AINT NO MOUNTAIN HIGH ENOUGH

On 22 May this year, Jo’burg-based banker Mandy Ramsden summited Everest, becoming the first South African – and African – woman to join the illustrious group of mountaineers who have climbed the Seven Summits, the highest peak on every continent. Fiona McIntosh traces her journey.
When she accepted an invitation to join a group of work colleagues and their friends on a trip to Mount Kilimanjaro in 2006, Mandy Ramsden had no inkling that five years later she would enter the record books. Recently single, the challenge of climbing Africa's highest peak seemed just what the doctor ordered. She'd never seen snow before and found the camaraderie, laughter, physical challenge and exultation of 'topping out' intoxicating. By the end of the trip she was a convert to high-altitude mountaineering.

It's an addictive pursuit. Three months later she was in Russia climbing Elbrus, Europe's highest peak, but the Seven Summits were still far from her thoughts. 'It was only when I received an SMS after the successful climb saying "Well done – two down, five to go" that the idea even crossed my mind,' she says. And only when she topped out on Aconcagua (South America, number three) later that year did she realise that going for the Seven Summits was an achievable, if lofty goal.

Her next target, North America's highest peak, Denali (Mt McKinley), was a little more serious. 'Denali is high and cold and required a degree of self-sufficiency I hadn't needed previously,' she admits. 'But I made it.' She had also gathered a circle of friends set on the same course, and I think we fanned each other's flames of enthusiasm as we summited one mountain and started planning the next one. After conquering Denali, I began to think I could climb Everest, though the goal was not only to complete the list, but to see the world and indulge in a pastime I'd begun to really crave.'

High-altitude mountaineering requires physical stamina, but also a special kind of stubbornness. Mandy insists she's no great athlete and finds extreme cold and carrying heavy loads difficult, but years of experience have taught her valuable lessons that enabled her to survive in the death zone. 'As a thermally challenged person I've learnt to always pack extra heavy duty thermal gear and not to let cold fingers and toes go too far.'

So how do you train? 'I started road running after my younger daughter was born in 1996. I wanted to lose my pregnancy weight and thought I should try a run around the block – no more than 800m. I was shocked when I couldn't do it and tried again the next day, and again the next, until I was doing a few kilometres. After my younger son was born in 1998, I picked it up again and tried a 10 km race, after which I was hooked. The distances grew and I eventually ran a marathon. I've been running long distance ever since, not at great speed, but at a steady pace. I think this has provided a good platform for my climbs. Still, while training for ultra marathons creates a good endurance base, it does little for your core strength, so in September last year I took up Pilates with a personal trainer. I don't enjoy any sort of endorphin-free exercise, but I became more motivated when I started to see stomach muscles for the first time.'

Of course it's not just your fitness that you need to worry about. The logistics of an attempt on Everest are almost as daunting as the physical demands, particularly when you're a working mom with four kids. Preparing for a 10-week absence from home – paying bills in advance, buying winter school uniforms, stocking the pantry, trying to cover all contingencies (like sick pets, electricity and plumbing failures) – had to be planned for and financed. Standard Bank, where Mandy is a director, had been supportive of all her climbs, topping up her leave allowance for Everest, and she trusted that her two older children (Shaun, 21 and Katy, 19) would do a
sterling job house-sitting (which they apparently did).

She had put her house in order, so to

speak, when she left for Kathmandu in

March 2010 and the teams acclimatization

programme went well. It was all looking

good until the early hours of 22 May,

summit day.

The 24 hours following our departure

from the South Col on our summit bid

were the most mentally and physically

exhausting I’ve ever endured. Everything

happens very slowly at 8 000m. There are

numerous accounts of the climb, some

written by celebrated climbers, others

by blind men, amputees, the oldest and

the youngest summiters. These are stories

I’ve devoured over the past few years, but

I don’t recall any that suitably describe

the scratch of slipping metal on rock as a

crampon fails to catch on the near vertical

South Summit rocks. I will go back and

look for references to the downward-
sloping rock slab at the top of the Hillary

Step and the gap nearby that will hold

captive a carelessly placed boot.

‘Much of the climb took place in the cold dark of early morning, but as I struggled

with my desire to give up and head down, dawn’s glow on the horizon and Mike

Roberts’ (the Adventure Consultants team

leader) gentle “Are you sure about that?”

kept me moving upward, until, in the
distance, I could see the jumble of prayer

flags fluttering at the top of the world.

‘What a privilege to step on to that

small, snowy plateau. It would have been

impossible without the ever positive Mike,
or Pemba Chote, my Sherpa shadow, who

brushed aside any clumsy attempt to clip

on to ropes, checked and changed my

oxygen bottles, was my brain when

I was too exhausted to think straight.

‘When you look at the summit photos

we look happy, strong, triumphant. What

they don’t show are the tears, the frostbiten

cheeks, the frost-nipped fingers and

toes, the buckling knees and the disbelief

at the 13-year-old American boy, Jordan

Romero, Everest’s youngest ever summiter,

who cheerfully arrived from the north side

with his father at the same time as us. We

stayed for around 20 minutes, savouring

the moment in spite of the discomforts.

Fourteen hours after our departure, we

stumbled back on to the South Col, fell

into our small, warm, yellow dome and

slept solidly for the first time in weeks.’

The quest was by no means all hardship.

There are many, many laughs on every trip

and deep friendships formed. Mandy recalls

naked runs in Antarctica, high-altitude

swims and encounters with complete
debacles that make for some very colourful

memories. And she still laughs at her less than graceful
descent from Everest, achieved largely on

her bottom, which to the amusement of all

resulted in a trail of down from the seat of

her down suit billowing in the breeze.

So what’s next? ‘Well I won’t need the
down suit for a while. The challenge now

is to get back into “normal” life and be

happy about it. My next running goal

is to earn my Two Oceans blue number

next year. I fancy the idea of another

8 000m peak in a few years time, but

have no shortage of things to do and

high places to visit before then.’

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