

CLIMB

every

mountain

AIMING HIGH: Clockwise: Thea-Mari du Rand waves the SA flag on the summit of Mt McKinley in Alaska; reaches the top of Carstensz Pyramid in Indonesia; tries out tree climbing and then it's back to climbing at a Free State resort

South African Thea-Mari du Rand, 28, has climbed five of the world's seven major summits and intends to become the youngest woman ever to conquer all of them. She told CLAIRE KEETON about her plans to climb in Antarctica in December and to tackle Mount Everest next May

Q: Why do you want to climb the seven summits?

A: It's my dream. I am a mountaineer and only eight women in the world have got to the top and they were all 33 or older. The only South African who has done it was a man [Sean Wisedale], nine years older than me.

Q: How did you get interested in mountaineering?

A: From the age of two, my parents took me on day hikes and at university I started rock climbing. When I got my degree [in sports science], I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro to celebrate. I summited on December 31 1998. I enjoyed it and realised I was reacting well to altitude [high altitude and the lack of oxygen affects people differently].

Q: From Africa's highest peak, how did you gain experience?

A: I went to Mount Elbrus in Russia and it was all new to me, the crevasses, the cold. I was very fit and fast. I had a green fleece and got the nickname "Green Pocket Rocket". We summited on August 10 1999.

Q: Where did you go next?

A: In December 1999 I went to Argentina, where I summited Mount Aconcagua on the 16th. We almost didn't get to the summit, there were two storms and we were running out of fuel and food.

Q: What happened during your first attempt to summit Mount McKinley in Alaska in 2000?

A: I got dehydrated and didn't eat and then I was physically weak and needed a rest day. The rest of the team made it up. It was the longest, most horrible 11 hours of my life waiting at camp after so much effort and training.

Q: What was your happiest moment?

A: My best day was when I got to the top of Mount McKinley on May 28 2001 — a year after I had to back down. It was a very emotional day for me and I didn't even notice I had frostbite on my cheeks.

Q: Which was the most adventurous trip?

A: Going to climb Carstensz Pyramid [in Indonesia]. It was a clandestine operation as we climbed without a permit, after two expeditions had been cancelled. Halfway up we thought we would be

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forced to go back down again but we summited on October 25 2003.

Q: Who has inspired and supported you?

A: Alex Harris and Sean Disney. [They have climbed most summits and Du Rand has climbed with them.]

Q: What makes a great climber?

A: Enjoying mountains, determination and self-discipline.

Q: How do you prepare for a climb?

A: I train very hard: swimming, running and spinning. I have done a triathlon and would like to do adventure racing.

Q: What is it like being a woman in a male-dominated environment?

A: I'm always one of the boys and sometimes would like to feel more feminine. I don't want special treatment and when we carry food, for example, we divide it equally even if I'm half the weight of the boys.

Q: Who are your role models?

A: My parents. They have been very supportive of me and what I am doing.

Q: How are you going to fund your future expeditions?

A: I am searching full-time to find sponsors to climb Mount Vinson in Antarctica and Mount Everest in May 2005. I raised money myself for the other trips but these two will cost R700 000.

Q: What do you do to relax?

A: Anything adventurous. I like white-water rafting and parachuting. I also like spending time with friends.

Q: What's your message to potential mountaineers?

A: Go for it and never give up on your dreams.

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