

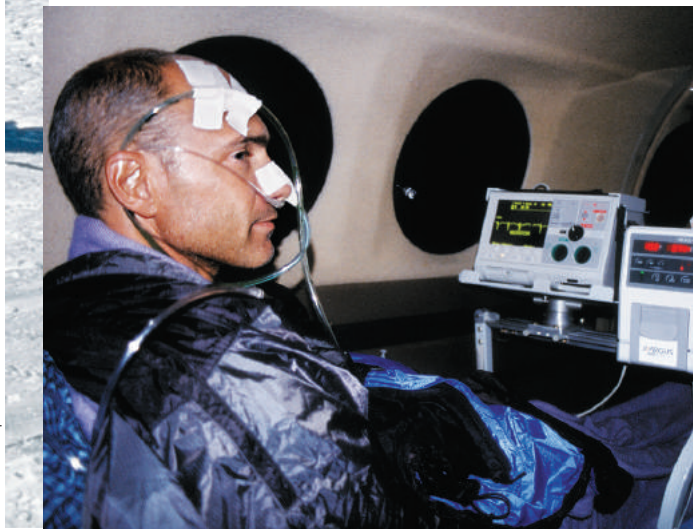


(right) Jo and Rob clown around for the camera at the South Pole Ceremonial Marker; (below) the couple reaching the top of Mt Elbrus, one of the Seven Summits, in Russia.

HIGH HOPES

Extreme weather, gruelling climbs and the risk of death were all part of the experience for couple Jo and Rob Gambi, who took on the world's tallest mountains – and cancer – and won. By Joanne Hawkins





(top to bottom) Rob in full climbing regalia; waiting for take-off in the air ambulance at Delhi; nappy rash cream soothes cracked skin on Mt Denali; the plane trip to Antarctica from Chile.



It was the day Rob Gambi feared might be his last. Lying in excruciating pain in a cramped tent high in the Himalayas, he knew time was running out, and fast. Rob could hear the faint whirl of the helicopter desperately trying to dodge the bad weather and airlift him off the mountain, but with each failed attempt to land, he knew his situation was becoming increasingly dire.

Rob couldn't believe his luck. He'd survived a bike accident and had recently undergone gruelling treatment for a serious bout of lymphatic cancer, but on hearing there was a 50 per cent chance his cancer would recur in three years, he'd quit his job to embark on the trip of a lifetime with his wife, Jo. "When you're not really sure what the future holds, spending time with the person you love, doing the things you love doing, is the right thing to do."

For the couple, who married in 1996, mountain climbing was a love. After the Himalayas, they had loose plans to attempt Antarctica's Vinson Massif and Mt Denali in Alaska. But here they were, in October 2002, just one week into a trek up Mera Peak, the highest trekking peak in Nepal, and Rob's life was again in peril.

An unexpected complication from his radiotherapy treatment meant his intestines had become obstructed some 4300 metres above sea level. As his condition rapidly worsened, Sydney-born Rob, knew the helicopter was his only hope.

"It was very painful," he remembers. "We were in a seriously remote area [at altitude] and that helicopter couldn't get in because of the weather. They'd made several tries the previous day and, as another [severe] weather system was coming in, I knew if they didn't manage it soon, it would be curtains for me. I was certain of that. Given my blood-thickness levels, dehydration situation and general weakness, there was no way I would survive being taken out over land."

Jo, who is English, was also becoming desperate. "I was very, very scared," she remembers. "I felt almost victimised. I kept asking, why is this happening to us, what have we done?"

Fortunately, the helicopter eventually did manage to land, and the relieved couple were airlifted to a hospital in Kathmandu. "The doctors did a number of blood tests over and over again because they couldn't believe the numbers," remembers Rob, now 48. "They said, 'You shouldn't be here.' There was no question someone was looking down and looking after us, I can't give you any other reason as to why I made it."

There was another thing Rob was sure of: after his most recent near-death experience, he was finished with mountains. "I'd had enough."

