

Remza

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cap a distinguished feat of reaching the highest point on every continent.

"I think it always has been kind of a distant goal, but I'm not so driven behind it," Remza said. "I always kind of joke and kid that I will probably be one of the first people to accidentally climb the Seven Summits.

"I enjoy climbing mountains with people and guiding them. That seems to be more of my drive."

Remza's drive seems to be a never-ending quest of reaching some of the highest and most-challenging points on earth.

He's been on top of Aconcagua 12 times. Rising 22,841 feet in the Andes, it's the highest point not located in the Himalayas. He's climbed Mount McKinley seven times. At 20,320 feet, it is North America's highest peak and the longest vertical climb in the world. He resides in both Crested Butte, Colo., and Seattle, and hitting Mount Rainer in Washington seems like a weekend jaunt for Remza, with 55 trips to the 14,410-foot mountain.

All this while helping others accomplish an unimaginable feat for most straight-thinking men and women. Expectations of a guide can be as high as the peak itself, especially on Everest, where a trip can cost around \$50,000 or more. Those who sign up expect the logistical minutiae to be handled by others, and also count on guides who know the dangerous terrain and understand the mind-numbing effects of thin air in high altitudes.

"That's a whole different world up there; altitude is exponential," explains mountaineer Alan Arnette, who is noted for chronicling the Everest climbing seasons. "The difference between 27,000 (feet) and 25 is dramatically different than 16,000 and 14,000. It's a whole other world when you get above 8,000 meters (26,247 feet).

"You have to be mentally strong enough to push hard, but you also have to be mentally disciplined enough to turn around for safety. That's a very, very fine line. That fine line comes with experience and sometimes it comes with having a very experienced guide to help you see through the fog of altitude."

Remza jumped boot first into the wilderness field with a two-year degree at Paul Smith's College, a school in the Adirondacks that fulfills outdoors-oriented degrees. After spending a buzz-killing six months as a mortgage broker in Baltimore — "I didn't really feel the pull there" — he enrolled at Arizona's Prescott College.

