

Expedition Report

Welcome to the May 2004 Denali Expedition Report. On 19 May, 6 climbers including myself set out to climb the West Buttress of Denali (Mt McKinley). At 6,194m (20,320 ft), Denali - the Great One - is North America's highest peak.

Undertaken as part of the Namaste Global Expedition, the climb of Denali was my first attempt on one of the seven summits. With a 48 hour weather delay to get on to the mountain, we were then blessed with moderate weather all the way to high camp, from where we were to make

our summit bid.

Read on to find out how we got on, as well as discover a plethora of information on climbing Denali if you decide to try it yourself. Do get in touch if you would like to find out more about climbing this amazing mountain...

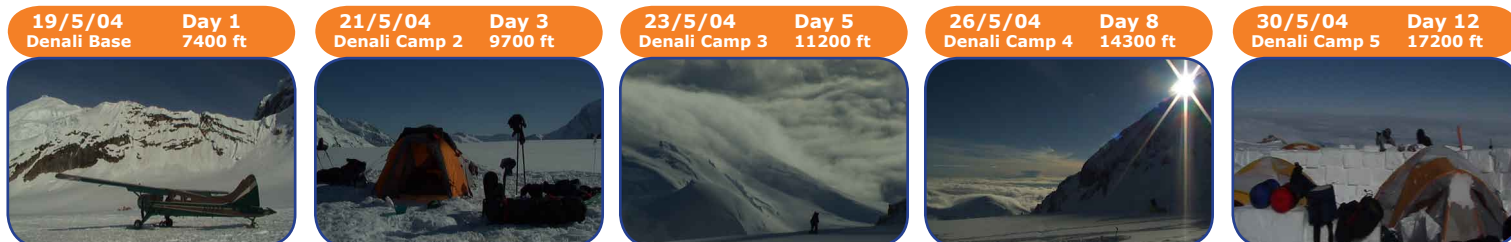
Also, look out for the Denali DVD, a film about the expedition, which will be available in the Namaste Shop from September 2004.

Cheers, Chris

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Denali Overview



About Denali

In the heart of Alaska, rising more than 20,000 feet from sea level, Denali - The High One - is the Native (Athabascan) American word for North America's highest peak, Mount McKinley. Regarded as the 'coldest' mountain in the world, Denali is just as beautiful as it is dangerous.

The lower north peak was first climbed on April 3, 1910 by a group of climbers bringing a 6 by 12 foot American flag and a 14 foot spruce pole. Denali's higher South Summit was first climbed by Hudson Stuck, Harry Karstens, Walter Harper and Robert Tatum on June 7, 1913. The first ascent of the most popular West Buttress route was made in 1951, by the party of Dr Bradford Washburn, well known for his excellent photographs of the Alaska Mountains.

The West Buttress

At 20,320 feet, Denali rises out of a sea of glaciers and other peaks that compose the Alaska Range. From the start at base camp, the West Buttress is a Grade II climb of 13,000 vertical feet to the summit - the greatest elevation gain of any mountain in the world; even greater than Everest which starts from a base camp at 19,200 feet!

The climb is generally traditional expedition style, relaying loads, establishing camps, and climbing slowly enough for proper acclimatization. The first nine miles of the route is up the Kahiltna Glacier to 11,000 feet. Above 11,000 feet, the terrain steepens moving to 14,200 foot camp located in a large basin relatively sheltered from high winds. After 2-3 days acclimatizing, resting, and making a carry to 16,200 feet, the route

heads for the upper mountain. Between 15,500 feet and 16,200 feet are 40-45 ° slopes utilising fixed ropes to safeguard progress. The stretch to high camp at 17,200 feet is the most scenic part of the route and climbs a narrow ridge to the 17,200 foot camp. Summit day from this high camp usually takes 10-14 hours.

The Team...

- Chris Charlton, 33, MD, Namaste, Surrey, England
- Edward Earl, 40, Radar Software Engineer, San Diego, California, USA
- Len Holmes, 56, Professor of Bio-Technology, North Carolina, USA
- Dave Metzler, 33, Maths Lecturer, Florida, USA
- Tom Torkelson, 35, Mountain Guide, Jackson Hole, Wyoming, USA
- Freddie Wilkinson, 24, Mountain Guide, New Hampshire, USA

Expedition Story

19 May: Day 1

Finally, we get to fly out of Talkeetna! The team travels in 2 planes - 1 Beaver carrying 4 climbers, and Tom & I in a Cessna 185. We arrive at Denali base camp at 7,200 feet, just outside the designated Denali wilderness



area boundary.

It's busy - with the weather window now open, flights going ten to the dozen have to clear the backlog of climbers who have been waiting patiently in Talkeetna. Taking a circuitous route to avoid some heavy cloud systems, the flight was a little longer than usual, but this gave us a great opportunity to get an aerial view of the entire Kahiltna glacier.

Rather than wait at base camp, which was the original plan, we decided to head straight for Camp 1 to catch up on the lost 48 hours in Talkeetna. So we sorted our gear off the plane into our rucksacks and onto our sleds, buried a cache for the descent, and hit the trail.

