


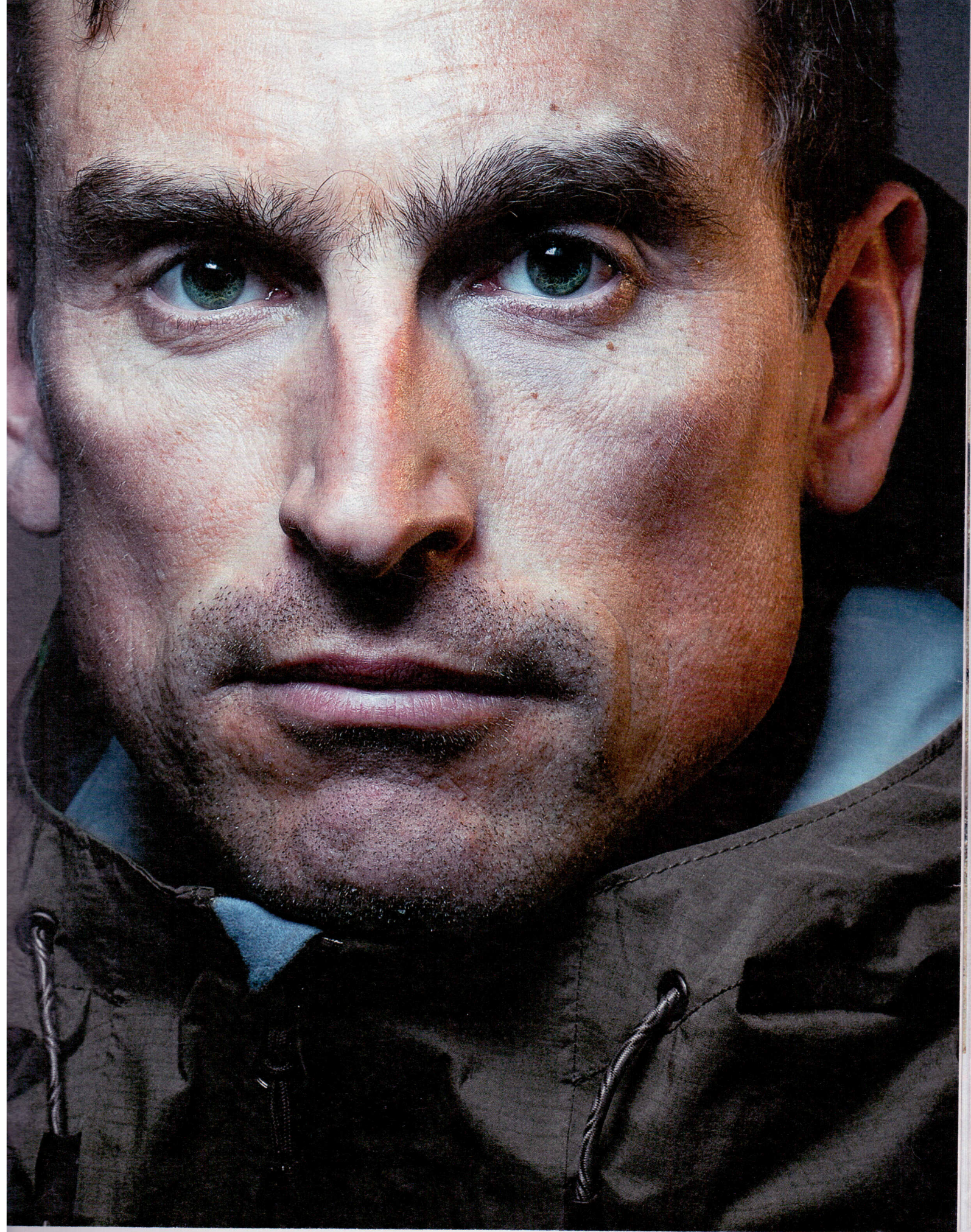
THE REAL MISTER COOL

He's climbed Everest a record-breaking 11 times and lost 37 friends to the mountains – meet British action man Kenton Cool. By Giles Whittell

PORTRAIT Martin Hartley



Kenton Cool leading
an ascent of
Annapurna III in 2003



The story that emerged from the Everest base camp on May 21 was remarkable even in its bare essentials.

