

# 22 Years to the Top

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## *Palisadian Finn-Olaf Jones Summits Mount Everest*

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For more than two decades, Palisadian Finn-Olaf Jones has dreamt of summiting the world's tallest mountain, Mount Everest.

The burden of the dream weighed heavily on the Via Mesa resident, but not without good reason. Jones nearly achieved his goal when he was climbing Everest for the *Discovery Channel* in 2000, documenting his journey closely and sharing it with eager eyes online.

Reaching the top was not to be, however.

An ill-fated encounter with a faux environmentalist group on the climb thanks to ill-gotten gains, a leaked office email and an extraordinarily violent assault by his expedition guide cut his journey short at 17,600 feet. Jones told the story himself in his 2001 piece he wrote for *Forbes*, "Into Finn Air."

"It has been a monkey on my back for 22 years," Jones shared. "It was the only mountain I've ever turned my back on. It was the only [climb] I've ever started and did not summit. I've had hundreds of dreams about it."

Jones waited for his five children to grow up before making the attempt again (all in college, save for his 14- and 16-year-old, who attend Palisades Charter High and Viewpoint schools)—and the waiting period paid off.

On Friday, May 13, Jones firmly planted both feet on the ground of the highest peak in the world.

To prepare for his expedition, Jones sprinted up Temescal Canyon at least thrice weekly, readied himself for the altitude change with a hypoxic tent, braved the wintry waters of the Pacific with lengthy swims and outfitted himself with state-of-the-art mountaineering gear. His hypoxic tent acclimatized him to a whopping 22,000 feet, which served him well for reaching the top of the 29,032-foot Everest.

Summitting Everest was unlike anything he had ever imagined. He, along with Nima, the steadfast Sherpa who remained by his side the whole way, stood alone at the top as the skies illuminated with the dawn of a new day.



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*Photos courtesy of Finn-Olaf Jones*

mbled the treacherous Summit Ridge in pitch black. As they reached the Hilary Step, known to be the final dangerous and challenging step before the summit, Jones' headlamp cast a glow over the body of a fallen climber on that Friday morning.

“You would have thought that would be eerie in the darkness, one of the most dangerous places in the world, and we had all the winds of Asia above us,” Jones reflected. “We were right below the Summit Ridge, and there was this body there. Much to my surprise, I felt zero fear. I saw the body and [recognized the tragedy], but in a way I thought, ‘What an ideal place to lie,’ like he was the guardian of the mountain.”

*Finn-Olaf Jones*

Jones used his iPhone flashlight to light up the area around him, and he could see the summit flag above him. Bracing himself in what he called “the strongest winds I’ve ever felt,” Jones and Nima readied themselves for their final push.

“I was expecting terror and fear at the highest point in the world,” Jones explained. “Your next step is into the void. Instead, I felt this intense joy and peace.”

He described his “mental computer screen going blank” and still reflects on what happened at the top.

“Having the summit all to ourselves was pretty magical,” Jones added.

This time, his climb was a totally different experience. A lot had changed on Everest over the past 22 years, Jones noted.

For instance, higher temperatures meant more crevasses, which posed a dangerous threat to climbers. Icefall doctors make navigating and crossing these crevasses possible, however after a tragic 2014 accident, many perished.

As a result, fixing icefalls has changed with a more conservative approach. While there were 30 to 40 ladders available 22 years ago, there were four on this trip.

What was once a three-hour crossing of the actively shifting and notoriously dangerous Khumbu Icefall for Jones became an eight-hour endeavor.

“In many ways, the Icefall has become the crux of the whole climb,” Jones explained.

Another big change? The fun he had with the whole crew.

“Even though I was only up there for [less than] three weeks, I will probably know most of these people on my expedition for the rest of my life,” Jones shared. “You’re very bonded up there.”

The largely Austrian group brought a lighthearted spirit to the expedition.

“One [of the climbers] was a musician with the Viennese Orchestra, and actually brought a horn up there and blew the horn at the summit of Everest, which is very hard to do,” Jones said with a laugh. “These guys were great to be with, and the food was outstanding.”

His crew broke all the rules Jones formerly followed when on a big climb. Rather than surviving on bland lentils and potatoes, he found himself indulging in rich sausages and cheeses from Salzburg. At one point, one of the climbers zipped open an entire duffel bag filled exclusively with Mozartkugel, a chocolatey, nougaty confection and Austrian favorite filled with pistachio and marzipan.

“They were really fun, really great company,” Jones said. “Everyone was making jokes and there was very little ego. Everything was light and fun. It was a morale booster.”

Recognizing that a large part of climbing Everest is psychological, Jones explained that the nature of this group was a big help in getting him to the top. Led by Lukas Furtenbach of Furtenbach Adventures, Jones spent just 16 days reaching his goal, all while working with Furtenbach’s high-tech tools and placing implicit trust in the Sherpa team.

“Lukas was such a great leader,” Jones shared. “It was 14 people with wildly different climbing styles and skills, and he knew exactly how to tailor [the experience to] everyone’s needs. I liked climbing at my own pace, and so he was great to introduce me to Nima. Nima and I climbed alone together all the way up there, and it was just perfect.”

At the base camps, Jones and the other climbers would revel in the day's successes and Furtenbach would map out the following day for all of the climbers. Furtenbach prides himself on a 100% success rate and quick trips to the top, thus eliminating and reducing several failure factors that come into play on longer expeditions.

“The fact that there was this possibility of [climbing Everest] with this very elite, high-tech group in two to three weeks was the deciding factor,” Jones explained. “This was grinding me down for 22 years and with a three-week investment, I could get it out of my way.”

A great deal of prep work goes into ensuring the group is ready for the climb, including an acclimatization climb up Mera Peak, which reaches 21,247 feet. Jones credited Nima with a great deal of his success as well.

“When it gets down to it, you really want to be climbing with Sherpas,” Jones explained. “They’re the ones who climb it 20 times and know it like the backs of their hands.”

Nima and Jones formed a strong, brother-like bond despite not speaking one another's language. In the end, Nima noticed that he and Jones shared another thing in common: their shoe sizes. As a token of his appreciation, Jones left Nima his state-of-the-art mountaineering boots. It was a Cinderella fit.

With Everest finally off of his list, Jones has completed six of the Seven Summits—the highest mountains on each of the continents. The only one left to tackle is Mount Vinson in Antarctica. While checking this one off of the list is not necessarily a priority, the temptation still remains.

For now, though, Jones is simply enjoying a peaceful night's sleep after the Everest dreams that haunted him for over two decades have finally been put to rest.