

TRAVEL

Birmingham businessman takes on mountain peaks

BY HUGH GALLAGHER
STAFF WRITER

Birmingham's Jim Straith isn't the couch potato type. "Sitting on a beach or around a swimming pool is not my idea of a vacation," Straith said.

Straith, president of the Straith Group, a commercial and investment real estate company in Troy, provides a list of past adventures that leaves the lethargic gasping for breath. He's taken 100 sky dives, 160 scuba dives, flown 700 hours, submersed in the Grand Canyon, skied mountains in North America and Europe and backpacked through most of the national parks.

But his latest passion is mountain climbing.

"I've always been into adventure type sports, snow skiing, aviation, I've flown my own airplane," Straith, 48, said. "As a kid I was a Boy Scout and camped in Montana when I was 12."

In 1965 Straith took a hike up Saddle Mountain in Montana, giving him his first experience standing on top of a mountain. He took several more hikes and a gondola ride up to the top of Mont Blanc in France, but he wanted to try technical climbing. Technical climbing uses ropes, harnesses and requires training.

"I was skiing in Jackson Hole two years ago and we were taking a bus to Yellowstone to go skiing and I saw the Grand Tetons, which are the most picturesque mountains in the lower 48," Straith said. "I asked the bus driver did anyone ever climb Grand Teton. He said, yes, all the time, and I was blown away that they are so high, rocky

If you want to go:
Exum Mountain Guides
Grand Teton National Park
Box 56, Moose, Wyoming
83012
(307)733-2297
Basic 1-day school, \$80
Intermediate 1-day school,
\$100
2-day climb with 4 people,
\$330 per person.

Rainier Mountaineering Inc.
Paradise, WA 98398
(360)569-2227
Basic 1-day school, \$80
3-day summit climb package
Private climb and instruction,
\$315 per day.

and difficult looking."

Straith contacted the Exum School of Mountaineering which offers a program of two days training followed by two days of guided mountaineering to the summit. Exum charged \$480 for one person for the four-day experience.

"You don't need to be a superman, marathoner or have extensive experience," Straith said. "It helps to have some experience, but you don't need a lot. You can fly into Jackson Hole, Denver or Portland, do the courses in mountaineering and climb in four days."

Climbing the Grand Tetons is not a stroll in the woods and that's what Straith enjoyed about it.

"I've always had an interest in individual activities that required exertion and have ele-



ments of exercise and a little danger and a little adventure," he said.

Last year Straith added Oregon's Mount Hood to his list of conquests and this summer he plans to take on Washington's Mount Rainier. He will be climbing with Bill Gray, a friend since childhood. This time Straith will be climbing with Rainier Mountaineering Inc., offering one-day of schooling (required) and two days of climbing for \$465.

"The Grand Teton was one of the most spectacular outdoor experiences I've ever had. We climbed for two days from valley floor to summit," he said.

From the summit the climbers looked out on Yellowstone and Jackson Hole valley. The mountain rises 13,771 feet, above the altitude at which pilots are required to use oxygen.

"I'm a jogger and was a swimmer," Straith said. "I'm aerobically fit. I was OK. One girl had trouble but made it to the summit, but she struggled."

But Straith said, the guided

climbs he's taken are not like those endured by those trying to take Mount Everest, and chronicled in the best seller "Into Thin Air," by Jon Krakauer.

"The dangers of Everest are extreme. It's a matter of degree. The dangers of these guided climbs are minimal," Straith said. "Of course you could go climb Mount Holly and have no danger and no excitement or gratification."

He would like to try Denali (Mount McKinley) in Alaska.

For Straith, mountaineering is a metaphor for life.

"Setting goals and achieving them is part of the life process. It carries over into business, personal and intellectual pursuits," he said.

Straith, a single father, is passing on some of his love of adventure to his 9-year-old daughter Lauren. He has taken her skiing, jet skiing and rock climbing and hiking through Michigan's north woods.

Summit view:
Jim Straith, in white helmet, and his climbing team enjoy the view from the top of the Grand Tetons.



Ready for action: Fully equipped with helmets, ice axes and crampons, climbers forge ahead on Mount Hood.

GREAT ESCAPES

LILAC FESTIVAL
Mackinac Island's annual Lilac Festival runs Friday, June 5, through Sunday, June 14.

"Authors and Artists" is one of the underlying themes of the Festival this year. Artist Richard Wolfgang, who painted the 1994, 95, 96 and 97 Festival Posters, will be signing original prints at his shop on Market Street. Back

issues of the posters are also available.

The festival will feature music by violinist Mary Margaret St. John, 3 Men and a Tenor, a country line dance seminar, the Meridian Community Band and the Bar Harbor Children's Choir. The Grand Lilac Festival Parade is Sunday, June 14.



San Francisco Symphony
Michael Tilson Thomas, conductor and piano
Sunday, September 27, 4 p.m.
McCully Associates Inc.

St. Petersburg Philharmonic
Yuri Temirkanov, conductor
Gidon Kremer, violin
Saturday, October 10, 8 p.m.
Kathleen G. Charla Associates

Budapest Festival Orchestra
Ivan Fischer, conductor
András Schiff, piano
Saturday, October 24, 8 p.m.
McMullen

Kirov Orchestra of St. Petersburg
Valery Gergiev, conductor
Monday, November 2, 8 p.m.
Supported by Dr. Herbert Sloan

Mitsuko Uchida
Wednesday, November 11, 8 p.m.

Renée Fleming
Thursday, January 14, 8 p.m.

Maxim Vengerov
Sunday, February 14, 4 p.m.

James Galway
Thursday, March 11, 8 p.m.

Mozarteum Orchestra of Salzburg
Hubert Soudant, conductor
Till Fellner, piano
Thursday, April 15, 8 p.m.

NHK Symphony Orchestra of Tokyo
Charles Dutoit, conductor
Sarah Chang, violin
Sunday, April 25, 4 p.m.
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