

Scaling New Heights

Three travel adventurers love to leave their comfort zone

Curiosity, risk, and reward beckon these Barrington travel adventurers beyond their comfort zones into some of the natural world's most challenging environments. It is trust and wonder that carry them through. Even as they hang on the brink.





Left page: Phil Wertz, and his brother Mike, begin their climb to Chimborazo's first base camp. Above: Chimborazo's first base camp at 14,500 feet. Left: The alpaca is native to Chimborazo and provides fiber for warm clothing. (Photos: Courtesy of Phil Wertz)

▲ Phil Wertz marketing consultant, tower lakes

When Phil Wertz decides to trek Ecuador's highest mountain peak he says, "I felt ready for the challenge."

Phil Wertz begins his day reviewing e-postcards sent from an online site called InternationalLiving.com. "My wife and I want to invest in a second home near an ocean," he explains. Ecuador intrigues him. "The more I looked into Ecuador the more interested I became," he says. He decides to plan a trip there with his brother, Mike, who lives in West Palm Beach, Fla. What happened next was not a part of the plan.

One of the things that make adventurers different from most of us is that they are ready for the inevitable. Wertz learns that his brother has to postpone the five-week excursion by a week. Undeterred, he spends the first week in Ecuador traveling solo. "All I had was my backpack. I stayed in hostels along the way, immersing myself in the local communities." On public busses he sat with the native people, several of whom held chickens on their laps.

His first stop was Mindo, a valley amidst the cloud forest on the western slope of the Andes. "Peace, beauty, harmony, and serenity" is how Wertz describes visiting Mindo. He ventures out to body surf along the beaches of Canoa, one of South America's celebrated surf destinations. He then moves on to the coastal town of Montanita, where he meets up with his brother.

Circumstances change again. While staying at the hostel in Mindo, Wertz met two Swiss travelers who were heading inland to Volcán Chimborazo. It is the highest mountain peak in Ecuador, a stratovolcano that last erupted

about 500 years ago. Heavily glaciated, bouts of severe weather and avalanches occur. With the help of a guide named Pablo, the brothers decide to begin their hike at Chimborazo's first base camp at 14,500 feet. They will descend on bikes.

The air is thin. They trek upwards toward the peak stopping to catch their breath every 20-25 steps. Upon reaching an elevation of 16,000 feet Wertz says, "We sat down and took in the serenity. All we could hear was the wind. It was a spiritual moment." Color sprayed across the powerful panorama—blue to white, gray to brown, and below, a shimmering green. It was Easter Sunday.

They trekked back down to 14,500 feet where their mountain bikes were waiting. They descended further on treacherous gravel roads. "One bad slide could pitch us 1,000 feet down. We had to constantly adjust our balance on the bikes," Wertz says. Further down they are happy to see paved roads. As if flying, they approach the mountain's base. To their surprise, Pablo has arranged for them to join him in an Easter Feast.

Wertz recalls the stark differences between Ecuador's coastal regions and the Andes. "In the mountains are the indigenous tribes. Quichua is the largest. The area is also cleaner, quieter, and agrarian."

The brothers travel on to other destinations in Ecuador, but it is Chimborazo that stays etched in Wertz's mind. "I felt ready for the challenge. It was an opportunity to push myself physically."

What's Next?

Wertz and his wife are spending time at the home they bought in Playa Langosta, Costa Rica. It's adjacent to a national park and a close walk to one of Costa Rica's finest surfing beaches.





Brenda Affinati physician, barrington hills

After Brenda Affinati finds herself on a mountainside in a windstorm in Patagonia she proclaims, “The tortoise wins the race.”

Upon graduation from medical school, Affinati traveled solo to Swaziland, South Africa, as a medical missionary. Her enthusiasm to see the world continued. She watched the sunset around the pyramids of Giza while atop a camel in Cairo, Egypt. She climbed Mount Kilimanjaro in Tanzania and dared her way around a pack of wild baboons while on a biking trip from Cape Town to Cape of Good Hope and Cape Point. Remembering that Cape Town bike trip she says, “It was truly extreme. Nothing safe about it.”

Before Affinati met her husband, Mario, and gave birth to their three sons, she dreamed of visiting every continent. Did domestic life and a demanding career dampen her desire to explore the world? No way. She and her family have traveled to some of the world’s most inspiring environments in Austria, Italy, Kenya, Costa Rica, Qatar, Nicaragua, and other unconventional travel spots. “We are not Disney people,” she says.

Many of the Affinati family trips are taken during spring break, including the one last year to Patagonia in Chile, a region located at the southern end of South America. After two flights and a four-hour drive they arrive at one of their destinations, Torres Del Paine National Park. With the help of a guide, they plan to hike six miles up from sea level and six miles down the Paine mountain range. The wind gusts off the Straits of Magellan create peril for hikers. But Brenda describes the area as “spectacular, invigorating, and pure.”

They prepare for the elements—sun, wind, and dropping temperatures. They maneuver their way up steep inclines, past crevasses, and across narrow ledges. Their guide, who is adept at hearing wind gusts, tells them: “If I say ‘go down,’ you go down.” They continue upward—Affinati, Mario, their 17-year-old son and 13-year-old twins in single file. Just as Affinati realizes that one wrong step could cost them their lives, she hears the guide yell, “Go down.”