A British climber had marked the 60th anniversary of the first ascent of the world's highest peak by climbing not just Everest but the two huge mountains next to it, all in one go. It was an astonishing feat of endurance at altitudes that

make most people throw up or give up even if all they have to do is stand up.

Kenton Cool and his Sherpa partner, Dorje Gylgen, had gained and lost ten vertical kilometres in the 120 hours it took them to climb Nuptse, Everest and Lhotse. They had barely slept or eaten much. They'd burnt so many calories that Cool staggered back from Lhotse two stone lighter than when he had set out for Nuptse on the 15th.

"Totally shattered like never before," he tweeted from base camp as news of their achievement spread.

It was his 11th time up Everest, a record for a Brit. It was the first time anyone had done the whole enormous Everest horseshoe in a single push (*Outside* magazine called it the "triple crown"). And it was a relief for the Everest industry, in a year marred by a nearly fatal brawl between Sherpas and Westerners high in the Western Cwm, to be able to end the season with a good old-fashioned epic.

Except that there wasn't much that was old-fashioned about it.

I first met Cool in a bar in Zermatt eight years ago. The second time was a few days after his descent from Lhotse, in a coffee shop in London, where I started by asking him for a blow-by-blow of the whole triple crown to make sure I had the dates and times clear in my head.

Nuptse was technically the toughest of the three peaks. It's also the lowest, but low is a relative term in the Everest horseshoe. It's still the equivalent of seven Snowdons stacked on top of one another and this year its snow summit was dangerously unstable.

Everest was a breeze, insofar as Everest can be in the middle of the night – they started the summit ridge at 8pm on May 18 and reached the top at two in the morning.

"Lhotse was the difficult one," Cool says. It was never going to be easy, given that they had been awake, in or near what climbers call the death zone, for three days by the time they reached Lhotse's advance base camp on May 19. But it turns out that neither sleep deprivation or oxygen deprivation was the problem.

The problem was Li Xiaoshi.

Cool had never met "Mr Li", as he refers to him throughout, until hearing him groaning in a solitary tent about 40 metres below the main cluster of tents on a steep snow slope that constitutes Lhotse Camp 4.



From top: Kenton Cool climbing the Eiger in 2007; with Sherpa Dorje Gylgen, his partner for

the 'triple crown'; at home in Gloucestershire with his wife Jazz and their two children

'I SPENT 12 HOURS WITH MR LI. HE WAS STILL ALIVE THEN, BUT BY THE TIME THEY GOT TO ME IT WAS A BODY RECOVERY PARTY'



Li was 58, Taiwanese, heavily built and dying. He had reached the top of Lhotse three days earlier with a team organised by a cut-price guiding company based in Kathmandu. On the way down he had collapsed with high altitude cerebral oedema, or HACE, the worst form of altitude sickness there is.

HACE involves uncontrolled swelling on the brain and is usually fatal if not treated quickly. An Italian helicopter pilot had valiantly attempted a "long-line" rescue the previous day. At 7,700 metres it would have been one of the highest helicopter rescues ever, but the conditions had to be perfect, and they weren't.

By this time Li's guides had abandoned him, failing to tell the Himalayan Rescue Association – the main mountain rescue organisation at base camp – that they had a casualty on the mountain. A Good Samaritan guide from another company had spent three days with him, but in the afternoon he had to descend to catch up with his own clients. That left Cool alone with Li for the night shift.

"I spent about 12 hours in the tent with him," he says. "His stats took a nose dive at about three o'clock in the morning. Come four o'clock I started doing CPR. He wasn't responding to dexamethasone, which is a steroid. We were injecting him intramuscular into his thigh, which normally has quite a profound effect. It was having no effect on Mr Li."

Cool kept up the CPR for about two and a half hours, sustained by lemon tea brought down from the main group of tents by Gylgen. ("Sherpas don't really like death and bodies, so I saw no point in involving Dorje more than necessary.") He estimates that Li weighed about 100kg – a daunting weight to manhandle at that altitude. A rescue party of at least eight climbers was needed, and it had finally left base camp around lam.

"He was still alive at that stage, but by the time they got to me at Camp 4 it was a body recovery party," Cool says. "Mr Li passed away about half past six, seven o'clock in the morning. There were no vital signs, no pulse, he wasn't breathing."

For a moment, as he relives it all over a cup of tea near Oxford Circus, it looks as if Cool's emotions might get the better of him. At the time, more than anything, he was angry. "I was going to sack the whole thing off. I was just going to go home. Basically Mr Li was let down by his team. When you pay \$18,000 to climb Everest, that's what you get."

