



MOUNTAINOUS EFFORTS

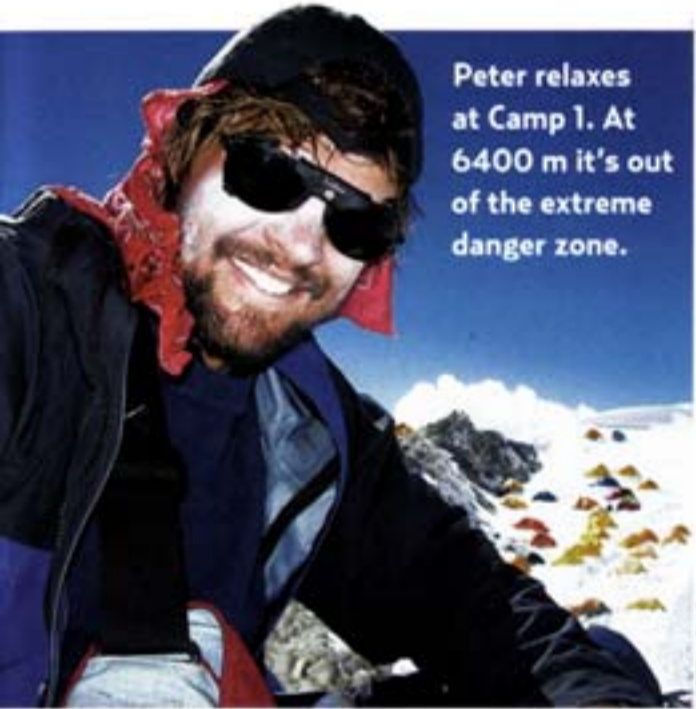
Peter Wells, a 33-year-old town planner at Mosman Municipal Council in Sydney, recently climbed 8201 m Cho Oyu – a pinnacle of achievement in a lifetime of adventurous activities. Here he describes the foggy delirium and perilous conditions at that altitude.

I HADN'T DRUNK enough water. Nor had I eaten. The eight-hour ascent to Camp 3, our final summit attack camp, had left me exhausted and delirious. I collapsed, half outside my tent. Then a brilliant glow of orange caught my attention. Mountain clouds had settled around the jagged peaks of the mighty Himalaya way down below and the sun's final rays were split by clouds into a colourful display of oranges, yellows and greys, providing a striking contrast against the blue sky.

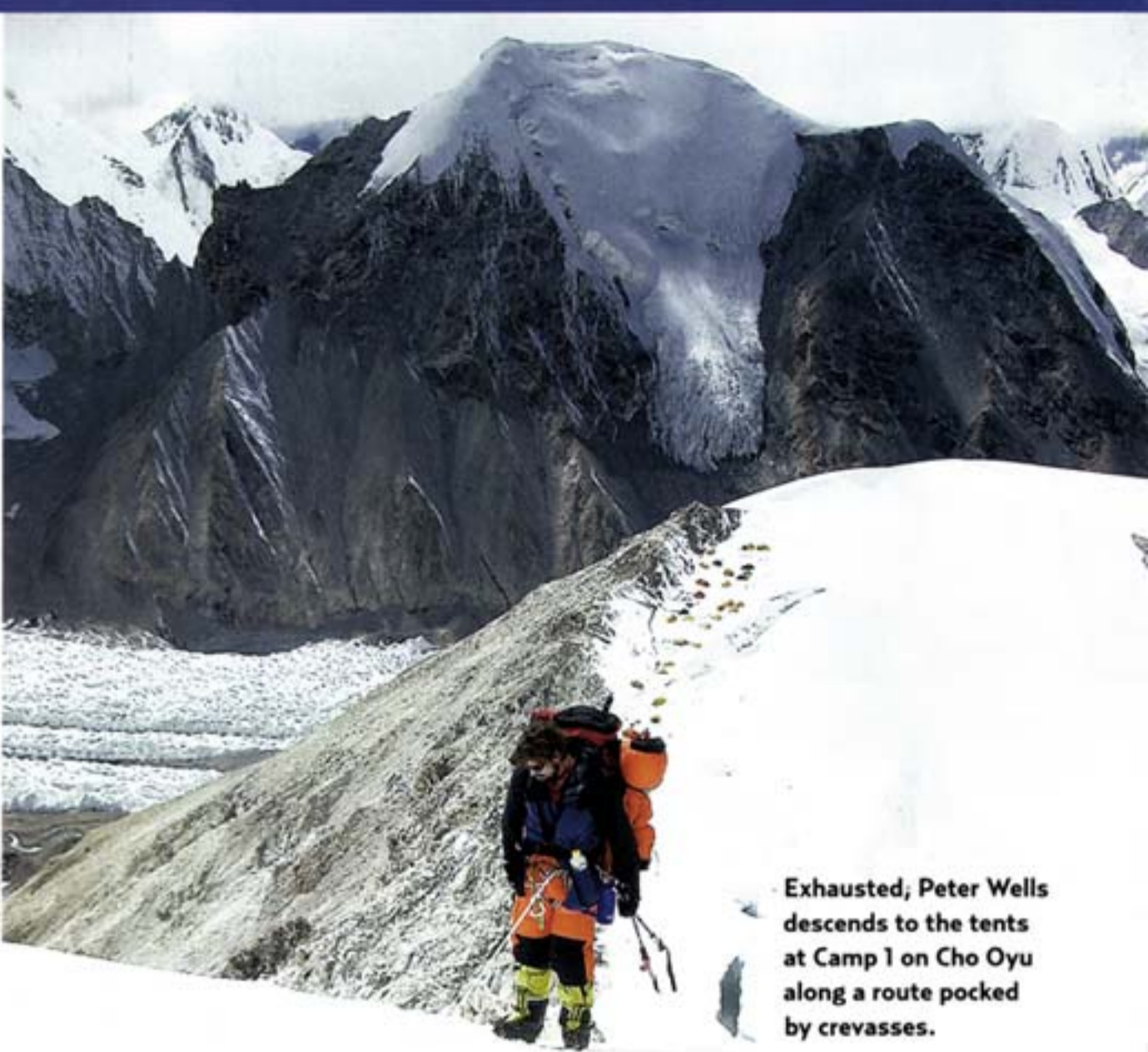
After I don't know how long, I rolled into the tent, where my South African mate Mike Patterson was preparing for our bid for the summit of Cho Oyu in a few hours' time.

