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Peak experience

*Queen Anne's
Matt Fioretti to
scale unclimbed
mountain*

By Maggie Larrick

To those who don't do it, mountain climbing may seem terrifyingly inexplicable at best and a fool's sport at worst.

To Matt Fioretti, owner of Four Winds atop Queen Anne Hill and a mountaineering guide, climbing is simply something he was born to do.

In October Fioretti will take his risky pursuit to the next level. He will lead a party of climbers in scaling a mountain in Nepal that has never been climbed.

"It's the full spirit of adventure, to get on a peak where there's no garbage and no people that shouldn't be there, that weren't properly trained."

Nepal opened 100 unclimbed peaks in April to mountaineers. Fioretti chose 22,000-foot-high Kyazu Ri because of its untrammled nature

"The old school [of climbing] is about the doing."

He says the new, goal-driven generation of climbers, who learn in the gym, are missing out on climbing as an art form.

"Hands, feet, hips – it's all the movement and the tools you use."

Fioretti ponders the many elements that compose the climbing experience: being in and enjoying nature, testing your physical limits and skills, being tied to your climbing partner, which requires the ultimate trust.

"You're trusting your life to them."

There was an instance when Fioretti couldn't trust a partner. On a climb in the North Cascades, Fioretti's partner was in the lead, placing the pitons that hold the rope the two climbers were using to assist their ascent.

For some unknown reason, Fioretti wasn't comfortable with the placement of the pitons. So, rather than use the pitons to follow his partner, Fioretti told his partner to rappel down to him.

"He said he wasn't feeling comfortable rappelling off his own anchors. I said, 'Then why would you want me to trust your anchors?'"



Queen Anne's Matt Fioretti in his element: mountain climbing.

Summiting peaks a 'fringe benefit'

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slowing, we got out and down the mountain."

Fioretti says becoming a first-rate mountaineer requires putting in the time.

"Being a good climber doesn't mean making your summits. It means knowing when to go up and when to go down. Summits are a fringe benefit."

First ascent

Fioretti isn't intimidated by the idea of making the first-ever ascent of Kyazu Ri, with no known route to follow.

"Even on a lot of traditional routes you get off track."

Fioretti is not, however, barreling into this endeavor without planning. He and the group of seven climbers and trekkers he is leading will circumnavigate almost the entire mountain, using binoculars and a telescope to get the lay of the land before the climbers begin their upward journey.

"We do that on some normal climbs."

The climbers in Fioretti's group are all experienced. Two years ago, Fioretti was at Mt. Everest watching people with no mountain-climbing experience preparing to ascend that formidable peak, which has killed its share of climbers.

Fioretti was shocked to see that the first-timers were receiving their initial indoctrination in putting on crampons.

The trekkers in Fioretti's party for the Kyazu Ri climb will stay at base camp, which he hopes to establish by Oct. 18, and the climbers will head up the peak with the goal of reaching the summit by Oct. 28.

Fioretti acknowledges that his dangerous calling can be difficult for family — Fioretti is the only one of his siblings who climbs — and friends to accept.

"But I always take them with me. They're always there with me when I'm climbing."

and its history. Kyazu Ri lies south-west of Mt. Everest in an area where few trekkers go. At the peak's foot is the village of Namchebazar, where Tibetans and Nepalese have traditionally traded.

Destined to climb

Fioretti, who has been climbing for 17 years, says it is his destiny. In part, he believes it was his exposure to the outdoors that inspired him.

"I grew up climbing big trees in our backyard. I was taking pictures of the mountains from our backyard [in the mountains near Stampede Pass] at the age of 10. It was always in me."

In the beginning, climbing was difficult for Fioretti, not because of a lack of experience or strength, but because of fear of heights, of death.

"I had to learn to work within the fear. I learned that a lot of fear is created within our minds."

Fioretti says he can never really put into words everything that climbing does for him, but it shows in the glow that radiates from him when he talks about it.

"It's a spiritual journey. There's chances of dying, and being close to that makes you feel more alive."

On his last climb, Fioretti was standing on an outcropping of rock about 3 feet by 2 feet wide, looking up about 400 feet to the glacier he was trying to reach and down at a sheer drop, and he found himself thinking how great it is to be alive.

Climbing as an art

The spiritual journey consists of much more than climbing's proximity with mortality, explains Fioretti.

Needless to say, that was the end of the partnership.

A bad feeling

The intuition that warned Fioretti not to follow his partner has been finely honed, and one day saved not only his life but also those of seven people he was paid to guide.

"I turned them back from the summit on a clear day. They were angry; they didn't know why I was doing it. But something didn't feel right."

As Fioretti turned his party around, three men passed them, headed in the direction Fioretti had abandoned.

"An ice wall broke off and hit them five minutes later. Two of them ended up in the hospital."

Fioretti has learned to heed his gut feelings whenever he heads out on a climb. "If the energy isn't moving toward the climb," he'll call it off.

Intuition is not, however, the only nonphysical skill important to keeping a climber alive. Knowledge and presence of mind were critical when Fioretti was in a group caught in a storm on the north side of a peak called Nayakanga.

"The weather was coming in from the south, and we couldn't see it. On our side it was a perfectly stellar day."

The wind and snow came howling in over the top of the peak.

"The wind was blowing us over. We couldn't even stand."

So the group dug a snow cave as quickly as possible and crawled inside.

"We were pinned in for three days. The wind sounded like a freight train. As soon as we felt and heard the wind

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