



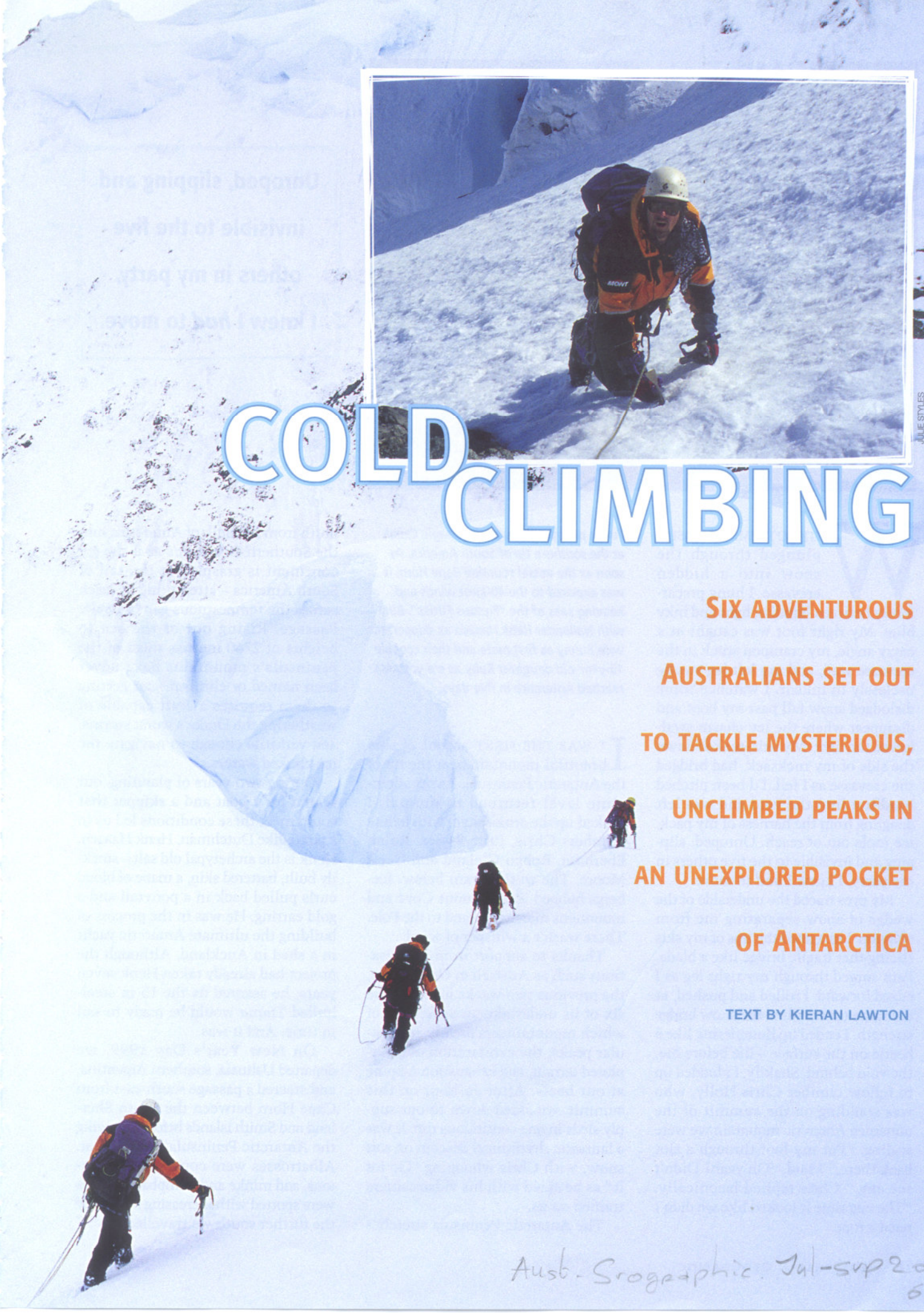
JULIE STYLES

# COLD CLIMBING

**SIX ADVENTUROUS AUSTRALIANS SET OUT TO TACKLE MYSTERIOUS, UNCLIMBED PEAKS IN AN UNEXPLORED POCKET OF ANTARCTICA**

TEXT BY KIERAN LAWTON

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KIERAN LAWTON

**Unroped, slipping and invisible to the five others in my party, I knew I *had* to move.**

**W**ITHOUT TIME TO GASP, I plunged through the snow into a hidden crevasse. I hung precariously between blinding light and inky blue. My right foot was caught at a crazy angle, my crampon stuck in the crevasse wall, and my left leg swung uselessly in midair. I watched some dislodged snow fall past my boot and disappear where the icy chasm swallowed the light. My skis, tucked down the side of my rucksack, had bridged the crevasse as I fell. I'd been pitched headfirst into the void and was left dangling from the harness of my pack, ice tools out of reach. Unroped, slipping and invisible to the five others in my party, I knew I *had* to move.

My eyes traced the underside of the wedge of snow separating me from oblivion. I imagined the tips of my skis slicing that fragile bridge like a blade. Pain surged through my right leg as I edged forward. I rolled and pushed, at the same time willing the snow bridge strength. I ended up floundering like a beetle on the surface – life before me, the void behind. Shakily, I plodded up to fellow climber Chris Holly, who was standing on the summit of the unnamed Antarctic mountain we were scaling. “Put my foot through a slot back there,” I said. “Oh yeah? Didn’t see any,” Chris replied laconically. “The one time it looked like we didn’t need a rope.”

*TIAMA plunges through the Beagle Canal, at the southern tip of South America. As soon as the vessel rounded Cape Horn, it was exposed to the 40-knot winds and heaving seas of the “Furious Fifties”. But with Hollander Henk Haazen as skipper, his wife Bunny as first mate and their capable 10-year-old daughter Ruby as crew, TIAMA reached Antarctica in five days.*

**I**T WAS THE FIRST ascent of this beautiful mountain near the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. As my adrenaline level returned to normal, I soaked up the atmosphere with fellow climbers Chris, Julie Styles, Rolan Eberhard, Robyn Cleland and Geoff Moore. The world swam below. Icebergs bobbed in Brialmont Cove and mountains marched inland to the Pole. There wasn’t a whisper of wind.