On the inside, Cool must have the heart ➔

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of a yak and the haematology of a snow leopard. On the outside he is congenial, breezy, generous about his rivals and solidly upbeat about his sport, except on the rare occasions when he's not.

The story of Li is personal to him. Guiding clients up Everest is his livelihood, but it has been intensely controversial since well before nine people died in a blizzard near the summit in 1996 in a disaster that the purists said had been waiting to happen. What business did novices have on the world's highest mountain? What business did professional climbers have dragging them up there with fixed ropes, so they didn't have to know the way, and so much bottled oxygen that they didn't have to worry about being in the death zone?

Cool hopes that he embodies the answers. "The great thing about Everest is it's open to everybody," he says. Pick the right guide, in other words, and everyone's happy.

He has an enviable record: no casualties and a 100 per cent success rate in 11 seasons on the mountain. If that makes him one of the world's top guides, his fee reflects it. The cost of a place on a full-service Everest trip with plenty of Sherpas and experienced guides starts nowadays at about \$65,000 (£43,000), but after all these years, Cool says, he's doing less group guiding and more one-on-one work.

And what would that set you back?

"Six figures."

"High six or low six?"

"Mid six." Later he adds: "Sterling."

Yes, indeed. There are people willing to pay half a million pounds to maximise their chances of getting up Mt Everest. You can either let your jaw hit the floor, or compare half a million with the \$20 million that the same sort of alpha male conquistadors are willing to pay to go into space; or reflect that Cool is an athlete at the top of his game in a game whose rewards have never really matched its risks.

If that is changing at last, I claim a tiny sliver of responsibility. Cool's reputation rests partly on his extraordinary success with Sir Ranulph Fiennes, who set his faulty heart on reaching the top of the world after a heart attack and emergency double bypass surgery ten years ago. Fiennes says he also suffers from vertigo. All in all, it was a challenge. He chose to go with Cool, and I met them both for an early training climb in Zermatt in 2004 in order to write about it for *The Times*.

The idea was to help Fiennes get over his fear of heights by walking along a very airy ridge with Switzerland on one side and Italy on the other. If the doughty baronet had fallen one way, we would have had to jump the other, attached to him by a rope. We took in a couple of 4,000-metre peaks on the way, making it without question the pinnacle of

my climbing career. For Cool it was almost literally a walk in the park, leavened by the many opportunities it offered to tease "the world's greatest living explorer" about his failings as a mountaineer.

"Everybody holds him in such high esteem: 'Oh, I can't upset Ran.' In reality there's nothing he likes more than a good bit of banter," Cool remembers. "And shouting. Shouting at Ran was the one way that you could really get your point across to him. He'd be the first to say he's not a natural climber and he would be constantly stepping on a rope or doing some amateurish mistake. But he wouldn't just do it once, he'd do it time and time again."

They got on famously. Fiennes eventually reached the top of Everest in 2009 with Cool bringing up the rear. The previous year they had turned back above the South Col, with Fiennes pleading exhaustion. Cool is too loyal to say so explicitly, but looking back he's pretty sure they could have summited first time. "In reality the main reason for failure on Everest is because somebody's not mentally prepared for it," he says.

Prepared for it to hurt, that is. He knows all about Lance Armstrong's fall from grace, but still considers him a hero for one slogan: "Pain is temporary; quitting lasts for ever."

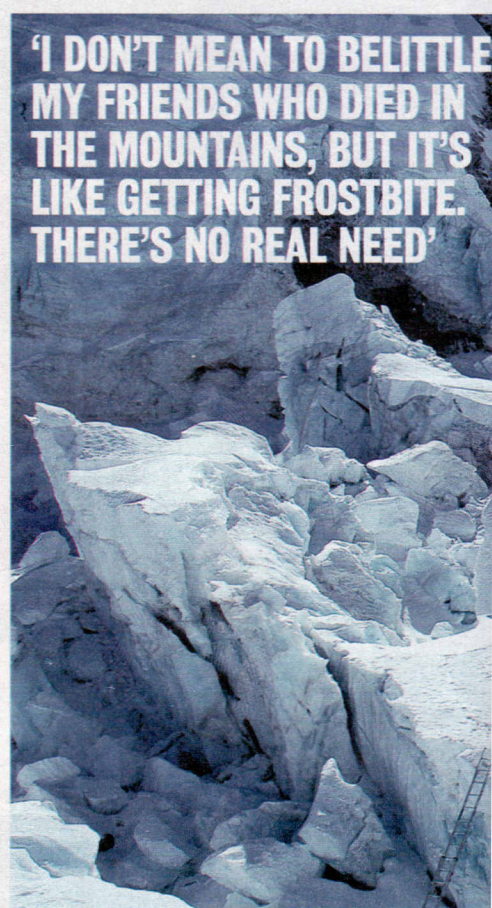
"That's something I've always used," he says.

