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here was still one goal after all the summit victories and through all the years of enthusiastic mountain-climbing: Mount Everest. It is the ultimate peak: the point where the Earth kisses the sky. Many mountain-climber colleagues, and even those who have little knowledge of it, now talk critically about this giant. Climbing up it is supposedly no longer a great feat. It almost seems as if the ascent has degenerated into a recreational event. There has also been much discussion about the alleged mass tourism, the environmental pollution in the Himalayas and the commercialisation of extreme mountain-climbing. And, last but not least, about the many catastrophes that have occurred there.

Even without covering this in detail here, I don't want to and can't completely dismiss all of it. It's actually true: Everest has changed – in the public's consciousness. But that has nothing to do with the mountain itself. The highest of the eight-thousand metre peaks stays true to itself: It's an unapproachable fellow and not a friend of humanity. It remains unpredictable, and this turns it into a challenge of a completely different kind.

There are quite certainly mountains that demand a more refined climbing technique from an alpinist. There may also be giant mountains that are located in a more charming landscape simply because they stand alone, looking less massive and chunky than Everest. What distinguishes Everest and lets it stand out from all of the other giants is its extreme height above sea level. Imagine that someone throws you out of a commercial aircraft at an altitude of almost 9000 metres. Temperatures are down to 40 degrees below zero and an icy wind is blowing around you. The oxygen content of the air that you breathe is only about one-third of its normal level: You are actually not supposed to survive this. And now you strap on a backpack to achieve the greatest physical and mental performance of your life.

Months of meticulous preparation and weeks of physical adaptation to these almost extra-terrestrial conditions are actually required until your body cooperates here. And even if you do everything right, have the right partners at your side, your training is appropriate, your mind is stable, the technology doesn't fail and your body doesn't let you down, it's still possible that you must turn around just a hundred metres below the desired summit simply because Everest has decided otherwise. Although the sky had just been azure blue, it darkens within moments. The temperature drops mercilessly and the summit hides behind a snowstorm and cloud banks, so the narrow window of time for your summit victory closes. In order to survive this, you must keep a cool head to the last moment: You must be ready to let go and turn back just before the goal.

Apart from my brief episode with Walter and his plans for a joint attempt at Everest in autumn 2007, the Mountain of Mountains had never been a serious topic for me. I obviously had absorbed every story about this magical mountain from an early age. I was just as familiar with the heroic attempts by George Mallory and his team as I was with the success story of Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay. Mount Everest was a mystical place of longing even in my childhood. But an actual journey to this giant had long seemed as far removed from reality as a trip to Mars.

What do we do with the goals that seem unattainable to us? We play them down and trivialise them. It was the same with me. I wasn't interested at all in this peak as a travel destination for a long time. For one thing, Everest didn't seem to be on my path because it didn't seem to particularly accommodate me and my restricted climbing possibilities. I am a rock-climbing specialist.

On the other hand, the approach to climbing Everest looks completely different: the impassable hiking area, densely covered with countless stumbling blocks, and the irregular glacier surfaces, gravel crossings and moraines, this upright marching as part of a human chain in which you are pressured from behind and cannot even choose your own tempo. No, I had long seen all of this as not being worth a serious thought. On the other hand, there was also the question of financing. It had long been my contribution to the expedition philosophy to not only take responsibility for the logistics and planning of the travel, but also for the issue of payment. And this is where Everest represented a quantum leap: Financing a trip to Mount Everest for a team of three to four people was far beyond my own possibilities...

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or the rest of this afternoon and the beginning of the evening, I slept away in the depths of my

cuddly sleeping bag. Now it was a matter of not oversleeping the ascent to the summit, which we had planned for 9 p.m. with our Sherpas. The fatigue and the separation from the more life-friendly air of the valley had put us into this strange state of being almost beyond time and space. We were plagued by neither nervousness nor any type of fears or concerns because of the weather during our upcoming, nightly ascent to the top of the Earth. There was simply a deep peace in the tent.

Half asleep, I heard how Wolfi – who was just one metre in front of me – struggled with the zipper at the entrance to our tent. Klemens was next to me and stayed totally calm.

"Is it possible that it's already 9 p.m.?", I asked Wolfi.

"Yes, it is!," he called over to me.

Judging by the flapping of our tent tarp, a moderately strong wind was blowing outside.