Thanks to support from organisations such as Australian Geographic, the previous two weeks had seen the six of us undertake an adventure of which mountaineers dream: spectacular peaks, the exhilaration of unexplored terrain, and exhaustion nipping at our heels. After an hour on this summit, we skied down to our supply sleds in one continuous run. It was a fantastic rhythmical descent on soft snow, with Chris whooping “Go for it” as he skied with his video camera trained on us.

The Antarctic Peninsula stretches

north from the bulk of Antarctica into the Southern Ocean. It’s as if the icy continent is grasping at the tail of South America – attempting to reach across the tempestuous gap of Drake Passage. Rising out of the sea to heights of 2760 metres, most of the peninsula’s mountains have never been named or climbed. Just getting to them requires a craft capable of weathering the Drake’s worst storms, and versatile enough to navigate the ice-choked waters.

During two years of planning, our search for a boat and a skipper that could meet these conditions led us to a pirate-like Dutchman, Henk Haazen. Henk is the archetypal old salt – stockily built, battered skin, a mane of blond curls pulled back in a ponytail and a gold earring. He was in the process of building the ultimate Antarctic yacht in a shed in Auckland. Although the project had already taken Henk seven years, he assured us the 15 m steel-hulled *Tiama* would be ready to sail in time. And it was.

On New Year’s Day 1999, we departed Ushuaia, southern Argentina, and steered a passage south-east from Cape Horn between the South Shetland and Smith islands before following the Antarctic Peninsula’s west coast. Albatrosses were constant companions, and minke and humpback whales were spotted with increasing frequency the further south we travelled.



PHOTOS: JULIE STYLES

*Looking hopefully for somewhere to establish base camp in Brialmont Cove, Rolan and Kieran motor through brash ice – broken chunks that collect near the shore. Much of the peninsula’s coast is made up of ragged cliffs, consisting of glacier tongues flowing into the sea.*

*A humpback whale arches out of the calm waters of Gerlache Strait, near Brialmont Cove. When the team first sighted humpbacks and minke, all would race out on deck with cameras blazing to capture the graceful antics of these ocean behemoths.*



Megaptera novaeangliae

THIS ADVENTURE  
WAS SUPPORTED BY  
AUSTRALIAN GEOGRAPHIC