

Local & Region

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ANY MAN WORTH HIS SALT marries above himself, then spends most of his days trying to measure up. For Brandon Chalk, that meant accompanying his adorable bride, Kristine, up the Seven Summits.

On Christmas Eve, Kristine became the 18th American woman to climb the Seven Summits, the seven tallest mountains on the world's seven continents. Only about 350 people from around the globe have done it, according to 7summits.com, so Brandon wasn't just along for the ride.

It took seven years. They climbed Denali, also known as Mount McKinley, in 2007, so they averaged one a year and it cost all kinds of money and time. But c'mon. Look how happy they are.

"It was great experience and it was worth it to us," Brandon said.

And here's what they learned along the way. The types of things that happened to them happen to anyone on a climb as frustration and fatigue set in, Kristine said.

"Climbing partners are one of those things you must choose wisely, just like a husband or wife, because it combines so many different factors," Kristine said. "Hopefully it's made us realize we've made the right choice. We have a lot of tolerance for each other in our worst moments. And when you go through that, you're stronger for it."

Let the record show that when they summited Antarctica's Mt. Vinson on Christmas Eve, they laughed and danced and celebrated. They even braved frostbite and kissed.

However, even though love warms the heart, it doesn't make much of a dent in the weather. They spent only 10 minutes on the Mt. Vinson's summit. The temperature was minus 21 degrees and a brutal east wind hammered them with a minus 60 windchill.

But the sun never sets during an Antarctic summer, so they didn't start their summit push until 9 a.m.

"It's never dark in the summer, so there's really no reason to start early," Brandon said.

Ten minutes is about half as long as they spent atop Mt. Everest, 29,035 feet and the third of their Seven Summits. They took in the views, took in some oxygen and headed back down after about 20 minutes.

CLIMBING TOWARD HEAVEN

Brandon was 32 and Kristine was 31 when they summited Everest, and that made them the youngest American couple ever to do it, according to the Himalayan database that keeps track of that sort of thing.

Marriage means metaphorically putting



SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

Kristine and Brandon Chalk are in seventh heaven at the summit of Mount Vinson in Antarctica. The local couple completed their quest to climb the Seven Summits, the seven tallest mountains on each of the world's seven continents.

your life in someone else's hands. When climbing the world's tallest mountains, it's not a metaphor. The Seven Summits will make several serious attempts to kill you.

Brandon says Kristine is mentally stronger than he is, especially when it comes to the big trips. She says he's a better technical climber.

They met climbing when a mutual friend introduced them. For a few years, they were just climbing buddies, but as they started talking about their Mount McKinley climb in Alaska's Denali National Park — the first of their Seven Summits — they spent all their time together planning and training.

"Each peak has its own draw, the things that make it fun and nerve-racking," Kristine said.

For Denali they were over-prepared and apprehensive. On Aconcagua they got turned back from the summit and had to make a second assault. "We said, 'We don't want to leave here without taking our best shot.'"

They'd knocked out a couple of the summits and decided it was a good way to see the world. So they started planning for the rest, Kristine said.

SEVENTH SUMMIT

For the seventh of their Seven Summits, they flew to Puento Arenas, Chile, the



SPECIAL TO THE DAILY

Kristine Chalk turns cartwheels back at base camp after she and husband Brandon climbed Mount Vinson in Antarctica, the seventh of their Seven Summits.

THE SEVEN SUMMITS

The Seven Summits are the highest mountains of each of the seven continents. Summitting all of them is regarded as a mountaineering challenge, first postulated as such and achieved on April 30, 1985, by Richard Bass. Locals Brandon and Kristine Chalk are among 350 people worldwide to have ever done it. Kristine is only the 18th American woman.

THE SEVEN SUMMITS ARE:

- Mount Everest:** 29,029 feet. Asia. First climbed in 1953.
- Aconcagua:** 22,838 feet, South America. First climbed in 1897.
- Mount McKinley:** 20,157 feet. North America, First climbed in 1913.
- Kilimanjaro:** 19,341 feet. Africa. First climbed in 1889.
- Mount Elbrus:** 18,510 feet. Europe. First climbed in 1874.
- Mount Vinson:** 16,050. Antarctica. First climbed in 1966.
- Puncak Jaya:** 16,024 feet. Australia. First climbed in 1962.

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY



Kristine and Brandon Chalk celebrating their seventh summit with Champagne.

southernmost city in the world. From there they hopped on a massive Russian cargo plane for a five hour flight to Union Glacier. There were no windows in that plane, but there was a GoPro-type camera with a big flatscreen TV that showed them the outside world — and to keep people from getting airsick.

They landed near Union Glacier hundreds of miles inland. If you're going to do anything in Antarctica, you stage out of Union Glacier. They flew a smaller aircraft to base camp and started seven days of climbing.

Climbing Mt. Vinson is practically a personal experience.

"There were only 14 of us on the entire mountain. The closest people were at Union Glacier 200 miles away," Brandon said.

They don't climb for a living. When they're not doing this they're regular people with regular jobs. Kristine teaches fourth grade at Red Sandstone Elementary School in Vail. Brandon is a mechanical engineer

with Beaudin Ganze in Avon.

"A lot of people who do the Seven Summits just pack it in and say, 'We're done.' Not us," Brandon said. "There are still adventures we want to do. Maybe we'll stick closer to home for the next few years, maybe some climbs in the continental U.S. But we're going to keep doing what we love to do."

High on their bucket list is an actual honeymoon, somewhere warm. Or they might go climb Mount Rainier this spring instead.

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