Jo was sympathetic ("We were both traumatised by what had happened," she says), but secretly devastated their mountaineering dreams were over. "I did wonder whether our plans to travel and climb together had been completely blown out of the water."

Rob was eventually flown to London where the couple live (Rob, then a fund manager for AMP, moved to the UK for work in 1991 although he was "absolutely committed to returning to Australia after three years" he laughingly remembers) and where he underwent surgery.

As part of his recovery, the pair came back to visit Rob's parents on Sydney's Northern Beaches, largely to put back on some weight courtesy of his mum's "irresistible" cooking. It was there, in January 2003, that he suddenly announced to his stunned, but ecstatic, wife that they should attempt Denali after all.

Rob explains his somewhat surprising decision as a refusal to give up. "I thought, I'm going to keep going because I'll never get a chance like this again. You don't get two shots at life. Every second that goes by never comes back. What would be the worst that could happen? I might fail, but at least I would have given it a go."

Jo wasn't that surprised at her husband's change of heart. "All the way through his cancer and the various ailments he's had, he's always had this really strong fighting spirit," she says. "He wasn't going to be beaten. That strong mental attitude has played a key part in him getting back on the road to health each time."

But climbing Denali, the second hardest of the "Seven Summits" (the highest mountains on each of the seven continents), would be no mean feat; especially for someone who'd undergone major surgery the year before. But

after months of training in Canada's Whistler, where Rob had access to a hospital should he need it, the couple set off for Alaska, desperately hoping nothing else would happen. "All the way up [Denali], I was waiting for something to go wrong," says Rob.

On June 12, 2003, having battled extreme cold, blizzards, altitude, sheer walls of ice and the indignity of having to go to the toilet in public,

the elated Gambis summited the 6194 metre Denali. They were, according to Jo, "in a state of disbelief and bursting with happiness".

"We felt we had finally broken the spell of bad luck and bad health, and that boosted our confidence enormously," she says. "It made us think, let's have a go at some other big mountains that are going to be really challenging."

Both Rob and Jo say they never had any intention of trying to scale the Seven Summits, nor in particular Everest, the big daddy of them all, when they first decided to take some time out to travel after Rob's cancer prognosis. But Denali gave them the courage to try, and afterwards they climbed Mt Kilimanjaro in Africa, Vinson Massif in Antarctica, Mt Aconcagua in South America and Mt Kosciuszko in Australia, the baby of the group at a mere 2228 metres.

While in Antarctica, the pair also skied to the South Pole. "It was phenomenally expensive to get there, so I said to Jo, 'We'll probably never be there again, so now would be a good time to try for the South Pole,'" explains Rob matter-of-factly.

A climb up Tibet's Cho Oyu (not one of the Seven Summits, but at 8201 metres just about the

"There was no question someone was looking down and looking after us..."

“We refused to throw our freedom away. Neither of us were ready to roll over and play dead”



(above) Taking a breather 6000 metres up on Ama Dablam; (below) Jo now holds the Guinness World Record for the fastest female ascent of the Seven Summits.

because of something you've done rather than something that you can't control, like an avalanche or an ice fall," explains Rob.

Climbing Everest pushed them to the extreme. "Summit days are always hard because you're pushing it in terms of altitude; you can't breathe properly, you're dealing with migraine-type headaches, nosebleeds and feeling sick, yet are trying to push yourself physically," explains Jo. "And summit day on Everest was the hardest of them all, obviously; simply because you are working at this ridiculously extreme altitude where your body is dying, your cells aren't functioning and your systems are shutting down because of the lack of oxygen. Yet you have to stay alert mentally, because if you don't, if you sit down or trip and fall, then that really is it."

The pair also had to deal with the shocking sight of the bodies of dead climbers on their way up the mountain. "We had been briefed on seeing the bodies; otherwise it could have shocked us so much we might not have made it down ourselves," says Jo. "But even though you are bracing yourselves for it, you can't get away from the shock of seeing someone who looks just like you. And they look like they're asleep but, of course, they aren't. You also have this sense that you're just minutes away from the potential cessation of life; it really focuses the mind because you can't afford one mistake. One mistake is your last."