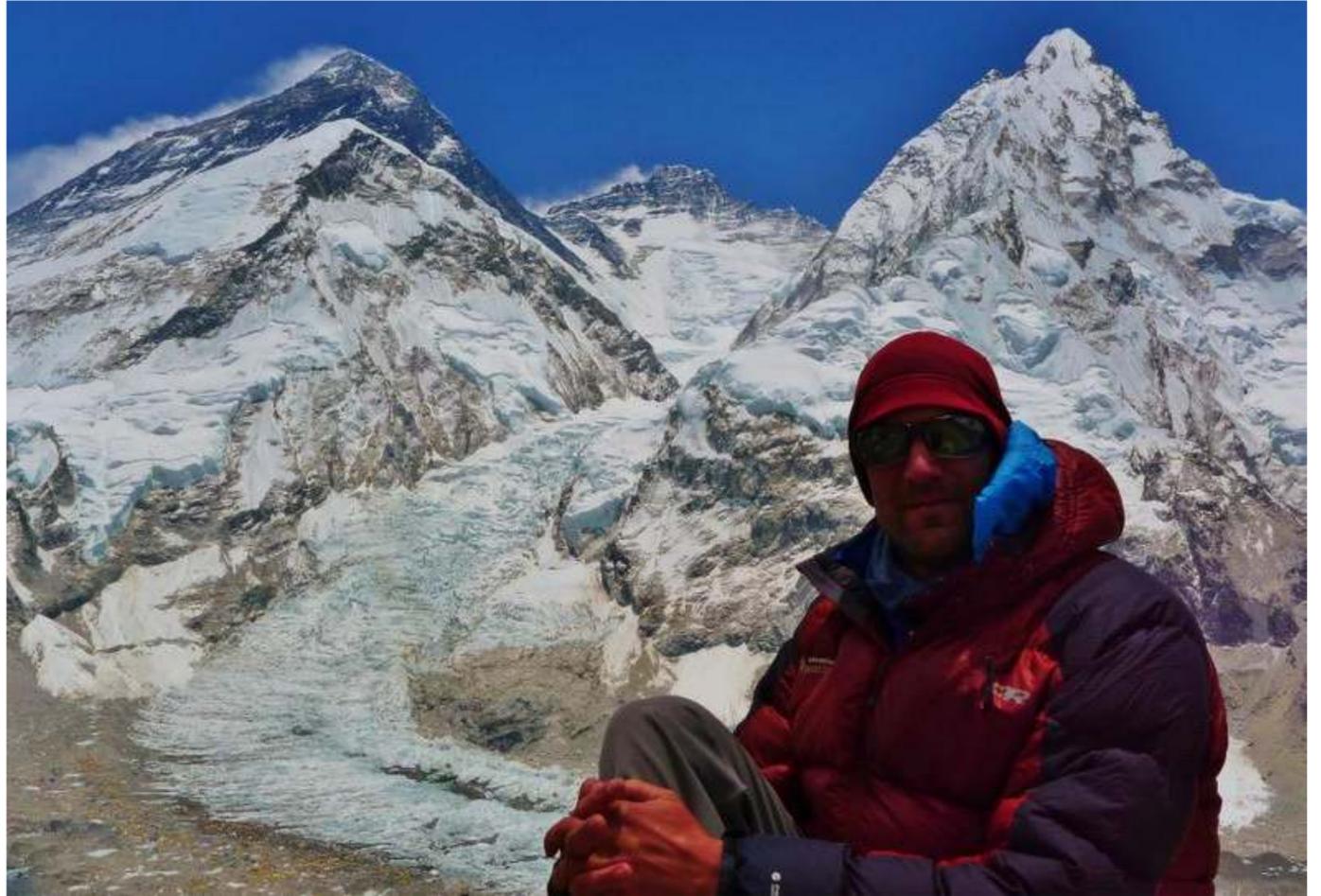
Prescott steered Remza into its Wilderness Orientation, so, as the school puts it, all new students "learn about themselves and each other and experience the educational philosophies of Prescott College."

"A three-week backpacking trip," is Remza's description. "That was my first real three weeks of being out in the wilderness and sleeping under the stars and that is what really got it in my blood to start doing more of this."

In Arizona, he benefited from joining the active rock climbing community and at Prescott, he began his studies in Wilderness Leadership and began to work as a mountain guide.

"Making a living as being a mountain guide is a challenge," he said.

"Not only are you just physically being challenged by being out there all the time, but financially, when you first kind of get your foot in the door,



Eric Remza in Nepal with Mount Everest (left), Lhotse (middle), and Nuptse (right) in the background. In the bottom left is Everest Base Camp, with the notorious Khumbu Icefall rising above. PROVIDED PHOTO

it's such a sought-after thing that until you have built up a resume you're not really making any money."

Remza reached the ceiling of the world in May of 2007.

Although he had worked for eight years for a large expedition company, a chance meeting with an old friend on Aconcagua led to a change in employers and the chance to scale the world's highest mountain from the north, Tibetan side, of Everest.

"We flew into Lhasa (China) and you don't see the mountain that much," he said. "When you finally get there and you're like, whoa, it's a long way up."

And the reality of Remza's job set in when he received the news that a close friend died while climbing.

"I felt her spirit and her energy supported me," he said. "I got a lot of strength from that. She was climbing in Alaska and she descended and repelled off the end of a rope."

"It gave me the strength because she was such a driven person. It reinforced what we're doing out here. We're putting ourselves in harm's way doing what humans don't need to be doing."

Remza took her spirit and energy all the way to the 29,035-foot summit. When his client fell behind and turned back, Remza pressed on.

