

ON TOP OF THE World

For most of us an adventure is going off-road in Moz with our brand new 4X4. Loads of fun, certainly, but Waterkloof's Ben Swart prefers his adventures to be a little *more* adventurous. Like 8 848 metres up and clinging to a rock face adventurous. Scary stuff!

Ben Swart is an advocate involved in Commercial Law. He's been practising for the last 19 years and has a 12-year-old son, Dreyer. Solid father figure? Check. Smart, sensible bloke? Check. So you might be surprised to find out that this seemingly sane man has summited six of the world's toughest and most challenging mountains. And he did it all for fun.

Well, there may be some underlying reasons that are far nobler than pure enjoyment, but the fact remains that Ben Swart is one of those individuals who actually likes pushing himself to his limits and beyond, who looks a challenge in the eye and, in his rather quiet and unobtrusive way, says 'bring it on'. His enthusiastic approach to life means he experiences everything to the fullest and loves every minute of it, even if it's hot, sweaty and a lot dangerous.

He's been climbing for roughly six years now, and he's achieved an impressive list of accomplishments. His first epic summit was Elbrus, West Russia, in 2004. 'A friend suggested I join them on an expedition to the top of Elbrus. It was only afterwards that I found out it was one of the seven summits and I guess I was inspired to do the rest.'

Elbrus counts as Europe's highest peak and was just the first of many summits for Ben. Next was Aconcagua in South America in 2007, followed by North America's Denali in 2008, both Antarctica's Vinson Massif and the Carstenz Pyramid, Papua, Indonesia in 2009 and, most recently, the grand daddy of summits, Asia's Mount Everest in 2010. The stories are true, the legends are based solidly on fact and yes, it is a mountain that deserves respect. Out of

the six behemoths he's conquered, Ben found Everest to be the toughest and most challenging of the lot.

In his words, it was a 'combination of the duration of the trip and spending long periods at high altitudes' that made this the hardest summit to deal with. There are always going to be dangers on any trip like this, and planning, knowledge, training and experience are all essential – not only to the success of the expedition, but to

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your survival. 'Meticulous planning for a trip is absolutely essential. It took us more than a year to plan and prepare for our Everest expedition.' And even then, things can go wrong.

'The two big dangers of high altitude climbing are cerebral and pulmonary oedema. Frostbite is also always a danger. I got cerebral oedema on the summit of Everest which caused disorientation to such an extent that I got frostbite on the descent. The end result was amputations on five fingers.' He's taciturn about this now, but it was a tough experience and not something you get over easily. Emotionally draining and physically exhausting, one wonders what possesses someone to take on risks like this.

For Ben, it's simple, 'Climbing mountains enables me to view my own life and life in general in context. It gives me an appreciation for the small things we usually take for granted, like good health and friendship. It makes me realise that life is short and precious.' A lesson he will no doubt pass on to his

son, Dreyer, and one that he takes very seriously.

So what, we wonder, does it feel like to summit one of the world's most dangerous mountains? Once again he makes a simple but powerful statement. He says 'I felt quiet elation. A feeling of gratitude that things worked out for me. It's small, a true summit, and with people summiting from the north and the south you sometimes have to wait your turn.' (To be honest, while we admire the zen, we're not sure we'll be hiking up to the top of Mount Everest to achieve it, but it's a nice dream.)

Next on the list is Africa's own giant, Kilimanjaro, in order to complete the seven great summits of the world. Until then Ben will spend some time relaxing with his son, reading, and scuba diving in Sodwana and southern Mozambique and no doubt planning his next big adventure.

Up for a challenge?

'Start within your limits, listen to advice and don't rush – climbing is not a race,' says Ben. 'Make sure you go with an experienced and credible guiding company like Adventure Dynamics International! Your training is also vital and Ben suggests aerobic training like you would undertake for the 70.3 Ironman, along with some intense power training in the gym. Don't try to cut corners by doing this yourself, get all the professional help you can. A great starting point is a personal trainer at the gym and a full medical check-up! Adventure Dynamics House, Suite 3, 25 6th Street, Parkhurst. Details: 011-447-7013.'

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