For 5 miles, it's pretty flat to camp 1, though you have to descend the 500 foot "Heartbreak Hill" - aptly named for the return journey - before plodding up to 7,900 feet. The hard bit is dealing with the burning heat of the sun and the combined weight of rucksacks and sleds, somewhere between 120-150 lbs each. This is the only day that we have to carry everything at one go, and we have yet to eat into our 300 lb store of food!



We arrive at camp around mid afternoon and make camp, with fantastic views of Denali above and other peaks in abundance. After prodding the campsite for potential crevasses and pitching our 3 tents, we build our first "posh". The posh tent is nothing more than a pyramid-shaped piece of parachute material that is draped over a hole in the snow that we've dug. However, with benches cut into the snow hole and even a cooking table, the "posh" becomes our group home,

for eating, chatting and shelter for many of our camps. It's only at high camp, 17,200 feet, that we do not build one and instead resort to cooking in our tent vestibules.

The posh becomes the focus of our camp and allows us to interact as a team rather than as 3 pairs in 3 tents. We also protect the posh and the tents with snow walls, cut out of snow blocks using our snow saw and shovels. This protects them from the wind and drifting snow.

After a dinner of soup and macaroni cheese, we chat into the evening as the temperature inversion sets in - this is where the clouds form and descend into the valleys, which gives you a great opportunity to look down on the clouds, and the more so the higher up you go.

I soon realise that some of my more politically incorrect jokes are not getting a good reception with one or two of the more



conservative Americans in my group. One Brit and 5 Americans - I'll have to learn to adjust a little, culturally!! All part of the team-formation exercise. There is quite a wide variation in mountaineering ability and experience in our group, and I find the US-style approach to guiding a little "motherhood and apple pie" but recognise the need for this given the mix of skills in the group, so try to help out where I can.

Tomorrow, we are to make our first carry to 9,700 feet, cache some supplies and return to our camp at 7,900 feet. It will be good to be travelling with lighter loads...

20 May: Day 2

Getting up at 8am, we have a relaxed start to the day, shaking off the stiffness from our previous exertions. After packing the sled duffels with cache gear, which includes food and equipment, we make the steep climb up 'Ski Hill' to the site of Camp 2 at 9,700 feet.

With lighter loads, though the terrain is steeper, the going is much easier than yesterday, so we get a good opportunity to take in the awesome views of Denali above, and Mt Hunter to our right. I also take the chance to shoot some action footage of our

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Summary

19 May: **Day 1** - Gear check, NPS registration, fly to Base Camp, 7200 feet. Move to Ski Hill, Camp 1, 7,800 feet. Distance: 5.5 miles, elevation gain: 600 feet

20 May: **Day 2** - Carry to Kahiltna Pass, 9,700 feet, return to Camp 1. Distance: 5 miles, elevation gain: 1,900 feet



21 May: **Day 3** - Move to Kahiltna Pass, Camp 2, 9,700 feet. Distance: 2.5 miles, elevation gain: 1,900 feet

22 May: **Day 4** - Move to 11,000 feet, Camp 3. Distance: 1.5 miles, elevation gain: 1,300 feet

23 May: **Day 5** - Descend and pick up cache at 9,700 feet, return to Camp 3. Distance: 1.5 miles, elevation gain: 1,300 feet

24 May: **Day 6** - Carry to 13,500 feet around Windy Corner, return to Camp 3. Distance: 1.75 miles, elevation gain: 2,500 feet

25 May: **Day 7** - Move to 14,200 feet, Camp 4. Distance: 2.75 miles, elevation gain: 3,200 feet

26 May: **Day 8** - Descend and pick up cache at 13,500 feet, return to Camp 4. Distance: 1 mile, elevation gain: 700 feet

27 May: **Day 9** - Rest at 14,200 feet

28 May: **Day 10** - Carry to 16,200 feet. Distance: 1 mile, elevation gain: 2,000 feet

29 May: **Day 11** - Rest at 14,200 feet

30 May: **Day 12** Move to 17,200 feet, Camp 5. Distance: 1.75 miles, elevation gain: 3,000 feet

31 May: **Day 13** - Rest at 17,200 feet

1 June: **Day 14** - Summit day (but sadly, not



completed as we only made partial progress towards Denali Pass). Return to 14,200 feet, distance: 2.25 miles

2 June: **Day 15** - Return to Base Camp, 7,200 feet, distance: 11.25 miles

3 June: **Day 16** - Fly back to Talkeetna

Total Distance: 38.25 miles

Total Elevation Gain: 19,200 feet

(to complete, add 4 miles and 3,000 feet)

Expedition Story cont...

team on the move.

Importantly, when moving together, we rope up in two teams of three to protect against crevasse falls. Whilst the trail on the glacier is pretty well worn, it can be the most dangerous part of the climb as the Kahiltna glacier, as with most glaciers, is peppered



with crevasses - large holes in the ice that can often be obscured or hidden completely by soft snow above. One important mountaineering skill that we practised as a team back in Talkeetna is crevasse rescue - firstly, how to prevent falls and secondly, how to extract a climber from a crevasse.

