

Brian Dickinson is reaching for the heavens

By Zach Urness of the Daily Courier

Brian Dickinson has faced plenty of challenges during his quest to climb the tallest point on each of the world's seven continents.

The inherent danger of avalanches, altitude sickness and treacherous weather are the 1992 Rogue River High graduate's constant companion en route to the world's most inhospitable places.

Two people died during freezing weather and whiteout conditions while he was ascending North America's tallest point — Mount McKinley/Denali (20,320 feet) — and it took a while to catch his breath in the thin air of Africa's Mount Kilimanjaro (19,340).



Brian Dickinson is seen at the summit of the 18,510-foot Mount Elbrus.

Danger and frustration are simply part of climbing the famed "seven summits," of which he's climbed three.

His most recent trip up Russia's Mount Elbrus (18,510) — considered the highest point in Europe — featured a different set of challenges to overcome, however.

It wasn't so much climbing the mountain that was the problem, but rather getting to base camp through the rampant corruption of post-Soviet Russia that provided the biggest obstacle. Add the fact that he was bringing along his wife JoAnna — who is deathly scared of heights — to the 12,000-foot base camp, and you had all the makings of an interesting trip.

From the moment he landed in the land of our former Cold War counterparts Dickinson found that paying off police and officials is just part of doing business.

"We didn't quite take into account 'bribe' money when we were budgeting for the trip, which made it very frustrating," said Dickinson, adding that the group paid out around \$500 (U.S.) in illicit funds. "The police stand on the side of the freeway and wave you over. They cite you for whatever and you pay them off ... pretty simple."

The corruption became most frustrating in the southern region of Azau, which provides access to Mount Elbrus. The group had to take two gondolas (which bring people up the mountain) and one chair lift to reach the 12,000-foot base camp. At each stop, however, were a few machine gun toting officials ready to exact more money.

"At each entrance to the lift there were military officials taking money in order for us to move higher on the mountain, even though we paid our fees at the base of the mountain," Dickinson said. "There's just not much you can do."

But while ascending up the gondolas and chairlifts became a frustration for Dickinson, they were a big

moment for his wife.

JoAnna Dickinson has watched her husband climb mountains at home — in Snoqualmie, Wash. — and around the world for years since he got out of the Navy, where he served as a helicopter search and rescue swimmer.

She's never joined him because of an intense fear of heights. On this trip though, with the mountain fairly accommodating to reach base camp without climbing any steep slopes, she decided it was time.

"It was my one chance to try to experience it with him," Joanna said. "I have such an extreme fear that I'd never even been on a chairlift before. I didn't know what to expect when we got on the gondolas. I just decided to go for it and pray the whole way.

"After a while I was able to just look around and sort of enjoy it. It was very peaceful."

The heights weren't the only thing JoAnna had to be nervous about. She spent one night by herself at base camp while Brian headed up to the summit.

"When we got (to Russia), our guide said that some American women have gotten kidnapped and made into brides by force," she said. "So I was like, 'Oh that's great.' The night by myself at base camp I slept with a knife in my hand and pepper spray nearby."

The climb itself began with Brian, David and Jessica (two friends along for the trip) and Oleg (a guide) heading up to high camp, where they dug into the snow at 15,000 feet. They set out in 2 a.m. darkness the next morning and, though David had to drop out due to altitude issues, the three of them reached the summit at about 6:15 a.m.

"The surrounding Caucasus Range was amazing once the clouds burned off," Dickinson said of looking from the summit. "The view on the descent is always the best since you actually get to see the view. I was worried about Joanna being by herself so I packed up a tent and other gear and headed down."

There was one final hurdle to be passed, however, before they could return to the United States.

"At the airport they gave Jessica trouble because of her missing papers, so we had to bribe the local military to let her through," Dickinson said. "We used all of our money to make sure she made it back to Moscow. I took a picture of the young, corrupt military standing there with their AK47's. They came over and said, 'no photos...delete now!'

"I did ... rather than cause an international incident."

o o o

NOTES: Dickinson's next trip will be an ascent up Mount Everest. ... More information about Dickinson's quest to climb the seven summits, along with pictures and video, can be found at www.sponsor7summits.com.