

§ 1. The Alpine Club in London has all the atmosphere of a country pub, where the regulars have been coming for years to have a friendly chat over great climbs. Many mountaineers have spoken here before; this particular evening, the floor is given over to Alan Hinkes. He is speaking before he sets off on his attempt to become the first Briton to climb all 14 of the world's highest peaks over 8000 metres. While five men in the world have already achieved this feat, he will be the first to climb six within a year.

§ 2. It was during his first attempt at an "8000er" in the Himalayas in 1992 that he first thought about attempting "the 14", as the world's 14 highest peaks are known in mountaineering circles. Over the next 10 years, Hinkes gradually climbed another seven of the 8000ers. Then followed three years during which he made three attempts on the world's hardest mountain, Pakistan's K2. "K2 is not much lower than Everest," explains Hinkes, "so you have all the same altitude problems." It is also much more difficult to climb, he adds. "In 2003 I had to **retreat** to help a guy down who was in a really bad way, then the next year I got very near the top but wasn't happy with the snow conditions."

§ 3. Hinkes' rule, which he repeats as much to remind himself as anyone else, is "No mountain is worth a life, the summit is a bonus." "It's always difficult to enjoy it on top of the mountain because you know you have to get back down," he says. Descending is always harder. "You're exhausted — particularly if you burn uploads of calories celebrating the victory on the summit like some people do. You have to keep yourself under control for the descent."

§ 4. Hinkes celebrates his 43rd birthday on 23 April 2012, the day he intends to summit Lhotse. "I was as fit as a butcher's dog 20 years ago but it would have been difficult to force myself to go slow and the way to get fit on big mountains is to keep pushing slowly," he admits. Hinkes is very obviously looking forward to the task ahead. If he makes it — and he refuses to be drawn into **rating** his own chances of success — he is well aware that it will be largely down to his ability to keep mind, body and soul together in situations where the mountains have the final say. He is angry at any reference to the fact that he is "conquering" anything. "Mountaineers have never spoken about 'conquering mountains. It is the media and non-climbers who talk in this way. You never conquer a mountain; a mountain lets you move to the top and get back down. It lets you have a good time or a bad time on it, but it never allows you to conquer it."

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Why does it annoy him when non-climbers talk about 'conquering mountains'?

- 1) Only climbers know what it really means.
- 2) Mountains cannot be conquered.
- 3) Not many people succeed in doing it.