I couldn't sense anything like a spirit of departure in our group. It felt like today was Sunday and we were allowed to sleep a bit longer. But it wasn't Sunday yet and we were also not allowed to sleep any more.

"Get up! Get up!," I called and Klemens also sat up drowsily in his sleeping bag and started to prepare for the departure.

"Wolfi!," I called out to my friend at the other end of our tent.

"Wolfi, I'll need at least two litres of boiled water now to get to the summit. And before we leave, I'll try to get one litre into me," I added.

Wolfgang's thermos bottle was also empty. Of course, Klemens murmured something about how much water he also still needed as well. We had agreed with our agency and the Sherpas that only the Sherpas would melt the snow and prepare the water for all of us. After all, this had worked perfectly well at Camp 1 and Camp 2. Up here at Camp 3, we had neither a cooker nor gas available to us, so we couldn't even have prepared any water. Our cookware was down at the base camp.

I tried to contact my Sherpa in the next tent.

"Angdorchi! Angdorchi!" I called for him time and again.

Unfortunately, there was no response at all except for the howling of the wind. No one really wanted to leave the tent at this point. It was somehow a messy situation: We had actually agreed to all leave together in the direction of the summit at 9 p.m. Now it was perhaps already half an hour later and nothing at all was happening. Between the breaks in the wind, I occasionally heard the murmuring of people from the tents around us. I couldn't tell whether this came from the mountain-climbers or our Sherpas. All of a sudden, I got a strange feeling: I felt like we had just missed the train: You stand on the empty platform and just hear the voices of those who have been left behind.

Around 10:30 p.m., someone on my side opened the zipper of the tent entrance that was facing the mountain. Without any warning or comment, a large plastic bag with a bunch of gas cartridges and a cooker was thrown into our tent. With a loud clank, the plastic bag landed on my calves. Wolfi pulled this bag over to him and examined its contents.

"Why are they just now handing over the cooking equipment to us?," he asked in a somewhat agitated voice. "There are gas cartridges and even a cooker in here – but unfortunately no pot!," he commented. It was already clear to us that the time to boil water had passed. About two hours were required to get just one litre of water out of this dust-dry snow at 8300 metres. There was never moisture up here, so it was necessary to have a giant ball of snow to squeeze some water out of it.

Someone now unzipped the entrance on Wolfgang's side of the tent and actually brought water for us. I handed both of my thermos bottles to Wolfi.

"Hold on, Andy," he said to me. "The Sherpa doesn't have that much water with him for us," he tried to explain to me.

So filling up our water supplies in our bodies and in the bottles was no longer a possibility. We had to be content with the little bit that was there. The wind denied me an optimal acoustic connection to Wolfgang's tent entrance. In the glow of the headlamps, the water was filled into our bottles in small amounts. Wolfgang quickly returned my first thermos bottle. Unfortunately, it didn't have anything in it. "We can't even properly fill one bottle right now," he said with resignation.

Our Sherpas had apparently misjudged the situation in preparing the drinking water for their clients this time. Or something had gone wrong with the timing. As we later found out, no one in our group had more than a litre of liquid with them for climbing the summit.

I would like to say very clearly that I don't make anyone and especially not our dear Sherpas responsible for this mishap. It's completely obvious that our Sherpas – with their ultra-heavy backpacks filled with a mountain of oxygen bottles for their client's climb to the summit – also feel this inhumane altitude and have given everything for us in any case. The kind of thinking that is typical for Western standards doesn't apply up here: "I paid for it and so now I also want the merchandise."

For the three of us from East Tyrol, we never had this attitude during any of our trips and always saw our helpers as extremely strong partners on an equal footing. But the equal footing is probably very much understated in this case. No Western mountaineer can hold a candle to a Sherpa in terms of their performance and even their loyal partnership. The higher we had climbed up this mountain, the more humbly we perceived what these men were able to do for us. A Sherpa would never say "no." These people grew up in such a way that they always put themselves last and try to give everything to their clients. I was fully aware that this problem with the lack of water affected our Sherpas at least just as deeply as it did us.

In the end, the three of us had three-quarters of a litre of water each in the thermos bottle. It was clearly too little for the ascent that could last about ten hours and the five to six hour descent from the Everest summit.

