



# Incredible journey to the top of the world

+5 more Tim Clarke

What have you been up to since the Christmas and New Year

blowout?

Painted the lounge? Cleared out

the shed? Maybe taken a quick trip down south, or if you're really lucky, a hop over to Bali or Singapore?

Well, consider this. Since January 6 this year, Steve Plain has been to every continent on Earth, in the process flying close to 100,000km.

On land, he has trekked hundreds of kilometres, sometimes with kit weighing dozens of kilograms, and then climbed seven mountains, often in wretched weather.

Just last week, he spent three days sitting and shivering in a wind-battered tent, with a 1.5m snow wall for protection, and a sleeping bag, supplies, and a Connect Four set for comfort. When the biting wind and swirling snow abated, he and his climbing party made a 20-hour trip to reach the top of Alaska's highest peak, Denali, keeping Plain's dream of



## 7 SUMMITS WORLD SPEED RECORD ATTEMPT



mountaineering immortality alive. And today, the 36-year-old is still edging his way down the brutal mountain, out of range of communication, and almost out of fuel and food. It is already an expedition and achievement beyond the comprehension of most. But given that Plain's seventh day on Denali was also the third

anniversary of the day he had his halo brace removed — which had been put on to aid his recovery from a broken neck — then the efforts take on an even more impressive hue. “Ninety-nine per cent of people would be in a wheelchair for life or worse,” Plain said of his injuries, suffered in the surf at Cottesloe on December 13, 2014. He has been clambering back

ever since.

“A week in the spinal trauma unit at Royal Perth Hospital, 15 weeks in a halo brace, a couple of months in a soft neck collar, then into physio and rehab,” he said before he left to climb the roofs of the world.

“Out of all this, you know what's been the hardest thing? It wasn't the physical injury itself, it wasn't the pain of being conscious while doctors screwed four metal pins into my skull, it wasn't living in a steel cage with piercing headaches for the best part of four months. The hardest thing out of all of this was lying in hospital and making the phone call to my parents, telling them I had broken my neck, and hearing the sheer distress in their voices as they comprehended the news.

“That was the only time I actually broke down and cried . . . I



had already put my parents through so much as a kid, they certainly didn't deserve this.” The idea to bounce back by climbing the continents' seven highest peaks in world-record time came as Plain lay in a hospital bed in December 2014. It was his way of giving himself something to work towards in recovery — while also proving he could come back as good, or better than before. The dream was one thing, the realities of training, and organisation, and travel, and visas, and climbing permits, and sponsorship, have been quite another. “While in my mind I had com-

mitted to doing it, the magnitude of the task from where I was at that point in time was unfathomable. To focus on the end goal

Was overwhelming. Plus, I had bigger issues to worry about," Plain said. "So I put the Seven Summits to the back of my mind and focused on my immediate objective, which was initially to walk out of hospital, then to get through the months in the halo, then to do the necessary rehab, then my first practice climb and so on. All along my focus has been taking it step by step."

Step one of completing seven climbs in four months was on to the plane in Sydney to fly to Punta Arenas in Chile. Since then there have been flights to Mendoza in Argentina, and then Kilimanjaro in Tanzania — via Buenos Aires, New York, London and Istanbul.



From Africa then to Bali, Bali To Sydney, Sydney to St Petersburg, St Petersburg to Anchorage — via Moscow, Dubai and Seattle.

Which led to Denali, which Steve said was always "the crux

of this project". Because the hardest climb of the trip was made harder because it was days after the Alaskan winter. "Of all the mountains, Steve Was most concerned about Denali as completing out of the

main climbing season there were many challenges logistically and environmentally to consider," Plain's sister and biggest supporter Tanya said this week.

That environment mean colder temperatures, less sunlight, harsher wind, and deeper snow for Plain and his climbing partners. "It was a bit of a reality check when the plane took back off leaving the four of us standing knee deep in snow, isolated and alone," Plain wrote on arrival.

"We are the first team in this season.

"There is nobody else on the mountain anywhere."

That's the way it stayed as last week, Plain and his team moved back and forth from camp to camp, transporting gear and supplies ready for the assault on the summit.

"It will be a very long, tough



Steve Plain looks out at the panorama from the summit of Mt Elbrus, the highest point in Europe.

day but . . . it's our only chance," he said.

It's a chance they took, leaving them just one more mountain to climb.

Mt Everest, or Sagarmatha in Nepali and Chomolungma in Tibetan.

The highest mountain the world.

Rather than the traditional six weeks climbers usually take to recover from Denali, Plain's ever-decreasing schedule means that from today he will have just 46 days to get to Nepal, get to base camp and then climb the 8848m to the

top of the world.

"I think to a certain extent (Denali) will help in our lead-up to Everest," he said last week.

"It will toughen us up mentally and on mountains like Everest, the mental drive to keep pushing on is just as important as the physical ability."

And on his way up, Plain says he would take inspiration from the words of George Mallory, who led the 1924 British expedition up Everest, from which he would never return.

"If you cannot understand that there is something in man which responds to the challenge of this mountain and goes out to meet it, that the struggle is the struggle of life itself upward and forever upward, then you won't see why we go," Mallory said.

"What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy.

"And joy is, after all, the end of

life. We do not live to eat and make money. We eat and make money to be able to live.

"That is what life means and what life is for."

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Tim Clarke



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