

The New Yorker
The Talk of the Town

NOSEBLEED DEPT.
RARE AIR

There isn't much a guy can do to improve his physical fitness while sitting all day at a desk, except maybe to squiggle a leg, or eat a lot of bananas. This was the problem that confronted Richard Wiese, the president of the Explorer's Club, who planned an expedition to climb a pair of volcanoes in Mexico. His biggest obstacle would be the altitude (the volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Parícutin, are, respectively, 18,700 and 17,343 feet above sea level), and the fact that he would have very little time to acclimate to it. Even seasoned climbers need weeks to get used to the thin air. Wiese, experienced as a mountaineer, but encumbered by a nine-to-five job, would have merely days.

His solution, the fruit of some Internet poking around, was to have an altitude chamber installed in his office, on the club's headquarters, a Tudor-style mansion on the Upper East Side. The chamber, made by a company called Hypoxico, was a transparent plastic box, nine feet by six feet by seven feet—the size of a walk-in closet. Amid all the club's artifact sledge, Thor Heyerdahl's globe, Peter the Great's side table), the chamber seems out of place, like Pei's pyramid air inside simulates that which you would breathe high in the mountains: it contains less oxygen. A month before the expedition, Wiese moved his desk into the chamber and began conducting his daily business at the equivalent of thirteen thousand feet. As far as he could tell, "the first instance of an altitude chamber being used in an office setting." (And it may not be hard to imagine oxygen, like carbohydrates and sleep, becoming a desirable deprivation among members of the executive class.)

At first, the mountain air got to him. He couldn't stay in the chamber for more than a few hours at a time, and in his conversations with the club's board of directors (who took to calling him B.O.B., for Bubble Office Boy) he found himself irritable and woozy. But after a couple of weeks he began to adjust. Thirteen thousand feet felt like flatland.

On a recent afternoon, just prior to the Mexico trip, Wiese made room in his chamber for a sea-level visitor. Wiese was six feet tall, tan and sandy-haired. He wore a Beretta shooting sweater and cargo pants. Once he closed the door, the pressure in the air, as measured by a handheld monitor, began to drop, and along with it the amount of oxygen in the blood. Wiese's headache set in. After a few minutes, the feeling was not unlike that of sitting atop the Grand Teton, if you were cold, exhausted, and the problem of getting down.

The chamber came equipped with a mask, which Wiese could strap over his mouth and nose. The air coming through the mask was even more hypoxic, like the air at twenty-one thousand feet. After issuing a few disclaimers, Wiese had the visitor try the mask. "It's going to be a horrible experience, and at some point you'll say, 'Take this off!'" he said. The mask went on, and the world grew heavy, the light pre-surgical. The pulse sped, as the blood's oxygen level dropped. "More of your cells than are being rejuvenated," Wiese explained. To mimic conditions inside a snowbound tent, Wiese and the visitor played hands of blackjack. "Look at you bobbing around," Wiese said. "Your eyes are looking a little buggy. Try standing up." It did not go well. Nor did a brief one involving a step machine inside the chamber. Finally, the revelation that the visitor's face was turning unfamiliar tingling in the vicinity of his left femoral artery prompted an immediate removal of the mask.

A small group of people had been watching all this from outside the chamber. Back at sea level, introductions revealed Gary Kotliar, a spiffy Russian of indeterminate age, who had founded Hypoxico, among other businesses; a press secretary, Jared Rice; and Kotliar's associate, a tall blond woman named Yulia Soukhanova, a former Miss U.S.S.R. Kotliar explained the chamber's powers of rejuvenation. "Did you know it is used already for treating untreatable diseases?" he said. "It can also, apparently, serve as both a sleep aid and an aphrodisiac. 'You are like bull,'" he said. "I'm, like, not like bull, but it is the equivalent of ten thousand oysters."

Wiese mentioned that a lot of climbers in the city work on Wall Street and are "cash-rich and time-poor," and wondered if Kotliar might donate a hypoxic chamber to the Explorers Club, for members to use.

"Richard, Richard," Kotliar said. "That is a great idea."

— Nick Paumgarten