At 7500 m, everything is an effort. We had so little oxygen in our brains, and our bodies had so depleted all our energy, that our ability to perform simple tasks was like that of children. Pulling my climbing boots off to change my socks gave me heart palpitations, a headache and made me gasp for air. I rolled back onto my thermal mat to rest, and then tried again.

Physically, I just couldn't bring myself to melt snow for drinking or to prepare one of my dehydrated meals. I knew my chances of reaching the summit relied heavily on drinking and eating, but I just couldn't do it.



Peter relaxes at Camp 1. At 6400 m it's out of the extreme danger zone.



Exhausted, Peter Wells descends to the tents at Camp 1 on Cho Oyu along a route pocked by crevasses.

Dozing next to me, Mike began Cheyne sleeping, a scary phenomenon suffered by some sleeping climbers at altitude when they forget to breathe. He'd lie without taking a breath for up to 15 seconds, before waking, wildly gasping, often springing upright with wide, petrified eyes. When he settled back into a half sleep I too fell into unconsciousness. I'm not sure how long I slept; perhaps only half an hour. But when I woke I was immediately aware I couldn't feel my toes. No feeling at all. Frostbite.

Immediately, acting on adrenaline, I ripped off my inner boots and rubbed my toes in panic. I grabbed my oxygen bottle and pressed the mask to my face. Oxygen, food and water are all essential ingredients to warm the body at altitude. I was severely lacking the latter two, so oxygen was my lifeline. My toes started to sting – a good sign, but the effort of rubbing exhausted me and I fell back onto my mat.

It was 9.30 p.m. Our departure time for the summit was midnight. I was scared about falling asleep and not being able to monitor freezing fingers and toes, and wondered whether I was using too much oxygen before starting to climb, leaving an insufficient supply for the return. But the present moment was more important. I kept the mask firmly against my face.

I can't recall the next two and a half hours. There is a gap of nothing until Mike began preparing for the climb. He looked as though he was moving in slow motion. I vomited twice into a plastic bag. The bag was virtually in Mike's lap, yet he has no memory of this.

By midnight my toes hadn't improved nearly as much as I'd hoped. I crawled out of the tent more like a patient than a climber about to attempt the highest and most extreme summit of his life. Phura Sherpa, our expedition sirdar, was blunt.

"I think not possible," Phura said, clicking my regulator clockwise to increase my oxygen supply. Having wiped the vomit from my face only minutes before and with wooden toes, I almost accepted his verdict as the end of my dream. But then Phura used his high-altitude expertise to rub my toes back to life. Phura suffered frostbite in the murderous 1996 Everest storm that took the lives of eight climbers. He took off my gloves to check my fingers. They'd turned purple from the tips to the first joint.

After Phura's assistance, I moved out, climbing by moonlight, in front of my three other climbing mates. It was a clear night with a light breeze. There were a million stars, and the moon lit the snow dark blue. Looming ahead ▶



Peter relaxes with Tibetan mate Namgya who would often visit to listen to Peter's music.

was what is known as the Yellow Band, a challenging vertical rock and ice section at about 7800 m. The concentration, let alone the physical effort of climbing the Yellow Band, exhausted me. I fell to the snow for a rest. With an instructional wave of his arm, Phura ordered me back to climbing. Phura is the best of the best. Everest four times, Cho Oyu six.

