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A PEAK EXPERIENCE FOR EASTSIDE COUPLE

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They built a house together eight years ago, so how hard could climbing Mount Everest be?

Phil and Sue Ershler, who last week became the first married couple to climb the tallest peaks on all seven

BELLEVUE

continents, are still talking to each other — and to the world.

Speaking by cellphone last night from their base camp at the 17,000-foot level of Mount Everest, the

Bellevue couple sounded tired but elated by an achievement that had been a driving force in both of their lives for the past 10 years.

"I've never been happier," said Sue Ershler, 46, who began mountaineer-

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Sue and Phil Ershler return to base camp Saturday after scaling Everest.

Couple scales world's peaks

EVEREST

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ing little more than a decade ago when she met Phil, 51, a professional climbing guide.

Phil said, "A lot of climbers have reached all seven peaks. This is special for us because we did it together."

The couple came within 1,400 feet of reaching Everest's summit a year ago. That experience, said Sue, better prepared them for their successful ascent Thursday. Last year, the wind was so bad, and the weather so cold, she said, her eyelids were freezing together.

This year, Phil said, they were blessed with calm wind, clear skies and strong Sherpas.

The couple left high camp on the 29,035-foot Everest at 10:30 p.m. and climbed in darkness. By the time they reached Hillary's Step, the last technically difficult passage before the summit, the sun was up and the couple's spirits were rising. But Hillary's Step, Sue said, is a sheer rock ridge that drops off into Tibet. The climb up

exposed rock is awkward with crampons meant for gripping ice.

"There are so many emotions," she said. "All the mountains surrounding you, the intense blue of the sky. You're thinking, 'This is pretty, but I hope I survive.'"

When they reached the summit, Phil said, the emotions were "so intense" that all he could say to Sue was, "You made it, baby!"

The Ershlers said they have a three-day hike ahead of them to Kathmandu and a helicopter. They plan to be back in Seattle next Tuesday.

Sue said she is not shy about voicing her opinions, but when it comes to climbing, "Phil rules."

"I don't question him on what we do in the mountains," she said.

Phil will be guiding a climb on Alaska's Mount McKinley in a few weeks, but Sue said she plans to take some time to relax. Both said their marriage is based on a strong friendship. "We actually like each other," Phil said.

But after 60 days in a 6-by-5-foot tent, Sue said, "we are looking forward to a little space."