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# Journey of a lifetime concludes with fatigue, total elation

## Pa. man at home after reaching top of Mount Everest

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YARDLEY, Pa. — Take a step. Take five or six breaths. Take another step. This is what it's like to climb to the top of the world.

Werner Berger knows it firsthand. He lived it for 57 days — 50 days to reach the 29,035-foot summit of Mount Everest, and just seven days to climb back down.

Berger, at 69, is one of the oldest people to ever climb Everest.

He arrived home, to his fiancée's house in Yardley yesterday, still coughing and wheezing from breathing in so much cold air on his 180-mile trek to the mountain's top. (It's called the Khumbu cough, named for the Khumbu icefall on the southern slope of Everest.)

Berger had to face the icefall — and more dangers — on his hike from the vil-

lage of Namche Bazar to the top of Everest and back.

And when he reached the top? "Fatigue. Then total elation," he said. Clear. Cold. Majestic. "It's a different world. Magnificent. Stunning," he said.

And deadly. To make the journey, Berger and his team had to wear oxygen masks from 23,000 feet high on up — even while they were sleeping.

When Berger reached the top of Everest, he took his mask off and breathed in the chill, crisp air — one-third the amount of oxygen at sea level. Berger kept his mask off for 15 or 20 minutes, just standing there, breathing the rarest of rare oxygen.

"It didn't feel different," he said.

Then his guides and the native Sherpas started yelling at him:



BERGER

"Put your mask on!" If Berger had exerted himself in any way he would have collapsed without the mask.

This is life on Everest. "The surroundings are different. The landscape is different. From the top we would look down on all these other high points, all these other mountains, and they all looked puny," he said.

Life runs slower, moments last. "When I'm on a mountain I live completely in the present. It's all about the next step," Berger said. "It shifts my awareness, shifts who I'm being. I feel in awe of the majesty of the mountains, the sunsets, the clouds."

All of us have that feeling at some point in life, Berger said, but not for that long a time.

"It's like being high without needing

drugs," he said.

And it was dangerous. Berger saw five bodies carried down the mountain while he was heading up. None of the dead were from his team. But of the 12 climbers, four guides and 19 Sherpas on Berger's team, only nine people reached the summit. The others backed off, two for health reasons, and the rest were simply unable to go on.

The most dangerous moment? "We had to climb the icefall," Berger said — huge chunks of ice known to collapse suddenly.

Climbers had to travel 50 feet apart so the whole team wouldn't die if a crevasse opened or chunk of ice the size of a car tumbled down the glacier.

Climbing down is easier but more dangerous.

"A slip can be fatal," Berger said. "I definitely was scared then."

Since 2002, Berger has reached the

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## CLIMBER

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### Trip will be part of documentary

highest point on each of the seven continents.

He does it, he says, simply for the enjoyment of it.

And for one other reason: Health.

Not his, but ours.

Berger wants to use his journey to the top of Everest as the backbone for a documentary linking physical achievement and well being.

"I want to use the climb as a metaphor for striving to maintain health," he said.

And the first thing Berger did when he arrived back in the United States?

Besides hugging his son and fiancée... He took a long, hot shower.

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