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Mandy Ramsden

FIRST SA WOMAN TO CREST THE BIG 7

On the bleak wind-swept South Col of Everest. Photo MIKE ROBERTS

Summit of Denali. Photo BEN SWART

Summit of Elbrus. Photo MANDY RAMSDEN COLLECTION

Aconcagua – sunrise on summit day. Photo PETER HAY

Arthur and Mandy on the summit of Carstenz. Photo MANDY RAMSDEN COLLECTION

Summit of Vinson. Photo BEN SWART
Earlier this year Jo’burg-based Mandy Ramsden became the first woman to climb the 7 Summits.
Ramsden, mother of four and corporate business woman, started her quest six years ago and has methodically ticked off the big 7 in good style, becoming one of the few to have succeeded in summiting all of them on her first attempt. I’ve known Mandy almost from when she started her journey and I decided to find out what drove this unassuming and modest woman to accomplish this astonishing feat and what effect it had (and has) on her life, so I caught up with her some weeks ago, shortly after her return from Everest, and asked her a few questions.

TONY LOURENS

You wanted to do something special and rewarding with your life. Why mountaineering?

MANDY RAMSDEN

Mountaineering found me rather than the other way around. I’d wanted to climb Kili for years, but suffered from that inertia that sets in when children and career occupy most of your time. I was suddenly and rather traumatically single and, when I was invited to join some colleagues on the Umbwe route, it seemed like just what I needed: a holiday and a physical challenge in a beautiful place in the company of good people doing something I’d always talked about but never got off my bottom to do. Then I simply got hooked. I got high (if you’ll pardon the pun) on the emotion of topping out. I had a strong summit day, I saw snow for the first time and I came home with some wonderful new friends. And that’s what every mountain has delivered: a new corner of the world, a new challenge, a colourful array of weird and wonderful people and some friends for life. I don’t know of any other sport that delivers such a rich and diverse result. I still do a lot of running, I’ve paddled, I can be persuaded to do the occasional bicycle race (if there’s a beer tent at the finish) and I love (very) easy rock climbs, but none blow my hair back quite like the package that is a mountaineering expedition.

What lead to the confirmation of the 7 Summits Journey?

When on Elbrus, I received an sms saying ‘well done – two down, five to go – mind the vodka’. Perhaps a subconscious 7 Summits seed was planted then. The rest of the message was completely ignored. Sean Disney offered me a spot on his Aconcagua trip later that same year, when another client cancelled. The weather co-operated and we managed to summit, bringing my total to three. When Sean put a trip to Carstensz Pyramid together, I didn’t hesitate. By now the idea of the 7 Summits was becoming real. Carstensz was a huge financial commitment – twice as costly than the other three put together – and there was no guarantee we’d even lay eyes on the goal, such were the logistical challenges to just get to base camp for what is really just a one-day rock climb. All a bit over the top for someone who didn’t intend to complete the list.

At that point, Everest seemed a somewhat fanciful notion, but I gained a great deal of confidence on Denali (which remains the hardest of them all, for me). Here there were no mules or porters, it was cold beyond comprehension, the weather was wildly volatile and I would be away from home for much longer than I’d ever been before. This was a good test – the real deal – and I started to think that I may have earned the right to start thinking about Everest.

How do your children feel about your climbing?

Well it seemed that I was the only one in tears when we said goodbye at OR Tambo in March.

They’re aware that climbing can be dangerous, but we’ve spoken at length about the rules of the game. I have made a promise to them that I’ll stick to those rules and never push my luck. Matthew, my youngest, declared to his friends that he is never worried because he is used to my climbing. He’s very keen to do Kilimanjaro and I can’t wait to take him. Both boys are keen rock climbers and seem to ‘get’ my need to do this.

Amongst my most treasured possessions are two emails – one from each of my daughters – saying how proud they are of me, not only because I have summited mountains, but because of the passion and effort they have seen go into each one, and that they are grateful for the role model I have been for them. It’s hard to imagine a better or more moving endorsement.

Do you think it has benefitted them in any way?

It would be fanciful to imagine that being away for long stretches of time has any direct benefit to one’s children, but I hope that they have seen that effort and commitment pays off, that even the most ordinary people can aim high and that life is there to be lived. I try to impress upon them that I care very little whether they want to climb or not, but would be thrilled if they could find something that they really love doing.

How do you feel about leaving them?

Guilty. But then I know mothers who feel guilty about leaving their children for an hour with a babysitter while they steal a well-earned coffee break. Guilt comes unavoidably as part of the motherhood package. Nonetheless, I’m very proud of the confident, independent young people they’ve become. I worry about whether they have everything they need, whether the logistics system is functioning, that they’re healthy and safe, but I know that Plan A is pretty strong and that Plans B and C will kick in in the unlikely event of failure. For the first time, on Everest, I had a satellite phone and access to email, which meant we could keep in touch. We spoke every Sunday other than the day after summiting, which brought them much closer to me and made my lengthy absence much easier on everyone.

What have been the biggest challenges you’ve encountered?

The before and the after. The longer the trip, the more organised my household has needed to be. Getting physically ready for Everest was the easy part. Trying to work
out how much washing powder is used in ten weeks was very stressful. I needed to ensure the lights and water stayed on, the school fees were paid, winter school uniforms were bought and that my eldest son had access to enough funds to deal with contingencies like plumbers and vet bills.

Coming down always takes much longer and is much harder than going up. I am finding the post-expedition re-entry phase more and more difficult, particularly in the very structured environment in which I live and work. I’m told it’s called the ‘post-expedition blues’ – a dangerous condition in which one desires change and is prone to making hasty decisions. If you can recognise it for what it is, it can be managed without too much damage!

Which mountains have been the most challenging?

Each one has brought its unique anxieties and hardships. With Kilimanjaro, I was new to altitude and worried about whether I’d cope; with Elbrus, I was new to snow and ice and faced proper cold for the first time. On Aconcagua, the biggest anxiety was the volatile weather. It was also much higher and colder than the others to date. Carstensz required some technical skills and a head for exposure, while Denali was extremely physically demanding requiring that I transport, at times, almost half my body weight. Vinson was difficult to reach and bloody cold. The biggest challenge around Everest was the huge commitment of time and the things that go with spending loads of it in such a harsh environment: impatience, boredom and homesickness.

Have you ever felt that you were in over your head?

Only once, and that was on summit day on Everest. It was dark and my goggles were fogging up, my oxygen mask wouldn’t stay on my face, it was much steeper and there was much more mixed climbing than I had imagined. I thought the Hilary Step would be the crux of the day, but the Triangular Face and the South Summit Rocks took me by surprise. Going up them was tough, but I was more concerned about how I’d get down. In the end, in broad daylight, things didn’t seem so bad, although I felt much more comfortable abseiling them, where others chose to arm-rappel down.
How did you feel on the summit of Everest?

Elated, emotional, relieved, very cold. I remember being fascinated by the fact that people were coming up the North Ridge towards the summit. I had a photo of my children and a pair of flags somewhere in my down suit, but I couldn’t find the energy to take them out. It was a beautiful day and we could see Kanchenjunga and Cho Oyu very clearly. I was thrilled. Still am.

How do you top Everest?

I’ve always been told that size doesn’t count. There are plenty of harder, more beautiful mountains to climb. My 7 Summits journey has been as much about exploring the world as its been about climbing, and there are many places I’d like to see.

How do you feel having completed your 7 Summits goal?

A little empty but liberated in a way. I’m free to seek new goals. Some ideas are starting to form. I’m looking forward to climbing without feeling any self-imposed 7 Summits pressure, which was definitely there once I summited Denali.