On May 24, 2004, nearly three years to the day Rob finished his treatment for cancer, the pair, wearing oxygen masks because of the altitude, reached the rooftop of the world. Unfurling their flags – one British, one Australian – they posed for a quick snap before taking in their surroundings. "It was an awesome moment," smiles Rob, who

admits he's scared of heights. "Being there with Jo, seeing the curvature of the earth, the inky blackness of the sky because you are so close to space; it was amazing."

Jo describes that moment as being "let out of prison. It was a landmark for us because the three year period when the likelihood of Rob's cancer coming back was much greater had just ended, and we also had the freedom to try for kids because we'd been told not to start a family for three years because of the chemicals still in Rob's system. That day was just incredibly special."

Having ticked off six of the Seven Summits, the pair decided to ascend the last – Russia's Mt Elbrus – in July 2004, and in doing so climbed their way into the record books. It had taken them just one year and 38 days to complete their feat. They are now the first married couple, and Rob the first Australian, to climb all Seven Summits and ski both the North (which they did last year) and South Poles together. Jo also entered the Guinness World Records in 2005 with the fastest female ascent of the Seven Summits, and is only the second British woman to ascend Everest by the North/North East ridge.

Rob, now back working in London, bristles slightly at the suggestion that they make their feats sound easy. "None of them were easy at all. High-altitude climbing is a phenomenally difficult environment to operate in, even when you're just sitting still, let alone carrying loads, looking after yourself, making judgements about when and how you should go. You are at the limit of your capabilities mentally and physically."

"In fact, Jo describes it like this: find a hill that goes up for a mile at a reasonable gradient, put a pillow over your face, strap a sofa to your back and start sprinting until you get to the top and you might get some idea of what's it like. Oh, and throw in a hangover as well," he smiles.

Rob's health is currently good, although he will continue to have regular check-ups for the rest of his life. Looking back on all they have accomplished over the last five years, he says, "We have been very privileged and amazingly fortunate that we had the opportunity to do it. Would we have done this had I not got cancer? I don't know. There's no question that the cancer made us look at things in a different light and realign our priorities."

Their amazing feats have enhanced their already strong bond. "There's no question it has strengthened our relationship," says Rob. "We've seen each other in extreme circumstances day in, day out, and there's no place to hide when you're in that situation. We know each other better and know ourselves better."

Their next challenge will hopefully be to start a family, although Jo says she's determined not to get too obsessed about that, "because that might stop it from happening".

"We're excited about the future," says Jo, who has written a book, *Holding On* , about their adventures. "As long as Rob's health is good, then we feel quite relaxed about it. We don't mind the unpredictability; just as long as he's healthy." ■

Holding On: A Story of Love and Survival (Piatkus, \$35) is in stores from November 1



closest thing to experiencing the so-called "death zone" – 8000 metres and above – they would face on Everest) convinced the pair to attempt the big one. In May 2004, after more training and "bulking up" on Rob's mum's cooking in Australia, Rob and Jo set off for Tibet to begin their ascent up Everest, the highest mountain on the planet.

The decision to push their lives to the limit may seem curious, especially given Rob's chequered health history. "We could have wrapped ourselves in cotton wool, hoping the cancer wouldn't return," explains Jo, now 37. "But if we'd done that, [the cancer's] spectre would have controlled our lives. Even with the threat it could return at any time, we refused to throw our freedom away. Neither of us was ready to roll over and play dead."

Everyone knows Everest is tough and people die attempting to climb it – seven climbers died during the 2004 Everest season alone. And just to make things even more difficult, the Gambis decided to climb Everest via the more demanding North/North East ridge. "We decided to take the harder route because it was more in our control; if something goes wrong, it's more likely to be