Left page: Brenda Affinati and her husband, Mario, with their three children. Above: The three granite pillars at Torres Del Paine National Park. Above: A rainbow at Torres Del Paine National Park. (Photos: Courtesy of Brenda Affinati)

She drops, hugging the mountain wall, curled up in a ball. The windstorm approaches quickly, whirling tiny rocks into their eyes and hair. She loses sight of her boys. Fifteen minutes pass. The guide is scared. When Affinati catches sight of her kids again she hears one of the twins say, “Whose idea was this?”

With a hint of disbelief herself, Affinati says: “There were no guard rails. We had three more hours of climbing to do. It was cold, then hot, so we were putting clothes on and taking them off. Our water bottles were empty so we filled them up at the springs.”

The Affinati family makes it safely to their destination swearing, pissed off, with blisters on their hands and feet. Yet before them stand three distinctive granite peaks called Torres del Paine, reaching to the sky against a melting glacier backdrop. They hear the wind and feel the brightness of the sun. “How many people see this?” Affinati asks. “It was utter peace.” Their dangerous climb was worth it.

Affinati honors and exemplifies the irony of adventurers. “Most of us live a life where everything’s protected; with bubbles around us. When I see how beautiful, wild, and real nature is, and how people from other cultures live, it grounds me.”

What’s next?

During spring break 2015 the Affinati family headed to Manaus, Brazil, a city in the Amazon rainforest. All of their excursions will be by canoe.



George Zelcs attorney, barrington

“I just assumed I could do it,” says George Zelcs upon his return from Mount Everest.

In spite of having bad knees from playing college football, George Zelcs recharges each year by taking an adventure trip with a few colleagues from his law firm. “We choose culturally interesting areas on different continents that are physically taxing, but don’t require technical skills,” he says. They find quick flights to get the most out of their two weeks away from the office.

In 2013, three of the lawyers decided to trek Mount Everest. They are all over the age of 60. Zelcs prepared for the trip by augmenting his regular workout with running up and down the bleachers at Barrington High School for two hours on weekends. They hired a trekking firm that assigns local porters and guides.

Their first flight was to Kathmandu, the capital and largest city of Nepal. Then they flew to Lukla where they landed at the Tenzing Hillary Airport, a mountainside airstrip named after the first two men to summit Mount Everest in 1953, Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary. It is one of the most dangerous airports in the world. The runway configurations are short and steep.

Lukla sits on the Dudh Kosi River at an elevation of 9,300 feet. The air is wet and cold. “From the beginning to the end of the trip we never felt dry,” says Zelcs. Along the river, the trail slopes upward. It is made of dirt and dung. When dried, the dung is used for fuel. “There are no horses or wheeled vehicles. Whatever you see got carried up on somebody’s back or the back of a yak,” Zelcs says. “I was amazed at how primitive it was.”

They hike to the Everest base camp at 17,585 feet with their Nepalese porters and a guide. The Khumbu Icefall, a mammoth glacier, emits a continuous groaning sound as it shifts. They come to a narrow bridge stretching high above the river. Leaning to one side, they must make room for the fully packed yaks and porters crossing from the other side. The bridge sways with the wind.



Left page: Fellow travelers Jerry Brown, Steve Tiller, and George Zelcs are law firm partners at Korein Tillery in Chicago. Right: George Zelcs refers to the porters as “human trucks”. Above: A spectacular view of Mount Everest. (Photos: Courtesy of George Zelcs)

Small teahouses are situated about four hours apart on the trail. The lawyers observe the Buddhist influence seen in the Mani stones, flags, and prayer wheels along the way. They honor local traditions, spinning the prayer wheel as they visit and pass a Buddhist monastery.

At 19,900 feet they have no appetite. “We just keep walking. Passed shrines built to those who have lost their lives. We see how simply people live and lose track of what day it is. When the sun goes down, we sleep.”

After 11 days of hiking, the plan is for them to descend via helicopter to Kathmandu. But when the helicopter arrives, it can seat only two of them. George signals for his friends to go ahead. They catch up midway down the valley where the three can board. “My life is in the hands of a stranger whom I know nothing about,” Zelcs says of the helicopter pilot. The rotors spin so close to the river gorge walls that they are all near panic. Finally, they reach land.

Zelcs remains amazed by Mount Everest. “It took us 12 days to get as far as we did. Looking up, I wondered “how does anyone get to the top?”

What’s next?

The lawyers are planning a trip to Antarctica where they want to walk to the center of the South Pole.



The highest places Barrington writer Mary Klest has climbed are the granite domes on Tenaya Lake in Yosemite National Park and the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. Her other thrilling travel moments are white water rafting on the Sarapiquí River and cloud forest zip lining in Costa Rica.



Susan McConnell is a photographer from Barrington. Her most adventurous moment was when she kayaked for her husband, an open water swimmer, in the middle of the ocean in the middle of the night during his long-distance marathon swim from Catalina Island to Long Beach, California.