

I didn't go to New Zealand to change my life. I went there in my usual cushy way, to write a story about the super-lodge Whare Kea for ForbesLife, the magazine where I was the travel editor. I'd chosen Whare Kea because it has a separate cabin high in the Southern Alps, reachable only by helicopter, which seemed like a nifty feature to write about.

I'd arranged my trip through Seasonz, a travel designer I chose for its inside connections and access, although the company is also strong on luxury adventure. That's how my companion on that helicopter ride up to the cabin turned out to be Guy Cotter, who splits his time between his hometown of Wanaka and Nepal, where he leads climbs up Everest with his company, Adventure Consultants. What I'd thought would be a picnic lunch and a little tramping around the bush (as the Kiwis say) turned into a hike that would be the scariest I'd ever done.

But Seasonz had set me up with this mountaineering superstar, and I didn't want to blow it with my stupid timidity—something I'd been trying to shake for a few years. And so up the hill we tramped, and soon the ground got slick with icy scree, the remains of last winter's snow. He tied a rope around my waist, with the other end around his own, said something funny and reassuring and pressed on. We got to a point where I could have been proud of myself, but he suggested we aim for the summit. I said I thought I could make it up but had my doubts about down. He said the helicopter could get us. I was in.

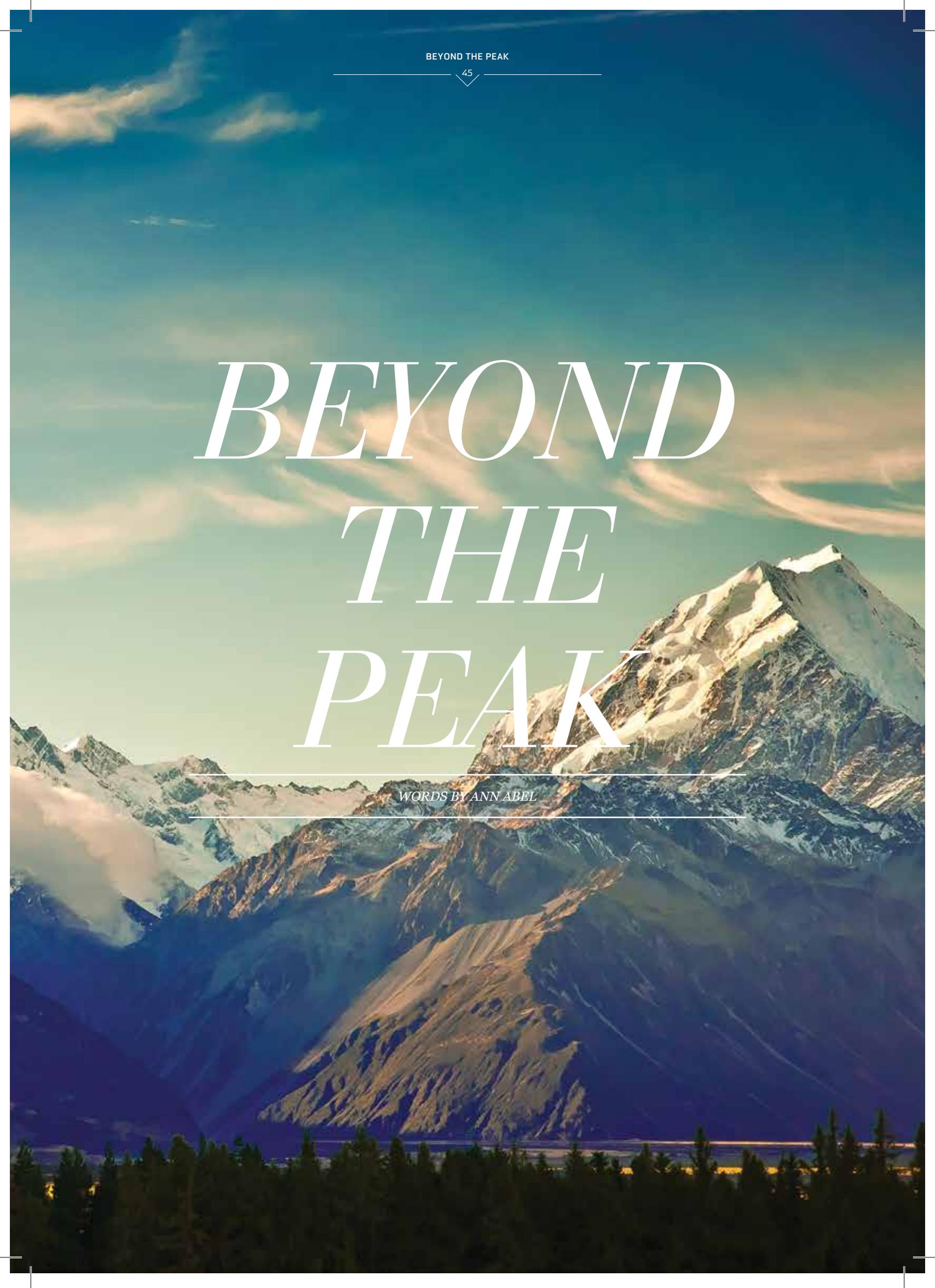
When we got to the top, I saw there was no way a helicopter could ever get up there. But I didn't care because I was so charged with exhilaration and self-satisfaction. I'd surprised myself. (And he'd read me well enough to know that's how I'd feel.) It was a minor peak—with the completely unthreatening name of Dragonfly—but one of the highest highs of my life. I knew I needed to get that feeling again.

