually see the curvature of the earth – it’s awesome on a clear day. When you get to the top of Everest it’s actually quite abstract, because you’re in the zone and climbing for your life. And on top you are also only half way, so the experience becomes emotional for me only when I step off the mountain.”

Everest is a 10-week trip that requires a year’s planning and two tonnes of equipment. Disney has summited Everest twice and on another attempt had to turn back just 300 metres from the top. “But that’s why I am alive today,” he
There is certainly a chance of dying on Everest because climbing is a risky pastime. If you do see a body, it shocks you into being careful.
journey, not just the summit, because you may not reach the top, though we do have a 95 percent success rate. Whenever we go on an expedition it's a team effort as well as an individual effort. Safety comes first and we are fully prepared for any problems. Importantly, once you summit you are only halfway there because you still have to get down. There's no point burning out on the way up and then having to be carried down, because sometimes it's not possible. I think all climbers need to have fear – it keeps you alive.”

Disney has been just metres from death before, when climbing Aspiring Peak in New Zealand. “It’s a sheer, cliff-like mountain, about 4 000 metres high, and I slipped on a piece of verglass ice and slid towards a 3 000-metre drop off. I managed to self arrest with my ice axe and stopped about five metres from the cliff edge. That’s the closest I have come to death. It felt like a movie. I was quite happy when I stopped.”

Disney says he's not running out of mountains to climb, though he has now started paragliding off of them. “I’m tired of walking downhill,” he laughs, “besides it’s how I keep myself entertained. Every year I set myself new goals and do new things. The next big thing is an 8 200-metre-high peak in Tibet, called Cho Oyu, the 6th highest peak in the world. It’s a new mountain for me, planned for April next year.”

So what is it about mountaineering that keeps him passionate? “To me it’s about freedom, travelling, seeing new cultures, and enduring personal challenges. It simplifies things, brings you back to basics and teaches you what really counts. I think it’s more dangerous driving a motorbike in Joburg than climbing Everest. The downside is that mountain climbing is a selfish sport that takes you away from your family.”

And what does he think about when he climbs? “Let’s just get to the top of this thing, then we can go home,” he jests, adding, “I don’t always summit and my failures humble my successes and keep me grounded. Besides, I do it for the adventure, and raising my two kids is actually far more challenging than Everest.”

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