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Feeling isolated, but satisfied to have reached their starting point, the climbers established base camp on a rocky knoll (below) overlooking the iceberg-speckled Brialmont Cove. From here, they hauled their gear in sleds and backpacks 24 km into the unexplored mountains.





IT'S LIKE having your stomach methodically sliced in half by a spring-loaded carving knife," said Robyn, after hauling her 70-kilogram sled a kilometre or so from the coast to our first camp. "We need to do something about the bungee cord."

Over the next three days, the six of us took turns hauling three 1.6 m sleds through 24 km of steep terrain into the mountains. The sleds were attached to the hauler by a rope, with a piece of elastic cord positioned to soften the jerks in the skier's stride. We hoped this would save our hips from wear and tear, and after making adjustments, the device worked well.

Our sleds contained food and fuel, climbing gear, crampons, ice-axes, tents, cookers, spare clothes, sleeping-bags, radios, batteries and solar pan-

els. We also carried 20 kg backpacks.

After dragging the sleds through fog and snow, we reached our mountain camp on the southern side of the Mouillard Glacier. Back at home, we'd studied a photograph taken with a telephoto lens to identify our objective: the mountains inland from Brialmont Cove. The only named summit in the area was Pilcher Peak.

We were awe-struck when the conditions cleared, revealing a field of tangled spires. The only map available, a British Antarctic Survey 1:250,000 map with a 100 m contour interval, hadn't even hinted at the complexity of the terrain. The challenges before us were as fresh as the cold, tasteless wind whirling down from the icecap.

On Pilcher Peak – our first ascent – the gods were smiling: a crisp snow

Dwarfed by a vast whiteness, Rolan and Robyn head past some of the region's unnamed peaks. The team were roped in pairs, which meant that if someone fell into a crevasse, and their sled toppled in after them, their partner would have to hold an enormous weight. Thankfully, they never had to test the system.

surface and easy climbing. With my companions whooping above and below, I wandered up the frozen spur dwarfed by the grotesque cornices that only occur in a climate always in frost. As midnight approached and the sun dipped below the horizon for a few hours, the Antarctic twilight cast a purple-pink hue on the mountains. Antarctic terns hovered overhead, seemingly wondering at our exertions.



Julie sizes up a craggy, unclimbed face on her way up Pilcher Peak. Dramatic, unexpected mountains like this appeared before the climbers as they rounded each turn. Having chosen their destination from a map – virtually at random – they were reassured that Antarctica holds countless more opportunities for adventure.