Nearly five years and many mountains later, a photograph of me near the top still hangs on my bedroom wall. It's a memento of not just a beautiful afternoon, but of a moment that transformed me from a shy girl who would try things out of courtesy, into a girlie badass who genuinely seeks out adventures.



BEYOND THE PEAK

WORDS BY ANN ABEL



My next travel epiphany came about two years later, 20 miles from pavement in Montana's Beartooth Mountains. I'd booked an out-of-my-comfort-zone vacation through the Bozeman-based operator Off the Beaten Path. This would be that: backcountry camping (my first time) on a horse-pack trip.

It was also something of a "hail Mary" vacation, as my marriage was on its last legs, and I'd hoped a week in nature, able to focus on each other without all the usual distractions and flashpoints, might help. We didn't make it quite long enough to find out. But the trip was paid in full, so we decided one of us might as well go.

That's how I found myself in the middle of nowhere with two horses, five mules and a Montana mountain man. Luckily my guide had grown up out here and knew what he was doing—and made mighty fine raspberry pancakes—and I trusted him immediately. Along with the head-clearing that comes while riding silently through stunning scenery for hours on end, the trip challenged me to get comfortable with my own company, and also to surrender and accept that sometimes I will need help.

I wouldn't have lasted three hours on that mountain on my own, and at one point he actually rode up on his white horse and saved my life, after I'd gotten lost on a solo hike. Am I being sappy and dramatic? Yes. Does this story have a romance-novel ending? Of course not. But it was what I needed at that moment in my life, and an intimation that there will be other men on (figurative) white horses.

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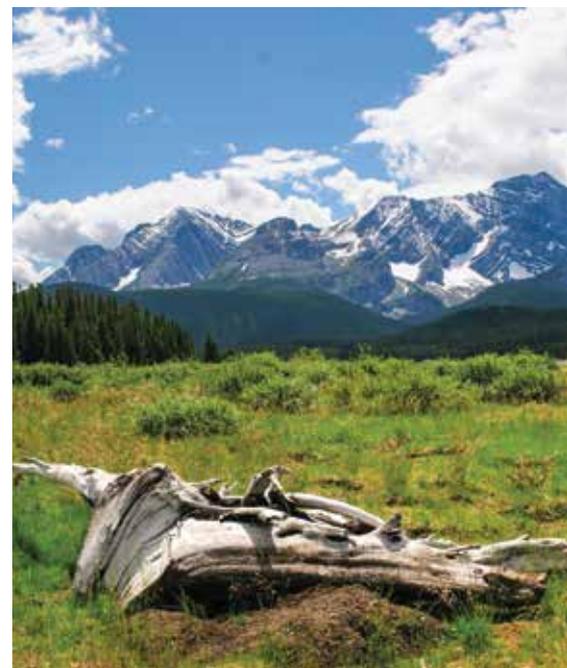
These trips changed me for the better, while being quite enjoyable at the time. So when I (reluctantly) turned 40 last year, I splurged on an expensive gift to myself that would continue the transformation.

Climbing Kilimanjaro was the hardest thing I've ever done. It was humbling. It showed me that however much I fancy myself a girlie badass, I still have a rather narrow comfort zone. (I even did a "luxury" version of the climb, similar to the trips offered by PUREists like Epic Private Journeys.)

I didn't know it was possible to be that cold. I cried every night and sometimes during the day. But I made it. I got through every dark, lonely night, kept managing to put one foot in front of the other, accepted help from the guides, and finally got that massive hit of adrenaline and pride that comes at the summit.

The climb proved that I'm stronger than I think, especially when I'm wise enough to know when to lean on someone. Whenever something feels daunting now, I think, *You climbed Kilimanjaro*. This is nothing. And instead of battling middle-age malaise, I know that I'm just getting started.

The former travel editor of ForbesLife and SpaFinder magazines, New York-based writer and girlie badass Ann Abel has written about her experiential travels in 69 countries and counting, for publications including Afar, Departures, Robb Report and National Geographic Traveler. She currently writes a column for Forbes and when she's not travelling you'll find her learning to fly at Trapeze School New York. Follow Ann on Twitter @peripatetic_ann.



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