This involves a combination of the fallen climber 'jumarring' - ascending the rope using a special climbing device - and the others installing a belay device, usually a snow picket, and then creating a pulley system to help haul the fallen climber out of the crevasse.

We return to Camp 1 by about 4pm in high spirits, ready for some dinner and discussions about our lives and the route ahead.

21 May: Day 3

Today is overcast, which makes for a pleasantly cool climb unlike the burning heat of yesterday. Three good pushes sees us at the top of ski hill and the site of the first of 2 caches that we had left the day before.

Moving off the well-worn trail some 20 metres to create camp, we make use of snow shelters built by other teams. This is a common experience on Denali as the many



teams making the ascent utilise each others' campsites. Some teams try to reserve their camps by caching supplies in the middle of the site, but this practice is frowned upon.

"No harm in utilising some prime real estate", says Freddie.

Tom, in particular, is very keen to ensure that our camps are high quality - what he calls "tight" - which is part of instilling good camp discipline and presents the image

of a professional team. This is a practice that I agree with, notably because a tidy and organised camp is far better when the weather turns bad. You can live with a little disorder in the sunshine and with great visibility, but when it turns bad, you need to know exactly where everything is, especially when it can become buried in snow, and that it is secure in the high winds.

For dinner, we have soup and curried kouskous - not bad at all for mountain food. Tom and I enjoy a good game of cribbage, a great card game that I used to play as a kid with my grandfather. First score to me, though Tom got his revenge further up the mountain winning the overall game 2:1.

It starts to snow, we make sure camp is clear, kit is packed away and we head for our tents by about 8pm. In the tent, Len and I chew the cud for a while and I write some notes. We rotate tent-sharing as we ascend



the mountain which gives us each a chance to get to know each member of the team.

22 May: Day 4

Waking up and poking my head out of the tent, I see that we are in the clouds and that about 3 inches of snow had fallen during the night. Denali night that is, where at most it becomes dusk. At this time of year at 63° latitude, there is almost 24 hours of daylight

After collecting the gear from the first cache, we 'break' camp and hit the trail for Camp 3. Starting at a moderate angle, the route winds its way up the glacier to Kahiltna Pass at 10,200 feet before turning east and more steeply up to the camp at 11,000 feet.

Nearing the camp, we break out of the clouds to spectacular views of Mt Foraker. This is the first day that we are really on the Denali massif, rather than the glacier, so it feels as if the climb has actually begun.

After probing and flattening a campsite underneath an imposing bergschrund, which the team does using snowshoes, we pitch our tents amongst the plethora of other campsites occupied by the many other teams on the mountain.

Next to us is a British team, a Norwegian

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team, and an American team. If nothing else, climbing Denali is certainly an international experience as it attracts climbers from all over the world. You get to know people from other teams quite well as you continually pass the same teams making similar progress as you on the route.

After dinner, there are some excellent opportunities for great footage as the clouds dive inexorably into the valleys below, all the time revealing stunning mountain views.

Tomorrow, Tom, with Ed and I, the stronger members of the team, are to head back down to 9,700 feet to retrieve the second cache, while Freddie and the others improve the quality of the camp. Len was beginning to feel the cumulative strain of climbing the mountain, and Dave needed to rest his knees and back from the perpetual slog.

As we'll be spending 3 nights or so at this camp, it is worthwhile making it comfortable and fortified.

23 May: Day 5

Tom, Ed and I head back down to 9,700 feet in a 'whiteout', so-called as all you can see is the white of clouds, falling snow and the glacier, where visibility has reduced almost to zero. We don our snowshoes for



the first time and make use of bamboo wands to mark our trail. Every team carries wands which become invaluable for navigation, notably ensuring that you are able to retrace your steps in such conditions. At times we also have to get the compass out to check our heading.

We find the cache in just over an hour, pack the food and gear it contains into our

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rucksacks, then turn around and slog our way back up to 11,000 feet. There is not much to see aside from the misty figures of Tom and Ed in front of me, partially obscured by the spindrift blowing off the slopes above us.

Its often quite revealing when the weather closes in like that as you retreat into your



thoughts, protected from the elements by your mountaineer's clothing. With only a small fraction of your face exposed, the gear acts like a shroud and it sometimes feels as if you're observing the scene from somewhere else, pondering the climb from behind your goggles.

On return to Camp 3, we find that the others have been productive building protective snow walls around the posh and tents.

Lots of chat later, including interesting anecdotes from other teams at the camp, we eat dinner, which was a bit on the 'heavy' side. Afterwards, I feel as if a brick is passing through my digestive system. I think the food needed a little more hydration than we had given it.

By 8pm, the clouds part allowing us a tremendous view of the peaks around us. At 9pm, as we're stowing kit away for the night, A Korean climber appears in our camp, elated from a successful summit push earlier that day and on his way down. He offers us some spare food and fuel he doesn't need, a gesture that many climbers offer each other.