I can still feel it as if it were yesterday: How I tried to get up on my feet in the night before 21 Mai 2017 at around 11:15 p.m. in front of our tent. It was just pointless. It was pointless for me to walk towards the ascent of my ascents under these conditions. After all, I already knew about this from many books: So many people before us had failed up there at the last stage to the summit due to a lack of water. I was afraid that I would dehydrate up there. As I previously explained, my organism still needs quite a bit more liquid than is the case for my friends Klemens and Wolfgang.

"If we set out now, it will quite simply be negligence," I shared my concerns with my guys. "That means: being completely aware as we run into an open knife."

I had never before succeeded while mountain-climbing for so many hours as I completely exerted myself with so little water. And now I was called upon to give the greatest performance of my life. Now I was supposed to climb up to the summit of Mount Everest in the driest and thinnest air in the world. To where you would normally need to drink much more water than anywhere else. I had exactly five minutes left. The Sherpas were standing by. Wolfi and Klemens held back on this decision.

"In 2014, we came home without reaching the summit because of the deadly ice avalanche. In 2015, we came home without reaching the summit because of the horrible earthquake. And now, in 2017, we should fail because one or two litres of water are missing?"

No! No! My mind just couldn't accept that. No one was holding me back now. No Nepalese government that had blocked the routes. No Chinese government that had closed the mountains. Quite the contrary: Everything was ready. Everything was open to us. I was my own obstruction. Not only for me, but also for Wolfi and Klemens. We had agreed to always stay together – unless there was an emergency. But there was no emergency now.

I mentally saw myself standing in one of the lecture halls and heard myself saying the same words: "Those who do not venture into the darkness, into the unknown, will never win." So I said to my lads: "We are now consciously climbing into the unknown. None of us knows the end of this story. None of us can judge whether I'll make it or even you will make it and survive this insane stage with just 750 millilitres per man."

Interview

You actually succeeded in climbing Mount Everest – an unbelievable achievement. What was it like to stand on the highest point of the Earth?

Up there, at the very vertical end of the world, I felt no emotions whatsoever. Not because I was exhausted but because I sensed that I was in the here and now, a unique moment in my life, the farthest away from Mother Earth. Only the way back would decide whether I could even enjoy this summit success. I'm otherwise a very emotional person, but I knew here that I had to entirely rationally direct my full concentration to the coming descent that was essential for my survival.

And how do you feel about this success today, after a few months of distance to it?

Only with time, in the course of the weeks and months after my ascent, I became increasingly aware of the grandiose way in which we had succeeded and which signals we three may have sent out into the world with it. That fact that we can still look after and take care of each other even in the most extreme surroundings. Up to the time of our ascent to the Roof of the World, this has more or less been described as impossible by the extreme mountain-climbers.

Quite privately, my thoughts in the morning hours of 21 May 2017 felt like I was sitting on a huge wing of a commercial airplane and the undulating movements within the air currents would time and again lift me out of the valleys of problems that may arise. I never want to forego experiencing this great thing with my friends and my family.

What was the greatest challenge for you in this expedition?

My three tours to the highest mountains of this planet pushed me to the edge of our earthly life three times. The deadly ice avalanche in the Khumbu Icefall, the catastrophic earthquake on 25 April 2015 and – exactly one month before our ultimate summit ascent – the death of my father on 21 April 2017.

It became very impressively obvious to me that this life is probably not just intended for our survival but very clearly to live it to the full: This direct involvement with death, with the saddest hours of my life, and then just a few steps further and a few moments later, with what was probably the greatest summit success of my life. I had to learn to deal with this.

And what was your greatest good fortune on the road?

It was probably the reactions by Klemens and Wolfgang to my physical low point due to my lack of water on 21 May around 4 a.m., up at 8600 metres. It was more difficult for me to assess my own potential than the way in which my two companions could see it in me. In an empathetic way, all three of us were closer than it would ever have been possible on the flat ground. That was the key on this day in my life and therefore the key to the very top.

Now that you have climbed all of the highest mountains on the seven continents, are you running out of goals?

During the past 30 years, I was able to climb hundreds, if not thousands, of summits together with really great people. This happened multiple times with some of them and just once with some of the others. After my Everest success, I now feel the luxury of not having to prepare myself for any major mountain destination.

This is not a new situation for me. Whenever I haven't had my eye on a goal for a moment, the time and space were wide open for the next exciting step. Now this mountain is behind me. Even though it's still quite a blur, I feel that there are still some things opening up for me...