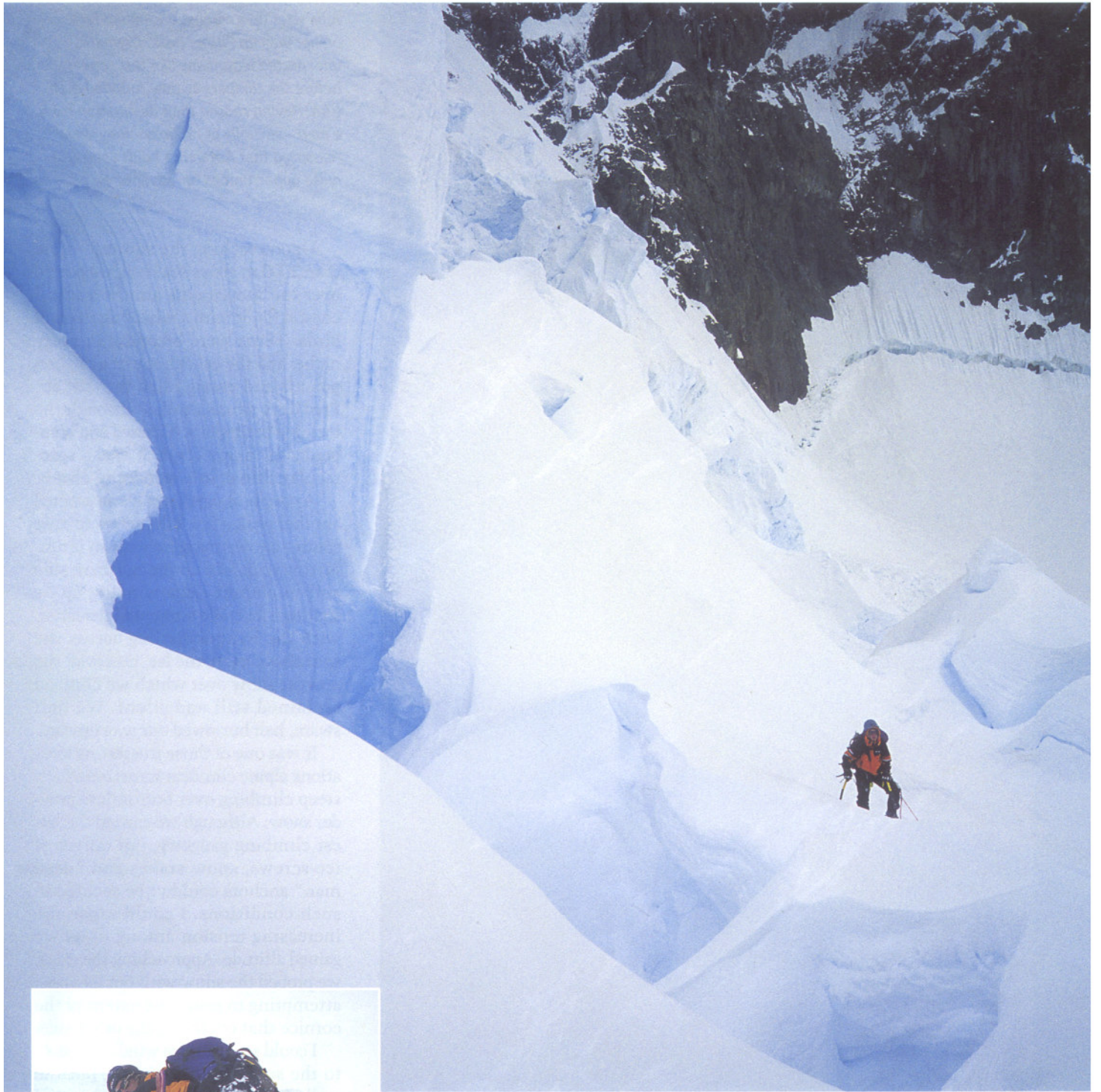
Upon reaching the summit, more than 2000 m above sea level, we peered over the mountain's almost vertical coastal flank onto a wheeling mass of birds. Terns were breeding in every niche, and the cacophony of a million parents and young filled the still air. Predatory skuas skulked through the teeming metropolis, harassed and bombarded by angry terns. It was a spectacular climax to a wonderful climb.

A couple of days later we attempted another peak a few kilometres further south – a towering spire with an intimidating rock face on the northern side and an elegant ridge winding up its southern face. We attempted the latter, with the wind whistling across the spur above us. In the lee, however, the powder snow over which we climbed remained still and silent. We half swam, half burrowed our way upward.

It was one of those frustrating situations alpine climbers sometimes face: steep climbing over bottomless powder snow. Although we carried the latest climbing gadgetry, our quiver of ice-screws, snow stakes and "dead man" anchors couldn't be secured in such conditions. I could sense the increasing tension among us as we gained altitude. Approaching the ridge, we probed the snow with our ice-axes, attempting to gauge the extent of the cornice that overhung the other side.

I could see the ridge winding steeply to the summit on our right, but the wall of snow before my face obscured all else. To my left I heard a wild howl as Jules reached its crest. I looked up to see her beaming down at me, the wind whipping her protective clothing into a frenzy as she yelled: "You can see right across the plateau from here – it's incredible!" Eventually I joined her and we gazed across exposed mountain flanks fluted with powder snow to Brabant Island and the Gerlache Strait. In the other direction the sweep of the Antarctic plateau stretched inland to the Pole.