24 May: Day 6

Today we carried cache supplies from Camp



3 to a cache site just around 'Windy Corner' at 13,500 feet. In the beautiful sunshine, I tried to keep my face protected as my lips had been previously burnt.

Out of Camp 3, the terrain is steep starting with 'MotorCycle Hill'. At the top of the hill, the wind has swept the ice clear of snow, so we stop to put our crampons on for the ice slopes above.

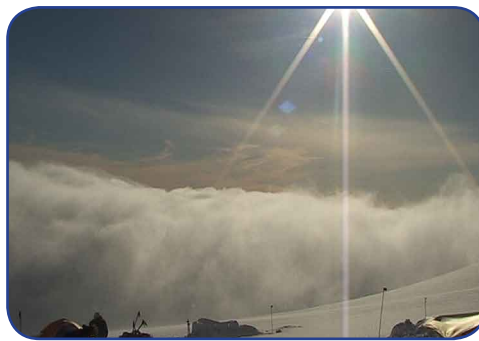
When we arrive at Windy Corner, an

interesting traverse above the glacier and crevasses - the only real bit of exposure on the climb so far - we prepare for the notorious conditions - it doesn't have the name 'windy' for nothing. However, to our pleasant surprise, it is not windy at all. 'Sunny and calm' corner was our experience, which added to our feeling that we had been blessed with good weather for most of the route so far. Aside from the snow and whiteouts so far, which in themselves can be good to give you a break from the heat of the sun, we had been lucky.

25 May: Day 7

After the light cache loads of yesterday, we climbed with all our gear all the way from Camp 3 to Camp 4, situated at 14,200 feet, an hour beyond our cache at 13,500 feet.

We also split the gear into 4 sleds, rather than 6, with Len and Dave not pulling sleds.



Though they carried heavier loads in their rucksacks, the 4 of us with sleds had a heavy load and I found it very draining. So much so, that for the final pull into camp from Windy Corner, Dave took over my sled. It's often quite amazing how much a shared effort can develop a sense of camaraderie.

Luckily, the sky was overcast, so we didn't have to deal with the sun. Nevertheless, our progress was considerably slower than previous days, mostly due to the additional weight, but also due to the higher altitude and the cumulative effect of strenuous effort for seven consecutive days.

We finally rolled into Camp 4 around 7pm, exhausted but happy to be there. Hot tea, soup and burritos were swiftly prepared as we pitched our tents in a suitable site.

Overnight, it was noticeably colder than our previous camps, dropping to a low of minus 15°C. Not surprising given that we were already at an elevation higher than most mountains in Europe and a latitude not far from the Arctic circle. But by Denali standards, this was pretty warm!

Denali has a notorious reputation for being the coldest mountain on the planet. Until that time, you are protected from the cold by the

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sun on the lower slopes. In altitude terms from base camp, Camp 4 (known simply as 14 camp) is about half way to the summit, so we have got much colder conditions to come...

We felt reassured that we would now have a couple of easy days, including one complete rest day, to recharge our batteries and prepare for the steeper, harder and colder slopes above us.

26 May: Day 8

After enjoying a well-deserved lie-in until 10am, you notice how much difference the sun makes. Whilst it doesn't set, it does move behind the upper mountain about 9:30pm which leaves 14 camp in the shade. It then returns around 9:30am, a time when the sun's rays begin to defrost the frozen condensation on the inside of your tent. It is a wonderful feeling as the sun's rays work their magic.

By 10:30am the tent becomes a very effective drying machine, reaching temperatures as high as 30°C in a surrounding ambient air temperature of -11°C.

After a leisurely breakfast, we get stuck into a 'working rest day', which began with



building the camp kitchen (for the posh), starting with a hole in the snow about 7 feet deep and 10 feet in diameter. Then we carved the entrance steps, a snow table for the stoves, and snow benches. At meal times, we can sit on the benches, on warm mats, to eat dinner, chat and savour hot drinks. In an environment that can be very harsh, this is a pleasant and sociable place to be.

As we plan to move to Camp 5 at 17,200

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feet on Denali's West Buttress, we enjoy the time in the posh at 14 Camp, as it's a luxury we won't get at the coldest camp of all. With recorded temperatures of -40°C and lower, you prepare for it carefully, including protective clothing and sleeping equipment. Setting up tents is not done lightly as you



know that, in a storm, they can save your life.

Having finished our kitchen, we then 'back carry', which entailed climbing back down the mountain to collect our cached gear at 13,500 feet. In the cache, we had stored 11 days worth of food, fuel for the stoves, snow saws for building snow walls, and each individual's snack bag for week 3.

After an hour and a half's trek back up to Camp 4 in the intense Alaskan sunshine gave us some time to rest and enjoy the fruits of our labour. But not before digging snow trenches and cutting snow blocks for walls around our tents.

Following our evening meal, we sat back enthralled by the natural show of sunlight, mountains, sky and ever-changing cloud formations. There is nothing quite like looking down on the clouds when your feet are still firmly planted on the ground.

