

# Far Flung

How We Tried to Climb the Highest Peaks in the Seven Seas



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# Introduction

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*Tell me, Muse, of the man of many devices, who  
wandered far and wide.... and saw the towns of many  
men....* (From the first lines of the *Odyssey*, Homer)

It all started back in the day, back with the blaring horn of a taxi as my shoe was flung onto its hood by my friend in the pulsing evening neon of another Friday night in New York City. We were young and stupid, yes, but full of the future and possible ways to make our way into the world. Near the end of college I had been examining maps. I enjoy their complexity and detail and compact yet comprehensive functionality. I went often to maprooms in both the School of International Affairs at Columbia and the New York Public Library. I was fascinated by the history of mapmaking, how we had come to understand the juxtaposition of land and sea and render it in so many different projections, with different emphases and levels of detail. But I also could feel that I had some drive to *go* to these places, to see them for myself. This girl who had thrown my shoe off onto a passing taxi was a willing soul as well and had her own pilot's license already. Later, she would entertain the idea of trying to cross the arctic circle by renting a plane and flying to the northern fringes of Quebec, fueling up a well-stocked inflatable and crossing Hudson Strait toward Cape Dorset on Baffin Island, then ringing around the edge of the island shoreline for another 100 miles or so to cross the arbitrary latitude before returning.

Well, that adventure never came to be, but we did manage to sling a 16 foot aluminum fishing skiff (rented the day before from a Hertz in Poughkeepsie), with outboard attached, into the Hudson River at around 125<sup>th</sup> street and voyage aimlessly down into New York Harbor to mingle with the Tall Ships on July 4<sup>th</sup>. Of course, we had no good longer term plan for surviving the day on such a sunburnt, bathroom-less, craft. We managed to find sanctuary on multiple hospitable decks throughout the day and the evening of fireworks before having to be towed back upstream by the US Coast Guard, who was not happy with us, but ultimately concerned enough for our safety in the midst of a 1000 boat wakes to make sure we did not succumb. Around the same time, nonetheless, I began thinking about all sorts of

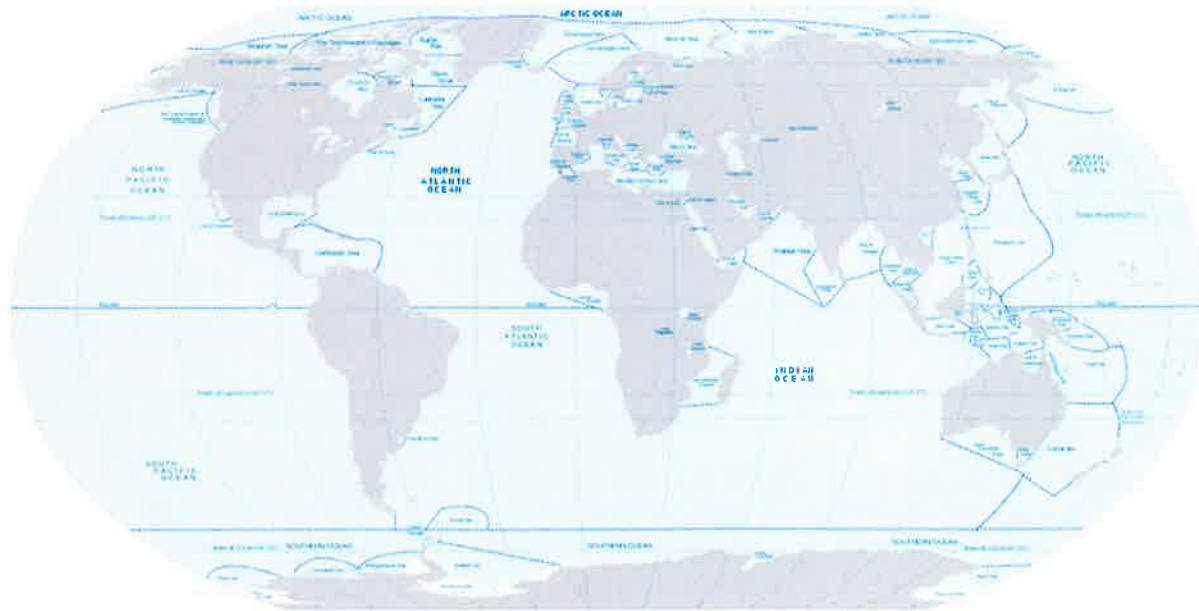
'world' scale quests. It occurred to me that, while climbing the 7 continent highest peaks (immortalized as a 'thing' by Dick Bass only months before, on my birthday ironically, in 1985) would certainly be monumental, climbing the highest peaks in the 'seven seas' was a potentially interesting alternative concept.