KIEFRAN LAWTON



KIERAN LAWTON



JULIE STYLES

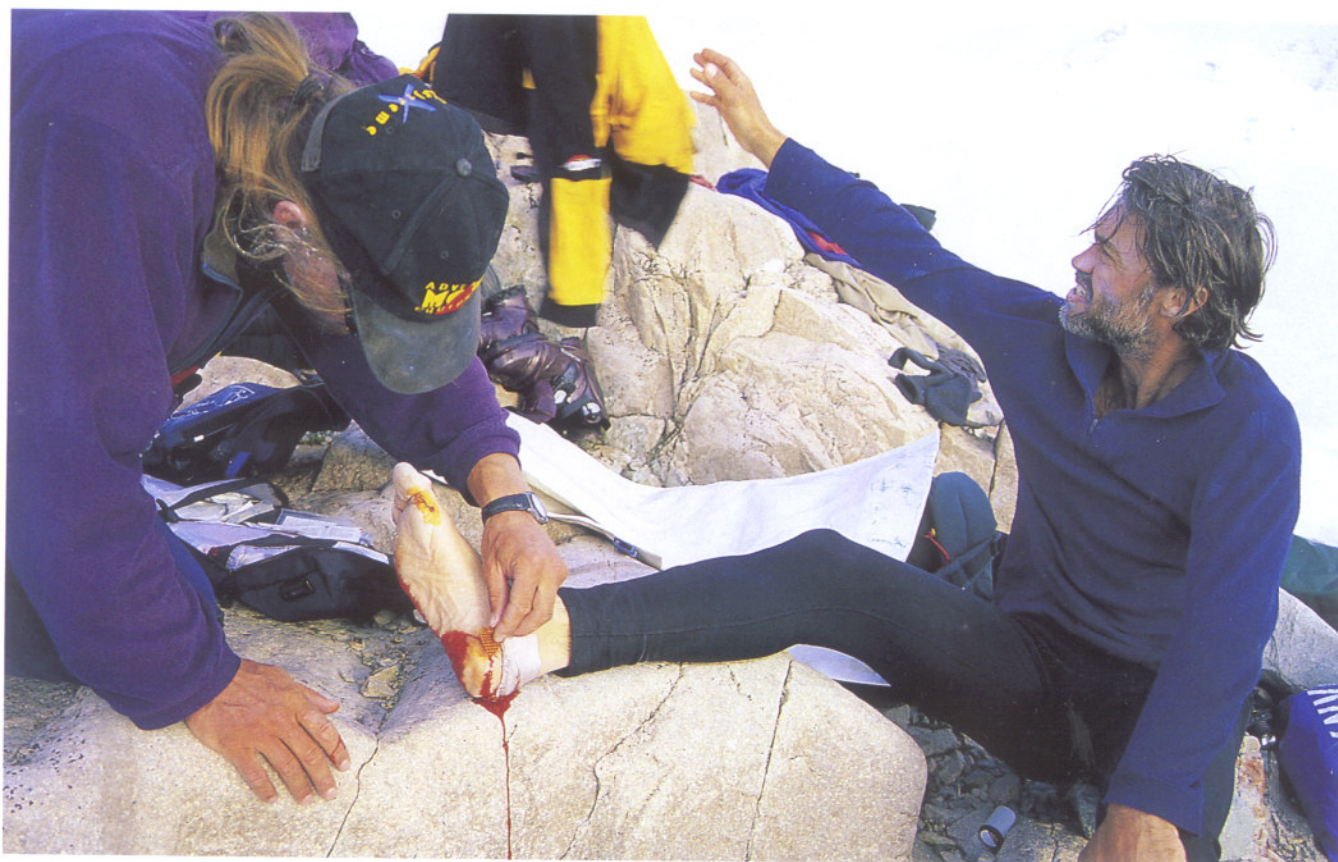
Incredible arrays of deep holes, slots, chasms and icy sculptures challenged the climbers' progress. Here Julie pauses (above) before crossing a monstrous crevasse. Both intimidating and fascinating, the dangerous terrain required all climbers to have complete faith in their partners' ability to hold them if they fell.

◀ *Nervously wishing he could place a solid anchor to hold a fall, Kieran (left) digs his feet in as he climbs a 70° slope of deep powder snow, more than 500 m above a glacier. "Imagine climbing a steep ladder and the rungs you're using for your hands dissolve as soon as you touch them," he said.*




◀ *Exhilarated, Geoff and Rolan look out across the spine of the Antarctic Peninsula, about three-quarters of the way up an unnamed peak. This was the first time in four days that the snow stopped falling and the fog lifted. Until then, the team could see no more than 50 m.*

Blood dribbles down a granite boulder at base camp, as Kieran tends to Geoff's injured foot. Softened by 10 days of trudging in plastic boots, Geoff's foot was gashed by the boulder when he slipped while reaching for some supplies. Once bandaged, it had a well-earned rest for two days in rejuvenating sunshine while the team awaited the return of TIAMA.



IT WAS AN ALMOST BALMY 0°C the day *Tiama* arrived to collect us from our coastal camp. A group of gentoo penguins swam past just offshore and, spying our tents, made a U-turn to investigate. They waddled up and mingled with us as we cooked breakfast. Shortly after, in an act of spontaneous stupidity, Chris, Jules and I stripped off and leapt into the frigid ocean to join the next penguin patrol swimming past.

Throughout our month-long expedition and the climbing adventures on six mountains, Antarctica assaulted our senses: the breath-catching cold, the smell of penguins and brine, the deathly silence inland. In some ways, visiting the frozen continent was like climbing – seemingly pointless, but it encouraged us to step away from everyday things and ponder life from an utterly different perspective. 

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