



Route-finding
around crevasse
on way to advanced
base camp

DIGGING TO REACH HEIGHTS Conquering Denali

OUR SKIS SLID UP THE WHITE EXPANSE. JUST BELOW THE SNOWY surface lay hundreds of feet of ice created more than 10,000 years ago. Flowing from as high as 19,000 feet, these glaciers are among the most impressive in the world. One-sixth of the national park is ice; over a million acres. The largest glacier, the Kahiltna is 44 miles long. From the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, the climb for the highest point in North America commences. If you're lucky, the clouds will part and the winds die down, allowing your bush plane to fly you into the heart of Denali National Park.

After months of planning, filling out permits, and practicing glacier travel, crevasse rescue and climbing other peaks, a team of nine climbers from Colorado Mesa University's Outdoor Program set out in May to scale 20,320-foot-tall Mt. McKinley, affectionately called Denali by Alaskans and climbers. Arriving in Talkeetna, Alaska, described by a local bumper sticker as "a quaint little drinking village with a climbing problem," we found ourselves on a tiny air strip in the middle of town. Each climber weighed out exactly 150 pounds of gear to take with them, including food, technical gear, and shelter. After a short flight, we arrived at Kahiltna International Airport, Denali base camp. While building the first of many snow camps and settling in for the night, we contemplated the task of scaling the tallest mountain on land in the world.



Kahiltna Glacier

Most mountaineering mornings involve the classic alpine start, waking up in darkness, and getting an early start. Not so on Denali, because there is always at least *some* daylight in May. The first leg of our expedition involved moving all our gear in a single push to 7800 feet and then on to 9700 feet where we felt the power of our first Denali snow storm. We spent 24 hours in our tents as the wind roared relentlessly. Sleeping on an ice field can play tricks on your mind, so before setting up tents, we always made damn sure we were on solid ground and were not hovering over a tent-swallowing crevasse. We probed around camp with avalanche probes, carefully laying out wands to mark the camp boundaries. Beyond these points a harness, ice axe and rope were requisite.

Our rope teams consisted of three climbers each, each a self-contained unit complete with crevasse rescue gear and their own tent, cooking supplies, fuel, food, and group gear. This way, each team could learn to work together efficiently, getting to know each other's personal habits and style. We had the vegetarian crew, who cooked everything from scratch; the dehydrated-food-in-a-bag crew, who simply boiled water; and the hot oatmeal crew who seemed to have this ten times a day mixed in with the occasional pop tart. A routine of gathering snow into the vestibule, melting snow, and boiling water ensued. Rock, paper, scissors played a vital

role in determining who would get out of the sleeping bag first in the morning to get the Whisperlite stove pumped, primed, and hot. During bad weather, we enjoyed the extra luxury of our four person mountain tents with only three people, giving ample room to spread out gear, play a round of hearts, or simply enjoy the loftiness of our minus-20-degree down sleeping bags.

Over the next few days we carried to 11,000 feet, where we enjoyed a much-earned ski/rest day. With a few feet of fresh powder, the slopes proved irresistible. We established a skin track and skied endless powder on one of the sunniest days of the trip. The next few climbs entailed a bit more elevation gain, so we employed a more tiered approach. Instead of tackling the next leg in a single push, we carried half the supplies to the next camp, buried the gear, and then returned to the lower camp to spend the night. This method aided in acclimatization, an important part of any high altitude climbing. In this manner we climbed to the 14,200-foot advanced base camp perched on a plateau leading to the "Edge of the World," a 4,700-foot headwall overlooking the Northeast Fork of the Kahiltna glacier, truly one of the greatest views on the planet.

Advanced base camp, with a lower elevation and relative protection from weather, provides a great place to acclimatize. As one of the fabled seven summits, Denali is a



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—Chad

Gear at the Talkeetna Air Strip



coveted peak, with some 1200 climbers attempting to reach its lofty summit each year. Only Everest and Aconcagua loom higher, followed by Kilimanjaro, Elbrus, Vinson, and Carstensz Pyramid. Advanced base camp is where you get to meet people like Vern Tejas, an Alaskan climbing legend who has completed the seven summits a record nine times and furthermore, has the speed record for climbing all seven summits in 134 days. He was also the first to climb Denali solo in the winter in 1988. But it gets better.

After introducing myself as a climber from Grand Junction, Vern's eyes lit up. "Do you know Jim Hale?" And it just so happened that Jim's son Mike had worked with me in the CMU Outdoor Program for the past few years. Vern flat out said, "I learned everything about mountaineering from Jim Hale and I only hope that I can be half the climber that Jim is." We spent the next few days hanging around Vern, learning the ins and outs of getting to the top of Denali. He would know; he has over 50 summits. Vern even showed us how to build an emergency quinzee, just in case we needed it. Pick up a copy of *An Alaskan Life of High Adventure* by Jim Hale to learn about the early years of guiding on Denali.

Just above advanced base camp looms the headwall, a 2000-foot climb that includes over 800 feet of 40- to 55-degree snow and ice. Fixed lines protect the steepest parts of the headwall, allowing a bit of relief as we scaled the sheer wall with heavy packs. At the top of the headwall at 16,200 feet we buried our supplies and descended back to base camp. The following morning we gathered enough gear and food for the high camp at 17,200 feet.

