

The older man and the mountains.

In his 60s, scaling world's highest peaks

By Frank Fitzpatrick
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

Some people dream big. **Werner Berger** dreams high.

Four years ago, the South African-born geologist-turned-filmmaker fulfilled a wish by celebrating his 65th birthday atop Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro, watching the sun set.

Since then, Berger, now less than two months shy of 70, has climbed the highest peak on each of the seven continents, completing that soaring feat two weeks ago when he reached the summit of the world's tallest mountain, 29,035-foot Mount Everest.

Berger, who soon will move from his home in Ontario to join his Bucks County fiancée, Heshie Segal, in Yardley, is now the oldest North American to make it to the top of the world.

(A 71-year-old Japanese climber did it earlier this week.)

His lofty ambitions developed relatively late in life. In 1992, an instructor in a self-development workshop asked him to list three things he still wanted to do.

See **EVEREST** on A9

"I have no idea where it came from," Berger said during a telephone interview yesterday, "because I'd never climbed anything in my life, but I said I wanted to climb Kilimanjaro and the Matterhorn and see a base camp at Everest."

He soon forgot about his pledge. But in 1995, his son reminded him, and the two went backpacking in Nepal.

"We were near the Everest base camp," he said. "When I looked out and saw the mountain, I lost myself. I said, 'Oh, my God, it's phenomenal!' I fell in love. I knew I was going to do it."

In between less-challenging ascents — he has climbed Kilimanjaro in Tanzania twice, for

example — Berger began to prepare for Everest. He spent five years working out physically — cardio-training, free weights, backpacking hikes. (The 6-footer weighed 170 pounds when he started his latest climb, 160 afterward.)

Finally, on April 2, he and 12 others, including a film crew and four Sherpa guides, began their ascent from the 17,000-foot base camp at Namche Bazaar, Nepal.

A proposal

Just before leaving, Berger telephoned Segal and proposed. She said yes. (Thanks to the satellite equipment they brought, he also spoke to her several times more on the ascent.)

Curiously, when the group had reached the first milestone on its 50-day, upward trek, moving past the Khumbu icefall and into Camp 1, Berger began to have doubts.

"It's unusual for anyone to get discouraged that early," he admitted. "But I knew that because of my age, the steepness, the altitude, the difficulty I was having acclimating, I probably only had a 25 percent chance of surviving."

The farther he climbed, the more his pessimism was confirmed. Several other groups were on the mountain at the same time, and before Berger's journey was through, he would see five bodies carried down the mountain.

Deaths and a rescue

Two Koreans attempting a new route to the summit died in an avalanche. Another climber was hit by a huge chunk of ice. Two others, in-

cluding the first female Sherpa to reach Everest's apex, slipped and plummeted to their deaths.

One of Berger's companions had to be rescued after falling into a crevasse. Three others dropped out for health or personal reasons.

"My belief system was failing me," he said, "but I kept having this vision of me being on top."

Eventually, the reality matched the vision. His party reached the south summit a day before the higher north peak. On the cloudless morning, Berger viewed the nearby summit and was nearly overwhelmed.

"I can't describe to you how it feels to stand there and know that on that very day you're going to be standing on top of the world," he said. "It's on a mountain, where you have no choice but to concentrate on the moment, where I learned the meaning of spirituality. I couldn't speak. I got tears in my eyes."

Once at the top, he took a long, 360-degree look at the inspiring vista.

"The thing that amazes you the most is looking down at all these huge mountains you passed on the way up," he said. "They look like teeny little hills from that high."

The journey will soon be chronicled in his documentary, *Meet Me at the Top*. In it, Berger uses his remarkable climb as a metaphor for the film's message — that we all need to lead healthier lives.

"We're so fixated on fast food and quick fixes that we neglect our long-term health," he said.

Throughout the interview, Berger's answers frequently were interrupted by a cough.

"It's a high-altitude cough," he said. "It typically lasts three or four weeks after a climb."

He should be fine when and

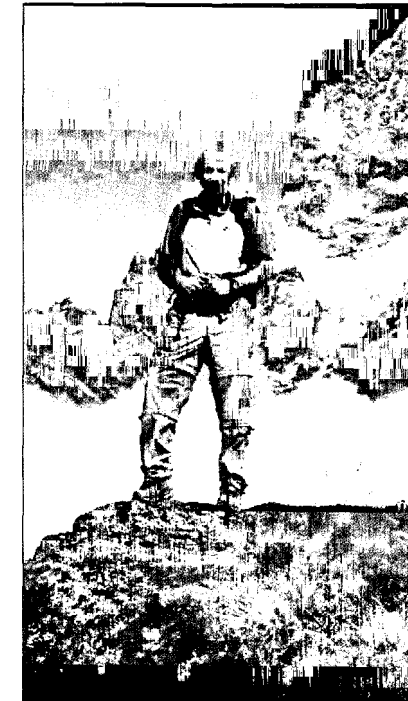
if he finally gets around to that last item on his 15-year-old list — the Matterhorn in the Swiss Alps.

"I have no compulsion to that now," he said. "I've climbed so many more higher mountains. But if I happen to be in Europe, I still might."

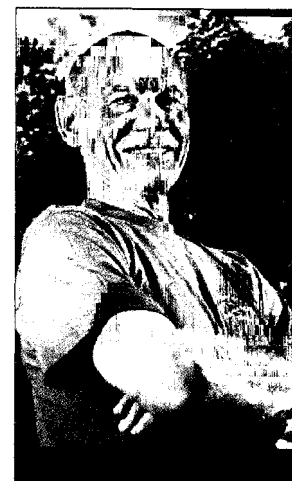
Contact staff writer Frank Fitzpatrick at 215-854-5068 or ffitzpatrick@phillynews.com.

philly.com

Find out more about Werner Berger and his mountain-climbing adventures via <http://go.philly.com/everest>



Werner Berger on his way to the summit of Mount Everest.



MICHAEL PEREZ / Inquirer
Werner Berger, 69, who will soon move to Yardley, has reached the tops of the highest mountains on all seven continents, including Mount Everest as part of the climbing expedition at right.