He started climbing at 17 while at grammar school in High Wycombe, a few months before his A levels. He went with a friend – his parents weren't climbers – and was smitten by the sheer thrill, and the fact of risking everything.

His first serious rock climb was, absurdly, a "very severe" on the South Coast near Swanage. "I remember sitting at the top looking out over the water thinking I'd just completed the hardest thing I'd ever done. The exhilaration was unbelievable, and the contrast: a few minutes before, I'd been battling for my life."

That summer he went straight out to the Alps without telling his family too much about his plans, and stormed up mountains that many climbers will spend lifetimes dreaming of but never quite attempting. "I was totally clueless and shouldn't really have come back alive," he says, plausibly. One of his successes that year was on the Forbes Arête on the Aiguille du Chardonnet. Google it, and you can quickly find yourself reading a blog post by another young British daredevil who had a similar adventure on the same ridge. Below the post there is a long comment from a much older climber who tried the same route with two experienced partners 50 years ago. One of them made a single error, slipped, and swept them both off the mountain to their deaths.

Before climbing, Cool was a county hockey player. From that summer, the mountains have been his life. Bivouac-ing under a rock for nights on end high above the Chamonix valley felt like "the most wonderful existence you



could possibly imagine", he remembers. "The sense of freedom was incredible. It was the ultimate Boy's Own adventure, but at the same time it felt incredibly grown up doing this thing that other men were doing, not just boys, from all over the world."

Cool has been lucky – or unlucky, depending on your view. Back from the Alps, one June afternoon in 1996, he was on a route called Major Headstress in a Welsh slate quarry when a handhold broke and he fell 15 feet onto his heels. He broke them both. "Bang, hit the deck. There was no time to prepare. It was a bit like landing on concrete. I ended up with a bilateral calcaneal fracture on both heels. Four weeks in hospital, three and a half months in a wheelchair, three operations and I was told I would never walk without a stick or modified shoes."

Ironically, considering his reverence for the Armstrong mantra about pain being temporary, his heel pain is permanent. His standard gait is a hobble. When forced to stand still he sways to relieve the aching, and at the end of a hard day in the mountains he can sometimes be found getting around on his hands and knees.

At the time of the accident he had been due to attempt the Ogre, a 7,285-metre granite spike in Pakistan first climbed in 1977 and not

Kenton Cool

On the Khumba Icefall, Everest, in 2006

nbled again for quarter of a century. His
nds went without him. He grins at the
mory. "Luckily, they didn't get up. They got
lly high and I wished them all the best but
p down I didn't want them to succeed."
In high altitude mountaineering – "this
e of ghosts", as *Touching the Void's* author,
Simpson, puts it – pain goes in a box to
gnored, and death is a constant risk and
inder of what it means to be alive. And
Cool insists that's still the goal, achieved
nly through "burning your friends off". In
early days that just meant doing routes
r hadn't done or couldn't do or didn't want
later, it became about stealing rivals'
nder on an almost institutional scale.
n 2003, for the last big Everest anniversary,
50th, an expedition in honour of Hillary
Tenzing was planned that Cool and his
g were not invited to join. Noses seriously
of joint, they wondered what they could
o grab some limelight and settled on an
ne-style ascent of Annapurna III, also in
Himalayas, by a new route. That meant no
pas, no fixed ropes and very heavy loads.
nd two friends reached the summit, but ran
of food, fuel and energy on the way down.
r dark, Cool fell down a steep moraine
a 40kg pack on his back. At the bottom

he saw a movement on the opposite slope.

"It was one of my buddies, John, who'd watched the whole thing, and I remember sitting there, sobbing tears of frustration and wondering why he wasn't helping. It dawned on me that we were all so strung out, so far removed from normality, that we were all essentially on our own. It was like a feral fight for survival. And John couldn't help. He was stuck there with his own huge rucksack lost in his own dark thoughts of just wanting it to end."