The second climb up the headwall was completely different than the first. Only a day earlier we had easily scaled the slope with sunny skies. The next day the clouds enveloped us and the winds howled. We arrived at our cache, unburied the supplies and loaded our packs with additional weight. The next 1000 vertical feet was perhaps the most spectacular section of the entire climb. Known as the "16 Ridge," the route weaves through short, steep sections with 2000 foot drops on either side of the ridge. Full concentration is required as you make your way along the knife-edge with fully laden packs.

The mountain gods smiled upon us that day; as we made our ascent the clouds gave way to sun and to some of the most spectacular views of my life.

Arriving at high camp at 17,200 feet, we started to feel oxygen-deprived, especially when building camp. The highest and windiest camp required a bombproof site. At this point in the climb, we were experts at building snow walls, setting up tents, melting snow, and simply living in this cold and frozen world. We brought provisions for 5 days, hoping a good weather window would present itself. The following day started sunny and mildly windy with a large push for the summit by other climbers in camp. We roped up and started out for the summit, only to be discouraged by the crowds. We decided to return to camp and give it a shot the following day.

We were on the slope well before the sun arrived, giving us a little head start but not much. It seemed that everyone else in camp had the same plan. We had to stand in the cold shadow of Denali Pass as we waited for climbers to move.

Summit day stands out as the toughest and lengthiest day of the climb. On average it takes 12 to 14 hours to summit and return to base camp. This day would be considerably longer due to the slow guided groups in front of us. You gain a profound respect for guides as you witness them practically pulling their out-of-shape clients to the top. We looked at options for passing, but decided to stick to the route with snow pickets. Falls occur regularly on the traverse leading to Denali Pass.

Up to this point on the trip, we had seen death several times. We saw body bags being lifted up by helicopter from a nasty fall from Denali Pass, and I will never forget setting out for our first camp and passing two climbers, one pulling two sleds. Later my suspicions were confirmed: Denali had claimed another life. The truth is that a simple stumble up high on the side of a mountain can easily lead to your death. When you're climbing at altitude in subfreezing temperatures, the chance of a fall increases precipitously. To counter a fall, we set up a running belay system, clipping our climbing line into snow pickets. This can be a slow process, but reassuring.

We arrived safely at the top of Denali Pass at 18,200 feet. In high spirits and with fantastic weather, we headed south for the aptly named "Football Field," a large plateau that leads to Kahiltna Horn at 20,100 feet. From here the last quarter mile leads along the corniced "Summit Ridge," the very last obstacle before reaching the top of North America. The last section is no doubt one of the most classic summit ridges anywhere on the planet, with views of the entire Alaska Range far below.

We gained the summit and had it to ourselves for fully half an hour. Our summit group of seven included Sam Morrison, Evan Clapper, Stoney Molina, Joe Talley, Chris Baldwin, Will Tarantino, and me. We had named our group the Tusken Raiders, and now proudly stood on Denali. The odds were stacked against us the second we landed at base camp, with an average of only 50 percent of climbers





reaching the top each year. We had managed to get seven out of nine to the summit. Summit festivities followed, but nothing was more touching than watching Evan stand proudly on top of Alaska, spreading his brother's ashes to the winds. Evan's brother Sasha felt like the tenth member of our team. Having lived in Alaska for seven years, Sasha left his mark on Alaska, including hundreds of friends who took us in, housing and feeding us before and after the climb. Having two brothers of my own, I could not hold back the tears of joy for Evan.

Most stories stop here, but the fact remained that we were only at the halfway point of our climb. Most climbing accidents occur on the down-climb, a sobering thought when you start your long descent to base camp. We made it back to high camp some sixteen hours later. Completely exhausted, we collapsed into our tents and awoke to the morning sun with a completely different feeling. We no longer had to think about summiting; a huge weight had been lifted. Eager for a beer and cheeseburger in Talkeetna, we gathered our gear and arrived at advanced base camp feeling great. The next day we made one long push all the way to base camp. Descending on skis made the miles fly by and the worry of falling into a crevasse a little less scary. The snowpack had melted considerably from when we had

made our way up the Kahiltna Glacier, exposing hundreds of crevasses along the route. We passed several spots where climbers had fallen through the thin snow. Skis allowed our weight to be spread out over a larger area, aiding in keeping us afloat while crossing snow bridges. We skied into the midnight sun, arriving at base camp around 1:00 a.m.

Going into the wilderness for an extended period of time always gives you a new perspective on life, especially when it's a land as foreboding as Denali. Simple tasks such as drinking water take on a whole new meaning. But that is why I love to climb. There is nothing more satisfying than having your world view rocked.

Climbing brings you back to the basics. Where am I going to sleep and poop? What am I going to eat? Who are my friends supporting me? And how can I sustain this simplicity? Living simply and surrounding yourself with the right people is the key to life, just as it is in climbing. On that 19-day expedition, I carried no more than what I needed, and surrounded myself with an incredible team, allowing me to move through terrain filled with obstacles. Life is filled with difficulties, but if you approach them with simplicity and surround yourself with great people, you just might find that you can accomplish anything. ❖