But he suddenly knelt awkwardly in the snow. He turned and vomited. I was just thankful for the rest time this gave me.

The massive snow dome that forms the north face of Cho Oyu now dominated the view ahead. Was this the summit? Like a mirage, the next 10 steps continually looked like the last 10 to the next ridgeline, and each rolling ridge hid the next stage. "Three hours," Phura shouted, flicking his arm towards the summit. My heart sank. I thought I was much closer. I tried to switch off from the pain.

My oxygen supply felt short. My mask was suffocating me. I ripped it off, gasping for breath. Phura decided to change my oxygen over and attached my second bottle. Suddenly, curses. I was immediately concerned. At just under 8000 m my last oxygen supply wasn't blowing air. My dream climb was over. To come off oxygen suddenly at this height usually plummets a climber into a hypoxic state – a dangerous condition in which the body is forced to utilise a fraction of the oxygen it is used to.

I could feel my breathing getting shallower. We decided to reattach my original bottle and go for the summit. When and where the bottle would run out I didn't know. I set targets for the number of steps I was going to take. In my mind

I was yelling: "Thirty steps. GO!" After each set I'd hunch over my ice-axe and suck some air.

The sun had risen now, but Cho Oyu's massive summit prevented any rays from reaching us on the north-west face. In one of the most amazing things I've seen, the massive triangular shadow of Cho Oyu stretched for kilometres over the jagged peaks of the Great Himalaya Range. I could see the entire path of our journey. Way, way down below was our glacier-based Advanced Base Camp at 5800 m, which had been our home for three weeks. I could see

"At the edge of the Yellow Band, I slipped and hadn't the energy to prevent or brace the fall."

Chinese Base Camp (5000 m) at the edge of the plains and the road we had taken from the remote Tibetan town of Tingri (4200 m).

It had taken a month of acclimatisation to get to this point. Refocusing, I targeted the number of steps again, but now I was down to 10. Then the sun struck my face. The path flattened. Ahead, a Tibetan flag. The summit!

Phura was standing at the flag, waving his arms uncontrollably. I choked with emotion. Exhilaration took over exhaustion. Years of dreaming and 12 months of preparation had led to this perfect moment. At 7 a.m. I stepped onto the summit and Phura bearhugged the air out of me. I felt an intense satisfaction knowing that whatever happened from here, however difficult the descent would be, I had stood on the sixth-highest point on earth. The awesome jagged mass of Mt Everest dominated my view to the east. Its faces looked so steep and intimidating.

And then the clouds whipped over Cho Oyu's summit, wiping Everest from view. The ice-capped western panorama remained visible, revealing the entire expanse of the western Khumbu, and its amazing transition into the flat, desert-like infinity of the Tibetan plains.

We shared the summit with a French climber, who asked me to take his picture. Finding it impossible to operate his camera with my puffy mitts, I removed them, leaving only my mid and inner layers. Within 10 seconds my fingers were painfully cold. The suddenness and intensity of the cold was frightening. I quickly handed back the camera and slipped my mitts on, sucking some more bottled oxygen to regain warmth.

I removed my mask to capture the summit on video. In no time I was gasping for breath. In my excitement I'd forgotten the danger of running out of oxygen. It could still happen at any point. The exhaustion returned as I realised the task ahead. I was only halfway.

After less than an hour downhill I came across other members of my team, Romi Garuda and Mike. Both were clearly exhausted, Mike quite delirious. I called out to Romi. Mike turned Romi's way, confused.

"What? No. Romi's not here."

At first I thought he was joking, but quickly realised he wasn't. I told him that Romi was right next to him. Romi had been climbing with him for eight hours. Lhakpa Sherpa encouraged them up the mountain and kept a close eye on Mike. Romi told me later that had it not been for hearing from me how close the summit was, he would've turned around and descended.

Phura stayed high to assist Mike so I was now on my own. At the edge of the Yellow Band, I slipped and hadn't the energy to prevent or brace the fall. Thankfully my karabiner prevented a 10 m fall to an icy slope that then drops a kilometre to the Tibetan plains.

Phura rejoined me and we reached Camp 3, which we'd left about 10 hours before. I desperately needed sleep and fell onto the snow while Phura collected items from the tent.

"You go Camp 2!" Phura called.

"Phura, I think I'll have a sleep for a while."

"No sleep. You go."

Just getting to my feet was an effort, let alone walking or abseiling. I was collapsing every 10 steps. Mysteriously my oxygen bottle still seemed to be providing some oxygen, although I'd turned it right down.

I fell into my Camp 2 tent at 7100 m. I tried to capture my elation on camera but dropped the camcorder in my pot of melting snow. It hardly mattered, I was so tired. I plucked it out and calmly placed it in my rucksack, then slumped, fast asleep.