27 May: Day 9

A full day of rest at last! Relaxation feels good as it's been hard work every day so far, and it's only going to get harder! Time to rejuvenate, stretch out tired muscles, have a smoke, chat to other climbers, and enjoy the



view, which is spectacular.

As the weather deteriorates around mid-afternoon, some climbers arrive who have just returned from higher on the mountain. They recommend options for using the fixed lines higher up, so we don our climbing gear in the falling snow, lay out a rope around camp, and practice the techniques that we will use to ascend and descend the fixed lines the next day. Parties ascending and descending

the fixed lines use separate ropes, and there are different techniques for each direction.

Going up, you use a jumar on the fixed line (rope) to protect yourself from falling on the steep terrain. This is backed up by a karabiner above the jumar, attached to the rope and to your harness, in case the jumar fails and as a second attachment for crossing snow anchors.

Your ice axe and rucksack are also attached to your harness to prevent dropping them. If you were to drop them, it wouldn't be too pleasant for the climbers below you, and you would be without crucial items for the climbing above.

You are also roped to your teammates with a separate rope that moves with you as you climb and descend, in our case, using 2 ropes with 3 climbers on each. This acts as another layer of protection as you can assist each other, either in preventing a fall in a



crevasse or down the mountain, or in helping each other overcome different obstacles on the route.

Negotiating steep terrain at 16,000 feet on a mountain in freezing air, deep snow and often without much visibility is quite strenuous on the body and on the mind!

That is why it is good to practice techniques that help you stay safe and communicate with your team members, which is key to fluid movement on the mountain. It also helps you quickly negotiate anchor points, where the fixed line is picketed to the mountain, allowing you to transfer your safety devices from one side of the anchor to other in order to progress, all the time remaining protected from a fall.

We practiced this for about an hour and a half, perhaps more, then headed back for dinner. Well rested, well prepared, and ready for the tough day ahead climbing 2,000 feet to the ridge at 16,200 feet.

28 May: Day 10

As it turned out, with intermittent sunshine and clouds and wind, we made excellent progress, passing two other groups to the bergschrund at the half-way point, onto the fixed lines above and we reached the ridge in

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only three and a half hours from Camp 4. Not wanting to stick around in the cold wind, we cached our gear and headed down.

Now, descending the fixed lines is a little more "macho" than going up. With ice axes put away to prevent them getting in the way, we attach ourselves to the lines using 2 karabiners with slings tied to our harnesses (1 acting as a back-up). You then climb down the slope with the fixed line wrapped around your arm, using friction to control your descent rate. In the event of a fall, the karabiners would slide down the rope until the next anchor point, usually spaced around 50-60 feet apart. Whilst unpleasant, a fall of that distance is a lot better than falling 2,000 feet!!

You do ponder, however, the condition of the fixed line and anchor points. With as many as 60 people on one line at a time, it is imperative that they are kept in good condition, one of the jobs of the National Park Rangers stationed at 14 Camp.

On this part of the mountain, aside from the weather, one of the greatest dangers is actually other parties above and below you. And you always take great care when passing other groups, either going in the same or opposite directions. Strong words can be said



when one party is careless or inconsiderate towards their fellow climbers.

Safety is vital in the mountains and Denali is no exception. The technical issues on the West Buttress are not too great, but still important enough to be comfortable with, especially when the conditions become extreme.

Descent was rapid and we were back in
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Expedition Story cont...

camp 4 by 5pm or so, a good performance from the team, which had clearly benefited from the rest day. We felt good, both on the way up and down, and we were happy to be back in camp to relax.

This was also Len's 'summit day', as he had decided the previous night that 16,200 feet

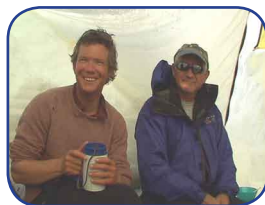


was as far as he would go on the mountain. 4,000 feet higher than ever before, and on only his fourth big mountain expedition, Len, at 56, had achieved an incredible goal. Not the summit - this time - but how many people, of any age, could do what he had done?

Later, after dinner, we debated what to do next. A plan for five higher on the mountain, and a plan for Len to begin his descent with another group. Len and I also agree on a potential plan to become members of the Polar Bear Club by jumping into the Arctic Sea at Barrow, the northernmost point on the North American continent!!

Tomorrow, we are planning another rest day before the ascent to high camp at 17,200 feet, picking up some of the cached items at 16,200 feet along the way, with the intention of pushing for the summit the following day, weather permitting. No point in sticking around at high camp for longer than necessary, as at that altitude, the body only begins to deteriorate in the thin air. Any waiting around should be done at 14 Camp where possible.

With the weather looking favourable and improving over the next couple of days, we



felt optimistic for our own summit attempt. However, on Denali, there is no guarantee of success with only about 50% of climbers ever reaching the summit.