Fast forward several decades to meeting my adventure partner, Chris Martin, whom I had known for several years but had not considered as someone interested or willing to partake in any climbing expeditions. I had been to the tops or nearly so of Denali, Aconcagua, Kilimanjaro, and Elbrus, among other lesser heights, and Chris had followed these exploits with a standard amount of interest and some post-climb inquiries, but no particularly apparent enthusiasm. One day, while we transited through the El Prat Airport in Barcelona after a meeting, he asked if I might be interested in making the trek to Everest base camp, which entailed flying into Lukla from Kathmandu and then making our way through the Khumbu Valley. Though I had of course considered trying to climb Everest, dismissing it mostly because it would require more time than I could be away and more expense than I could justify, a protracted high-altitude *trek*, on the other hand, seemed both short enough and affordable enough. I agreed.

During this trip, exotic and formidable, but spectacular and exhausting all at once, I confided my now ancient and buried desire to climb the highest peaks of the 7 seas to him. I think he received it with both a hypoxic enthusiasm and logistic glee, as he could see the need to make our way to all sorts of far flung parts of the globe and have a built-in itinerary and goal with each sojourn as well. He was happy to start work on the future quests. One of the immediate benefits was that I had a kindred soul to share the accomplishment, and the burdens, of such endeavors. But more pre-eminent was that Chris had a penchant for travel logistics, a flexible willingness, and an understanding of our mutual constraints and interests. It turned out I could not have asked for a better partner.

The first thing we did was figure out what was meant by the 'seven seas'. Though I had already considered this issue and made a list of the highest peaks years ago, we really had to dig through all of it again to make sure it made sense. It's an old term in the literature of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, (see for example Rudyard Kipling 'The Seven Seas', 1896), part of sailing and trade lore and many sea shanties. Typically, the term came to include what we still use as our definition today: the Indian, North Atlantic, South Atlantic, North Pacific, South Pacific, Arctic, and

Antarctic Oceans. There is also a long history (now ensconced in the 'Seven Seas Group') which took the clipper-ship trade route between China and England as a mark of superior seamanship and included passage through the Banda Sea, Celebes Sea, Flores Sea, Java Sea, South China Sea, Sulu Sea, and the Timor Sea – 7 seas. However, it is actually a term that has been used even much earlier in ancient Greek texts. Apparently, early references used the term 'seven seas' and included the Aegean, Adriatic, Mediterranean, Black, Red, and Caspian seas, with the region of the Persian Gulf added as the 7<sup>th</sup> 'sea'. Later, in medieval European literature, it instead included the North Sea, Baltic, Atlantic, Mediterranean, Black, Red, and Arabian seas. As the North American continent and America itself came more into focus, the term was still used, though its members changed again and included Arctic, Atlantic, Indian, Pacific, Mediterranean, Caribbean, and Gulf of Mexico as the world's largest bodies of water.



Of course, it's all arbitrary. But so is every kind of definition of a grouping like this. The 7 continents are arbitrary ways of dividing the land masses with a modicum of political and geographical expediency. Even now there are several lists of what qualifies as the 7 summits, depending on where certain peaks reside and what one considers a 'continent'. The seven seas are not much different in this regard, except that NOAA and other entities have all agreed on formal boundaries of where the oceans do in fact start and end. Even recently, however, definitions are in

flux, and the Antarctic has been passed over for the Southern Ocean in many accounts. Using then the cutoffs of the Equator to divide north and south, and using the latitudes (approximately 66.3 degrees) from the north and south poles where the sun either stops setting or never rises as the Arctic and Antarctic boundaries, one can fairly confidently define the 'seven seas' and begin to look at what lies within them. And here is where our story begins.

*The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy. Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus*