

# SEIZE THE WORLD

Tired of being a beach potato? Turn your life into an adventure story



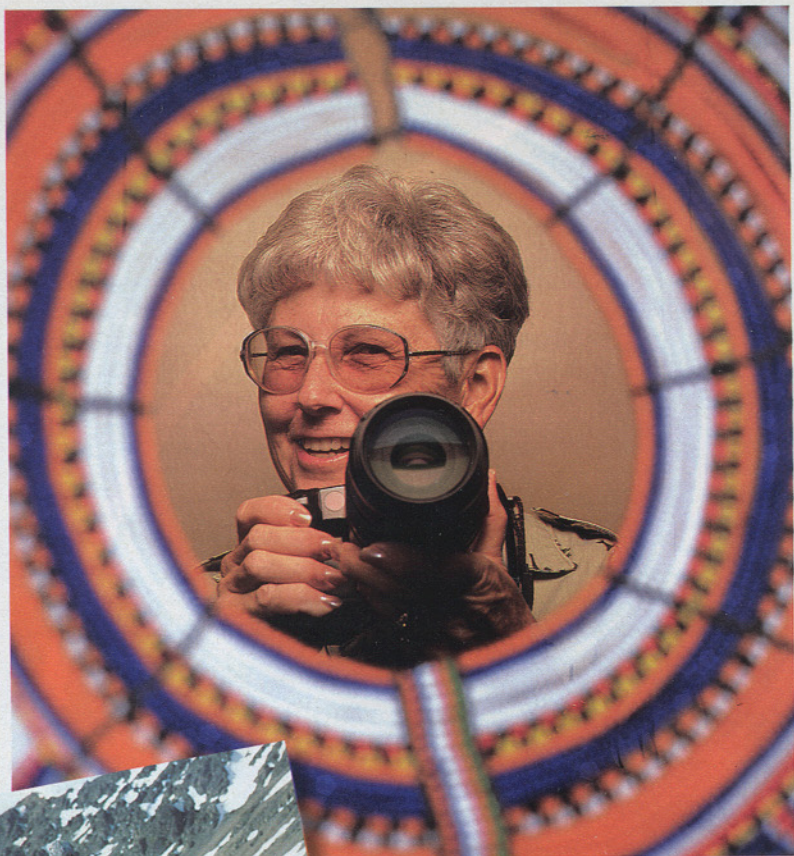
ON A COLD DECEMBER MORNING, UNDER THE 24-HOUR daylight of the Antarctic summer, Californian Betty Platero, 62, climbed down the steps on the ice-hardened hull of a chartered converted Russian research vessel. Scrambling into a rubber Zodiak boat, she prepared for a rough ride through breaking surf toward a beach on South Georgia island. After landing, she found herself on a hill rising above an ineffably wild and pristine environment, gazing down at a sight few humans have enjoyed: more

than 250,000 King penguins in full summer plumage assembled in a remote rookery for their elaborate

By Peter Potterfield



ILLUSTRATIONS: KODICHA KOPAL; PHOTOGRAPHY: GALEN ROWELL



show that at least 8,000 outfitters in the United States alone can satisfy your yen for excitement. According to the World Travel and Tourism Council, adventure is the fastest growing segment of the travel industry today, with more than 98 million adults pursuing a challenging experience in just the past five years alone.

"The very definition of adventure travel has changed over the past several decades," says Richard Bangs, a founding partner of Mountain Travel-Sobek, one of the oldest and largest operators in the field. "In the early days, in the '60s, there was a very small client base for this business—mostly well-heeled professionals who wanted lots of adventure and didn't mind taking serious risks or being uncomfortable doing it. The trips were expensive and full of unknowns and bad surprises. But the gradual shift toward 'soft' adventure in the mid-'80s opened the business to a larger population of clients who wanted something challenging but also demanded good planning and a relative degree of comfort."

It's no accident that the concept of adventure became a mainstream phenomenon in the 20th century. Modern life has stripped away many of the physical challenges that once were inherent in human existence. That void creates an unfulfilled need.

"The desire to experience is important in today's virtual world," says Dawn Beckley, operations director for Alpine Ascents International, a travel company specializing in mountain climbing. "People can lose touch with their sense of physical purpose, and climbing is a way for those people to feel strong. To strive for something difficult, to go beyond what's called for in everyday life, becomes empowering and carries with it not just a physical sense of accomplishment but a spiritual one. The impact goes far beyond the experience itself. A real adventure stays with you. It becomes a part of who you are."

More than a visit to a foreign city, the excitement of a serious adrenaline rush lingers. For many people, adventure, once tasted, becomes addictive.

"Lifestyles have changed," says Bud Davis, founder of the International Adventure Travel and Outdoor Show, the leading industry trade show. "Many people aren't content anymore to be beach potatoes and fry

in the sun. Add to that a genuine concern about vanishing wilderness and the desire to get out in the magnificent outdoors before it disappears, and you've got the drive behind the growth in adventure travel."

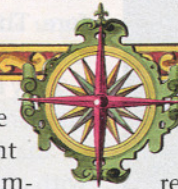
Bangs is a case in point. Now 49 and editor-at-large for Microsoft's Expedia.com online travel site, he had, as a kid growing up in suburban Washington, D.C., an innate yearning for risk, and in his late teens he was seduced by the allure of fast rivers. One day he bought a cheap rubber raft and launched himself down the Little Falls rapids on the Potomac River. Submerged rocks soon ripped the bottom out of his raft and he almost drowned. But Bangs was electrified with excitement, and that epiphany led him to take a summer job as a guide on the Colorado River. "I was just blown away," he recalls. "Running the canyon was beautiful, and the people who came along were incredible. In those days, it was only the rare person who would take a trip like that."

His appetite whetted, Bangs upped the ante by heading to Ethiopia, where there were rivers so wild that they had never before been run. His intent was to take a year off between graduation from Northwestern University and graduate school, a "last yahoo," as he puts it. But a dark, forbidding river called the Omo, full of crocodiles, poisonous snakes, lethal insects, and deadly rapids changed all that. After weeks in uncharted wilderness, he and his small band of companions ran out of food and had to abort the trip. They were in danger of starving when they stumbled out of the jungle onto a remote airstrip, and salvation.

"The experience was so remarkable that I couldn't accept the idea of going back to normal life after that," he says. "There was such a richness to the adventures, everything seemed young and new, and the exotic sights and smells and languages just swept me away. I came home determined to see if I could make a living doing this."

After that trip, Bangs and a friend founded Sobek, named for the ancient Egyptian croc-

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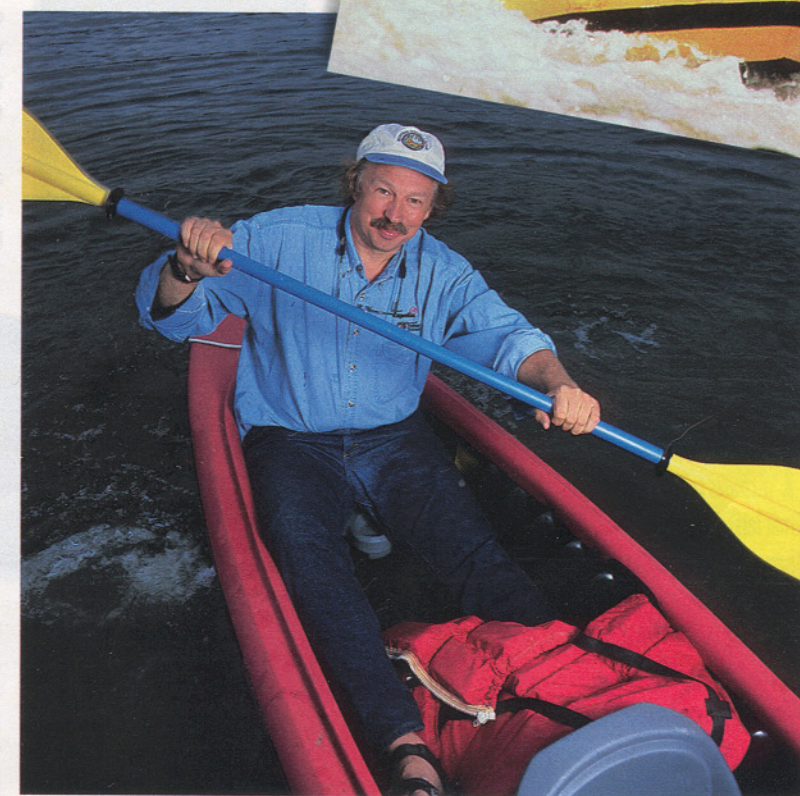
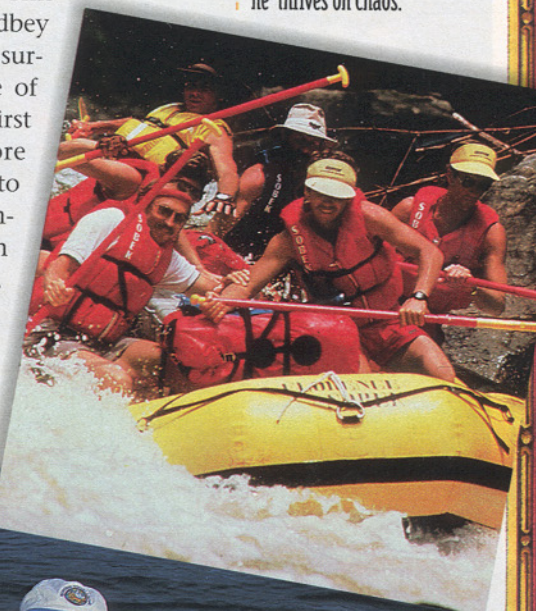
dile god. "When you try to define adventure," he says, "the only definition that makes sense is that it's more mental and emotional than anything else. When you challenge yourself, you learn from it and come back changed, with new strength and understanding."

The transformative power of adventure is well-known to Keith and Antje Gunnar. This

couple from Whidbey Island, Washington, surrendered to their love of the outdoors when they first met 40 years ago, before there was an industry to cater to it. Keith put together a 20-day trek through the Himalayas of Nepal. No information was available on the area because no other Westerners had ever traveled this trekking route before, so

### Richard Bangs

Bangs, shown (top) paddling the Alas River in Sumatra in 1983 on an expedition to an orangutan reserve, says he 'thrives on chaos.'



annual mating ritual. As she recorded the scene with her camera, Platero breathed in the salty air of the cold South Atlantic Ocean and relished the deep satisfaction of being in one of the world's wildest places.

Although not her first—or last—adventure, it was a special moment for Platero. After 31 years of teaching junior high and high school students, she has, since 1995, aggressively pursued her companion

enthusiasms of photography, wildlife, and travel. She has embarked on journeys to see polar bears in northern Canada, orangutans in Indonesia, lions in Africa, and frost-encrusted buffalo in a Yellowstone winter. But that day on South Georgia, surrounded by glaciers and mountains, elephant seals and penguins, was a symbol to Platero of how rich her life had become through her ongoing quest to fulfill her passions.

Whatever the desired experience—a landing in Antarctica, a trek into the Grand Canyon, or a bicycle trip through the French countryside—going it on your own is no longer necessary. The latest figures

### Betty Platero

There are too many places I want to go, says the former teacher. Inset: Posing at a grave marker on an expedition to Norway in 1992.





Keith charted a course from Gorkha to Pokhara using the only resource he had: maps.

The journey led them through valleys and villages, and eventually into the high rhododendron forests on the lower slopes of the range. At one 15,000-foot pass, however, the Gunnars realized they were lost. Two of their Sherpa guides scouted a route they hoped would bring them out of the mountains, and eventually the small party descended out of the clouds to astonish a small village whose residents had never seen a trekking party before. The Gunnars weren't sure what kind of reception they would get.

They had nothing to fear. The Nepalis greeted them warmly, adorned them with garlands of marigolds, and celebrated the occasion with an epic party. Keith and Antje were the guests of honor, plied all night with a potent distilled beverage called *rakshi*, and entertained with nonstop dancing and singing. "We must have seemed like aliens descending from the sky," Keith says.

An expectation of wonderful moments has inspired the Gunnars to pursue a life wholly given over to their first love—travel. "We decided not to have kids because we wanted to keep our freedom and be able to play," says Keith. "I even turned down a job as vice president of an aircraft company because I knew I wouldn't be able to travel. Instead, we were able to derive income from the photos we took while traveling to wild, remote places."

When they met in 1960, Keith was working as an engineer specializing in aircraft windshields for Boeing in Seattle, and German-born Antje was a Boeing liaison for Lufthansa. The airline connection made worldwide travel possible for them at a fraction of published fares. "We could fly to Alaska for \$15," Keith recalls. "We once flew to New Delhi for \$98. We sometimes got a ride on delivery flights to Europe. There were no limits in those days."

A seminal moment of sorts came in the late '70s when a new magazine, *Adventure Travel*, sent the Gunnars to Africa for a month to photograph wildlife safaris. The mere existence of such a magazine proved that the adventure-travel industry was coming into its own. The world was beginning to catch up with the Gunnars. The emergence of a service industry only fueled the couple's passion, and their pace

of travel increased in the '80s and '90s to include more exotic destinations: Russia, Antarctica, remote Scandinavian archipelagos, the North Pole—all commercial offerings. Says Keith, stocky and strong at 71, five years older than Antje: "I don't think there's anywhere in the world you can't go to just by picking up the phone. That's the big difference from the '60s to today."

For New Englander Sal Pomponi, the urge for adventure was awakened in midlife and driven by a sudden passion for mountain climbing. Already well-traveled in his career as a systems engineer, Pomponi had also lived abroad. "Just before my 50th birthday I did a mental review of my life," he says. "I had an extremely rewarding and satisfying career. I had a wonderful family. I had traveled extensively. I couldn't find a lot to wish for, but nevertheless I set two goals for myself: I would run a marathon and I would do an expedition climb."

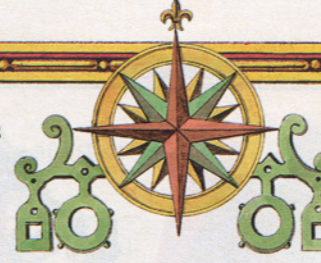
He did the marathon that year, but orchestrating the climbing expedition took longer. His love of the mountains had already been nurtured by camping trips into the White Mountains of New Hampshire along with his wife and children. By the early '80s, his grown son Marco had introduced him to the sport of rock climbing. Business trips to Tokyo had given him the opportunity to climb in the Japanese Alps. He was, in his own words, "really smitten by the beauty and exhilaration of mountaineering." He began to climb in earnest.

Pomponi, 70 this year, can now look back on the past 20 years with an impressive résumé. He has climbed the highest peaks on five of seven continents, including Aconcagua in South America, McKinley in North America, and Kilimanjaro in Africa. All ascents were made *after* his 60th birthday.

"Climbing appeals to me on many levels," he says. "I like to push myself mentally and physically, and climbing demands that. It's a proven way to decompress from the tension of everyday life. Mountaineering has a way of putting life back into perspective for

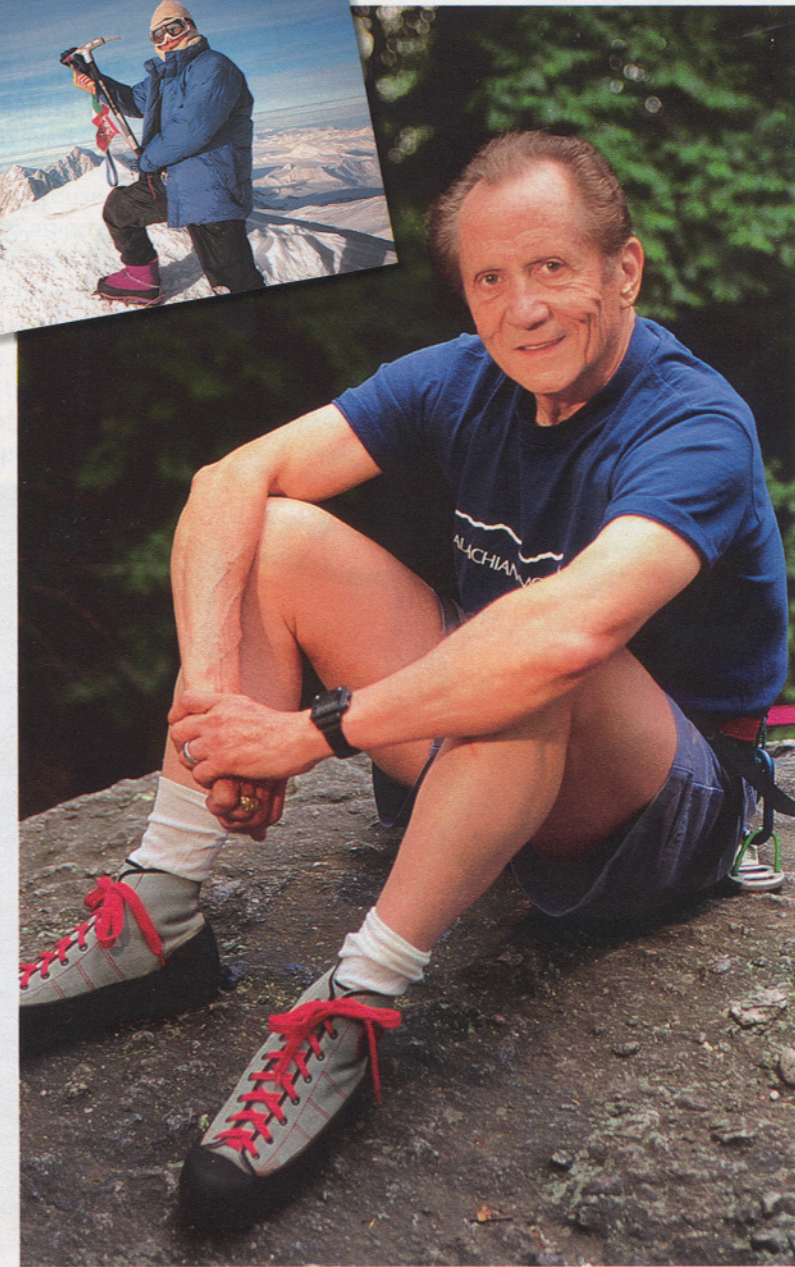
me because life is pretty simple on the mountain."

But mountaineering is also dangerous, and Pomponi knew he could not expect to climb as aggressively as he does without incident. Finally, one day the odds caught up with him. He was high on Ama Dablam, a 22,350-foot peak in the Khumbu Valley of Nepal, when he stepped to one side to check a piece of equipment. As he did so, a boulder dislodged from high above and (continued on page 97)



### Sal Pomponi

Life is pretty simple on the mountain,' he says. Inset: At the summit of Vinson Massif, Antarctica's highest peak, in 1996.



### Keith & Antje Gunnar

Their scrapbook includes (clockwise from left) pictures of them greeting penguins in Argentina, scuba diving off the Netherlands Antilles, backpacking in Washington, and getting a good deal from a Kikuyu woman in Kenya.



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(continued from page 53)

roared past the spot where he had been standing. It struck the climber behind Pomponi, crushing his leg.

It took Pomponi and his companions three days to get the injured climber down to where he could be evacuated by helicopter. "Fortunately," says Pomponi, "everything turned out well. But I still wonder what that boulder could have done to me if I hadn't stopped when I did."

If there is an ambition for him that remains unfulfilled, it is to climb an 8,000-meter (26,240-foot) peak. There are only 14 such mountains in the world, and his previous attempt to climb one—a venture on Mount Everest in 1993—was unsuccessful. But he is undaunted. "I hope to keep climbing," he says. "If you get trapped into defining your actions and ambitions solely by age, you're going to miss a lot of opportunities to enjoy life."

Epiphanies of this kind, however, don't come cheap. The typical price of an Antarctic wildlife excursion aboard a chartered vessel, complete with wildlife experts, can run to \$10,000 or more and a guided ascent of Mount Everest can cost a staggering \$75,000. "Serious climbing takes time and money, both of which are hard to come by early in life," Pomponi says. His goals are more achievable today because the guided-climbing industry has matured. Similarly, Platero has been able to pursue her photo hobby through such companies as Joseph Van Os Photo Safaris.

But who says you have to spend a fortune finding adventure? Whale-watch-

ing trips from San Francisco Bay, an ascent of Mount Rainier, or a tour of Anasazi ruins in Navajo country can be had for a few hundred dollars. (See "Great Adventures," page 60.)

Purists argue that the very definition of adventure travel mandates that it include travel to exotic, far-off lands, but more practical travelers insist it's the adventure that's important, not the location.

"The great appeal of adventure travel," says Bangs, "is that it opens up new doors of awareness for you. All the external trappings of your life—your mortgage payments, your job—mean nothing in the wild."

Bangs has compiled many of his exciting adventures into more than a dozen books. His latest, *The Lost River* (Sierra Club, 1999), describes the first-ever descent (by him) of the Tekeze, a wild African river. "Like many of my clients, I like chaos," he says.

Most experienced adventurers can recall close calls. The Gunnars remember being chased by a hippo

along the Luangwa River in Zambia. Keith says that as he ran for his life through the jungle, he imagined the headline in his hometown paper: LOCAL MAN KILLED BY HIPPO IN AFRICA! The story never ran; fortunately, their Zambezi guide shot the beast before it ran Keith down. Platero remembers being buried in a rockslide while camping in the Grand Canyon; she had a broken collarbone and had to be floated downriver for two days until a place suitable for helicopter evacuation was reached.

But near-misses have never dissuaded these or other adventurous souls from seeking excitement. "I encountered pleasant surprises when I started serious climbing," says Pomponi. "A lot of people older than I am are out there enjoying challenges. The rewards are just too great not to go." **MM**

*Peter Potterfield has written for Outside, Condé Nast Traveler, and other publications. His most recent book is In the Zone (The Mountaineers Books, 1996).*

### SOLUTION TO PUZZLE (PAGE 98)

"All work, even cotton spinning, is noble."

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