29 May: Day 11

Rest day 2! After cold pop tarts and cereal for breakfast, we spend some time refining our personal gear to minimise the weight we have to carry higher on the mountain. As

Len was not coming, we would only take two tents (one 2-man and one 3-man).

As the weather had been intermittent again, we decide to proceed the next day in the hope that we beat any bad weather coming in. In any case, the weather can be so changeable that you treat any forecast with a pinch of salt. Further discussions about our summit and cold weather strategy lets us psychologically prepare for the hardships ahead.

Freddie and I pop into the Ranger camp to check out what is going on and to say hi. A friendly place where the guides often meet to swap stories, it gives me a glimpse of some of the frustrations that some guides experience with their groups of mixed abilities.

30 May: Day 12

We rise early around 6am to have enough time to break camp before making trail



for high camp. Len packs his gear for the descent, while the rest of our group prepares for our second ascent of the fixed lines. Len is going down with Joey, another mountain guide, and one of his clients. I later meet Joey on the road out of Talkeetna and give him a ride in the Land Rover to Denali National Park, where he is to spend a few days before heading back to Anchorage for his next 'batch' of Denali clients.

In four hours, we make reasonable progress, reaching the ridge and cache site at 16,200 feet at the top of the fixed lines. From here, we have an enjoyable ascent up the ridge to high camp, arguably the most interesting section of the West Buttress route.

With mixed sections of rock and snow, several anchors and fixed lines, notably around Washburn's Thumb. There are also some great moments of exposure as you gaze down either side of the knife-edge ridge several thousand feet to the glaciers below.

I was feeling a bit shit for the first half of the ridge, with the altitude and accumulating tiredness from multiple days of climbing adding to my heavy load. It was at this point that I really began to regret not getting in enough training for the climb. Whilst I had

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managed to trek up a few mountains, my time driving across Canada had not been particularly devoted to physical exercise. This, on top of the previous year focused on delivering a major design project for the UK Atomic Energy Authority, had left me relatively unfit. In many ways, I was relying on my latent fitness from many earlier years of intense exercise and sports, including mountaineering.

The second half of the ridge, however, was less steep and really enjoyable. After a break above Washburn's Thumb, a large rock promontory that sticks out of the ridge, the sun came out. In the mountains at this kind of altitude, the sun takes on a hugely important role, both for the weather, but also morale. It is quite different from the glacier sun, thousands of feet below, as up here, you appreciate its warmth and the fact it allows you to experience the vistas.

Before moving on, Tom and Freddie make a brief ascent of the Thumb for a laugh, which I capture on film. Then, after a further hour or two, and a total of eight and a half hours from Camp 4, we reach high camp (Camp 5) at 17,200 feet at 5:30pm. From here, you have a great view of Denali Pass and the Summit above, as well as amazing



views across the entire Alaska range.

We pitch our tents in amongst previously constructed snow walls, whilst chatting to other groups, many of which had been "weathered" in at high camp for up to 5 days, the standard amount of time parties wait for good weather at high camp for a summit bid before descending.

Our original plan was to push for the summit

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the next day, but given our performance today, we decide it is wiser to have a rest day first. With dinner in our tents, as we no longer had the luxury of the posh tent, we got our heads down around 10pm.

31 May: Day 13



It turned out that the weather was too inclement today for a summit bid anyway, so we relax in the knowledge that the day has not been wasted.

In fact, many teams who had been at high camp for some time decided to head down. With their food supplies running out and motivations waning, you could see the disappointment in many faces, forced to descend without the summit prize. Such is life in the big mountains!

I had to admit, though, that the thought of descending did not seem such a bad thing. The idea of spending 5 days in this place was not particularly appealing. Yes, it was amazing, but it was also harsh with little oxygen in the air, and very cold. Part of me was saying: "To hell with the summit, I want some beer!", and the other half saying: "Come on, you've made it this far, now it's only summit day". It's not uncommon for climbers to have this mental, motivational battle as the going gets tough on any mountain.

Whilst Dave, Ed and I spend some time removing snow from our tent and getting settled into life at high camp, Tom and Freddie head back down the ridge to collect our remaining supplies cached at 16,200



feet. I also have my fingers crossed that the weather allows us to go for the summit tomorrow, as the thought of spending more time up here is getting less and less appealing.

Talking to Bethan, a guide in the neighbouring camp, she tells me that she has been here ten times before and only summited twice - a testament to the realities of the weather and people's capabilities on

Denali's upper slopes. Luck and the weather do play a massive role in any group's bid to get to the summit of Denali.

1 June: Day 14

Summit bid day!

At 6am, Tom reviewed the weather situation as agreed the previous night, but it was not looking too good. At 7am, however, the skies had cleared somewhat revealing a possible weather window for reaching the summit. Pulling on my expedition parka, I step outside the tent after breakfast to view the scene for myself. Looking up at the slopes above, there is a lot of spindrift blowing off the ridge, which indicates strong winds higher up.

It is these freezing, high winds that put an end to many a party's summit hopes, so I didn't feel too optimistic. Whilst the journey from high camp to Denali Pass at 18,400 feet



is relatively protected from the winds. Above the pass, you face the full force of the wind and it's ability to freeze anything it touches. With the ambient air temperature at 17,200 feet a cool -25°C, the wind can easily turn that into an effective -40 to -50°C. And that is very cold. The number of frostbite victims on these upper slopes is a legacy to those freezing temperatures.

We had to hope that the winds would calm down before we reached the pass in order to continue on to the upper slopes and the final ridge to the summit.

Before setting out, however, Dave decides that he is not feeling up to the summit climb, partly due to nausea and headache, clear signs of the onset of altitude sickness, and partly tiredness. He didn't feel it was appropriate to try without feeling 100%. A tough decision for any climber, and a sensible one by Dave. No point in taking any risks, so Tom decides that Dave should head down to 14 Camp with Freddie, while Tom, Ed and I would remain for the summit bid.

We pack up and head out on the trail towards Denali Pass along with a few other groups also at high camp. It was cold, very cold, and I was finding it difficult to keep my hands and feet warm, even with special

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warmers designed to provide additional heat inside your gloves and boots. My breathing was also becoming erratic, a combined sign of the altitude and my lack of fitness.

I felt good back at camp, but on the trail I was feeling steadily worse. With the winds above not seeming to calm and my deteriorating condition, I was finding it increasingly difficult to justify to myself that I should keep going.

With a calm mind, but a heavy heart, about a third of the way to the Pass, I made the decision that this time, I had gone far enough. I didn't want to become a liability higher on the mountain, and the experience of many previous mountains made this decision easier. A warning bell rang inside my head - Chris, not this time buddy, your body isn't ready - you need to train for this kind of endurance. Getting to 17,200 feet had used up most of my latent reserves. This summit will have to wait. Disappointing of course, but there is always another time, and there are so many more reasons not to take the risk.

So we headed back to High camp after a high point of 17,600 feet; and I managed to catch up with Freddie and Dave before they head down, so I can go with them. After a great descent down the ridge and a final memorable evening at 14 camp, Freddie, Dave and I finally flew from base camp back to Talkeetna and many beers on 3 June.

It took us a whole day from 14 camp back to base camp in a whiteout, but the thought of green trees and good food kept us going. Plus a good morale boost with a sip on the Ranger's 12 year old scotch whiskey.

To their credit, Tom and Ed finally summited on 4 June (Ed's second attempt), and I was able to meet and celebrate with them on their return.

Denali - the Great One: what a mountain!

On 6 June, I began the next leg of my journey on the Namaste Global Expedition. Stay tuned to www.namaste.co.uk/news to find out what happens.

by Chris Charlton

Local Information: Talkeetna

Nestled at the base of Denali, the historic village of Talkeetna has an outstanding panoramic view of the Alaska Range that is enjoyed and photographed from the overlook as you enter town.

Three rivers, the Talkeetna, Chulitna, and Susitna, converge here to become the Big Susitna drainage. The word "Susitna" in Den' aina Indian language means "Sand Island River." The name "Talkeetna" loosely translated, means "River of Plenty", or more literally, "Place where food is stored near the river," meaning a place where a food cache was located. Chulitna means "River of Big Leaf Trees."

Athabaskan Indians originally inhabited this area. They were a strong group that refused to let the Russian traders up the Susitna River. In 1892, gold was discovered in the lower reaches of the Susitna River, bringing miners and prospectors into the area.

Then in 1915, President Woodrow Wilson selected Talkeetna as the site for the Engineering Commission Headquarters for the construction of the Alaska Railroad that would connect Seward to Fairbanks.

The Talkeetna townsite was established in 1919 when the railroad surveyed and auctioned 80 lots. In 1921, the train from Talkeetna to Anchorage took

only 19 hours! Today, the express passenger train makes the trip in about 3 hours.

The late Don Sheldon was a pioneer pilot from Talkeetna and one of the first to do glacier landings on McKinley. Currently, seven Talkeetna air services fly thousands of visitors to Mt. McKinley to enjoy the spectacular scenery.

In summer, fishing for salmon and trout was followed by fall hunting. Some local big game animals are moose, bear, caribou, and Dall sheep. (In the winter of '92-'93, caribou herds migrated into nearby areas for the first time in 40 years.)

Of course, winter covers Talkeetna with a thick blanket of clean white snow. In 1989-90, the total snowfall was over 25 feet, which is three times the average.

About 720 people and half as many dogs live in Talkeetna year round. In the summer, be sure to pop into the West Rib or Fairview for a beer...