"You're so tired, every step takes it out of you," he said. "When I got up there it was maybe half an hour after the last person had summited. I had the whole summit to myself and took it all in."

But while Remza summited, his client made the decision to head back to a camp. But the decision to turn around in high altitude, especially in the thin air of 25,000 feet, is not so easy.

"It's the 'Human Factor,'" Remza said.

"The drive to get to the summit. I've heard clients say they would rather die than turn around. It blows my mind. But afterward, they say that's how they were feeling in the moment. ... Your ego gets tied to this and you've invested so much money, time away from family, quit your job."

"A lot of things weigh on them, and it weighs on you."

Remza was given a second Everest opportunity in the spring while working for International Mountain Guides, this time from the Nepal side of the mountain. It also gave him the chance to re-



Sunrise over Everest, taken between Camp 1 and Camp 2 on the South Route in Nepal. ERIC REMZA / PROVIDED PHOTO

flect on his definition of a successful expedition.

"I would get more satisfaction out of my clients (summitting)," he said. "But to not get to the summit yourself, you'd be kidding yourself ... you want to summit, you want to get up to the top."

This year, the Everest climbing season, which typically runs through May, began on a dubious note because of above-average treacherous conditions. The month ended with a reported 10 deaths on the mountain, the majority coming during a crowded rush to the summit.

Remza's team waited, a decision that paid off with better weather and reduced traffic. And more important, no deaths were reported from any of the expeditions.

So on May 22, 56 days after arriving in Kathmandu and beginning the rigorous process to acclimatize to the altitude, Remza's team left Base Camp at 17,958 feet.

"I was feeling great pretty much all the way up to Camp 3 (at 23,700 feet)," he said. "And then it was right before I went to bed that night, I started to get these sharp pains in my stomach."

He "toughed it out" and arrived at the South Col and final camp at 26,300 feet late in the morning of May 25. The team, using supplemental oxygen, rested for 10 or so hours.

"But then we went for it, and about a third of the way up the triangular face, that's when I really started to really feel it," he said. "Really bad indigestion and diarrhea. As a result I was falling back behind the group."

He was but 1,400 feet, 2-2 1/2 hours, from the top.

"I felt I could have summited. ... But there was a good chance that I would be a liability to myself and to my team if I kept on going. I've climbed enough mountains at 8,000 meters to know how my body should have been feeling. I turned back."

And the not-so-little problem of a gastrointestinal bug at 27,500 feet?

"You've got your down suit on and your harness on so you have all these layers," he said. "You clip yourself to the rope. You keep your harness on too, but I had to get myself to where there was a semi flat spot. You've got zippers on your down suit. ... Squat and drop trou. It wasn't pretty."

Safely back to the South Col, Remza rested in his tent and became the motivator for the remaining clients, 11 of whom reached Everest's peak

out of 17 on the team.

"I'm more impressed with somebody that said that they've climbed Everest five times and turned back three times with clients," said Arnette, who said he has turned around on the mountain three times. "That tells me that they have their priorities right."

"That's what you find in an experienced climber. That he knew that he would be no good at all to the IMG clients if he got up there and he was sick. ... He's a very responsible climber."

Just hours after retreating to Base Camp and beginning the hike out to Lukla, where he would catch a helicopter to Kathmandu, Remza completed his full-circle expedition.

He was one of the newest inductees into the Vestal Hall of Fame, but

missed the ceremony during his final days in Nepal. Fortunately, modern technology caught up to him in Lukla, and his face was projected in front of a school assembly while he answered students' questions via Skype.

"I was totally trashed, I was so tired and that was when they wanted to do this call," he said.

"I think I was able to shower, but my face was all wind burnt and sun burnt. But it was awesome."

"And I would probably say that that was my summit. Not to sound cheesy or anything, but the way I felt just being able to share that experience with these students, in an area where there aren't really mountains or some might not have seen a mountain as big as Everest before in person."

"I had that same kind of stoke, good feeling."

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