Ten years later, Cool is the new face of Everest. "New" sounds odd to his mates, given that he has practically lived at base camp for so long, but it takes a while to assert your credentials in such an unpredictable and competitive place. He might never have achieved the treble had a Nigerian billionaire not cancelled on him at the last moment, leaving him with an Everest permit but no client. And the right mix of weather and logistics might never come round again.

This was not what was going through his head on the morning of May 20. Emerging from the tent of the now dead Li, Cool was not cool. He was "super-irate" and heading down the mountain. It took a friend from another guiding company, Mike Roberts, to remind him how close he was to doing something new and special. "Let's turn the oxygen right up and just nail it," Roberts said. He joined the group for the last peak and they went ahead and nailed it.

Cool's one regret that day – as a climber rather than a paramedic – was that Lhotse was socked in by cloud. He still hasn't seen the rare view of Everest that you get only from its grandest neighbour. But he has joined the ultra-select few to have etched their names in the history of the mountain since it was first scaled on May 29, 1953, and he put on brogues to mingle with some of the others last month at the Royal Geographical Society and receive the congratulations of its patron, the Queen.

Most of Everest's heroes, of course, are dead. So are many who never quite made the grade. For all its advances in equipment and weather forecasting, climbing remains way beyond the reach of the cult of health and safety. For a reality check, try Wikipedia's regularly updated list of Everest deaths. The more people try it, the more people die trying; beginners who shouldn't be there, but Sherpas and veterans too.

Cool talks so enthusiastically about the mountains that when he says he's lost 37 friends to them, it takes a moment to realise they, too, are dead, not just gone missing from climbing to start families and take up accounting.

Some died in the Himalayas, some in the Alps, some falling off boulders in the Peak District. He doesn't think about them much. "I've got a very big closet with lots of skeletons in, quite literally, that I don't massively want to visit. But I think at some point it's going to

open, unfortunately... and who knows? Maybe I'll be down in Harley Street on the couch."

Or maybe not. He grins again, hugely. There's so much fun in climbing that people don't really think about the bad stuff. He certainly doesn't. Whenever he says goodbye to his wife, Jazz, and their two young children, aged 3 and 8 months, he does so in total confidence that he'll come back. Jazz doesn't climb herself (they met skiing in Chamonix in 2006) and counts on regular updates by satellite phone while he's away. When they stop coming, as they did for four days last month when he chose not to carry a satphone to save weight, the anxiety piles up quickly. He's sympathetic, but not exactly racked with remorse.

"I've always said family can't influence your decisions," he says. "That's when you start making the wrong ones." Neither marriage nor children have persuaded Cool to think about a change of career. "I've always said I'll go on doing this as long as I enjoy it," he says, mentioning a guide who's still at it at 63.

For most of his twenties, home was a series of rentals in Chamonix and life was hand to mouth. Like so many other addicts, he was a climbing bum. No longer. He wouldn't say he's rich, but he is comfortably off, with a gleaming Land Rover Discovery and a perky little Alfa outside his spacious Gloucestershire home. Unlike friends who've gone into the City, he has no second home – yet – but then again, who needs one when you have Everest base camp and your name is Kenton Cool?

Base camp consists of dozens of mini-camps maintained by the big guiding firms, and they all know him. "I'm lucky. I can walk into almost any camp at any time and be welcomed with open arms." Camp life is sociable, and so is Cool. Dinner out might be sizzling yak steaks with old friends from Seattle, or sushi made from fresh fish helicoptered in that day with his mates at Adventure Consultants.

"It's had some bad press but it's a fantastic place. You could be with bankers from UBS or bond dealers from New York but when you all have the same aim of going up Everest, it doesn't matter how rich you are. It's also a great place to get a lot of sleep."

Before he heads back to the Cotswolds I ask how important it is to him to stay alive and he replies as if the question's about flu.

"There is no reason to climb the hardest route in the world if you can't come back and boast about it," he says. "It's completely unstylish getting stuffed in the mountains. I know a lot of people have, and I don't mean to belittle any of my friends who have died in the mountains, but it's a bit like getting frostbite. There's no real need, touch wood, to get frostbite. I have absolutely no intention of dying in the mountains. I want to die with my feet up in front of the fire drinking a glass of red wine aged about 95." ■