Transportation/Shuttle Services

| | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Talkeetna Shuttle Service | 888-268-6008 |
| Anchorage to Talkeetna | 8am and 5pm |
| Talkeetna to Anchorage | 11am |
| Cost | \$50 one-way, \$90 ret |

| | |
|------------------------|--------------|
| The Park Connection | 800-208-0200 |
| Anchorage to Talkeetna | 3pm |
| Talkeetna to Anchorage | 11am |

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------|
| Alaska Railroad | 800-544-0552 |
| Anchorage to Talkeetna | 8:15am (3 hrs-ish) |
| Talkeetna to Anchorage | 4:40pm |

Talkeetna Accommodation

| | | |
|--------------------------------|--------------|-------|
| Chinook Winds Cabins | 907-733-1899 | **** |
| Eye of Denali Inn | 907-733-3077 | ** |
| Latitude 62 | 907-733-2262 | *** |
| Susitna River Lodge | 907-733-1505 | **** |
| Swiss Alaska Inn | 907-733-2424 | *** |
| Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge | 907-733-9500 | ***** |
| Talkeetna Cabins | 907-733-2227 | *** |
| Talkeetna Hostel International | 907-733-4678 | * |
| Talkeetna Motel | 907-733-2323 | ** |
| Talkeetna Roadhouse | 907-733-1351 | ** |

Anchorage Accommodation

| | | |
|-----------------------|--------------|-------|
| Anchorage Guesthouse | 907-274-0408 | * |
| Captain Cook Hotel | 907-276-6000 | ***** |
| Earth B&B | 907-279-9907 | * |
| Executive Suite Hotel | 800-770-6366 | *** |
| Holiday Inn Express | 907-248-8848 | *** |
| Springhill Suites | 907-562-3247 | **** |

Travel & Tourism Services

| | |
|---------------------------------|--------------|
| Anchorage Visitors Bureau | 907-276-4118 |
| New World Travel | 907-274-0408 |
| Talkeetna Denali Visitor Centre | 800-660-2688 |
| Talkeetna Travel | 888-567-8728 |

Mountaineering Retail

| | |
|--------------------------|--------------|
| AMH, Anchorage | 907-272-1811 |
| REI, Anchorage | 907-272-4565 |
| Talkeetna Outdoor Centre | 907-733-4444 |

Personal Kit

FOOTWEAR

| | |
|----------------|---|
| Socks - Inner: | 4 |
| Socks - Outer: | 4 |
| VBL Socks | 1 |
| Plastic Boots | 1 |
| SuperGaiters | 1 |
| Overboots | 1 |
| Camp Booties | 1 |

UPPER BODY

| | |
|------------------------------|---|
| Polypro/capilene Top - light | 2 |
| Polypro/capilene Top - med | 2 |
| Fleece Jacket | 1 |
| Fleece Vest | 1 |
| Gore-tex Shell | 1 |
| Expedition Parka | 1 |

LOWER BODY

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Capilene Underwear | 3 |
| Long Underwear - light | 2 |
| Long Underwear - med | 1 |
| Wind Shell | 1 |
| Insulated Overpants | 1 |

HEAD

| | |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Base Ball Hat | 1 |
| Warm Hat | 1 |
| Fleece Hood | 1 |
| Face Mask | 1 |
| Hood/Neck Gaiter (capilene) | 1 |

HANDS

| | |
|-------------------------------|---|
| Inner Gloves (capilene) | 1 |
| Fleece Gloves (polypro) | 1 |
| Insulated Ski Gloves | 1 |
| Insulated Overmitts | 1 |
| Insulated Overmitts - x large | 1 |

SLEEPING

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Sleeping Bag | 1 |
| Compression Stuff | 1 |
| Sleeping Pad | 2 |
| Half Pad | 1 |
| Sleeping pad stuff | 3 |

TRAVEL

| | |
|------------|---|
| Snow Shoes | 1 |
| Sled | 1 |

Ski Pole 2

BACKPACK & BAGS

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Back Pack | 1 |
| Side Pocket | 1 |
| Lash Strap | 2 |
| Stuff Sack: small | 1 |
| Lunch Stuff Sack | 3 |
| Tent and Cache Stuff Sacks | 4 |
| Trash Bags | 5 |
| Sled Duffel | 1 |

MISCELLANEOUS

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Bandana | 1 |
| Glacier Glasses | 2 |
| Goggles | 1 |
| Nose Guard | 2 |
| Cup - plastic | 1 |
| Bowl - plastic | 1 |
| Spoon - plastic | 2 |
| Headlamp | 1 |
| Lamp Batteries & Bulb | 1 |
| Water Bottle | 2 |
| Water Bottle Insulator | 2 |
| Lip Balm/Screen | 2 |
| Sun Screen - spf30 | 2 |
| Zinc Oxide | 1 |
| Cream Container | 1 |
| Knife | 1 |
| Toilet Articles | 1 |
| Tooth Paste | 1 |
| Baby Wipes 20 | 1 |
| Hand Disinfectant | 1 |
| Toilet Paper | 2 |
| Hand Warmers | 4 |
| Foot Warmers | 4 |
| Watch | 1 |
| Lighter | 2 |
| Nylon Cord 6 feet | 1 |
| Ear Plugs | 1 |
| Pee Bottle | 1 |
| Compass | 1 |
| GPS | 1 |
| Book (for journal writing) | 1 |

CLIMBING

| | |
|---------------|---|
| Seat Harness | 1 |
| Chest Harness | 1 |

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Ascender and Sling | 2 |
| Mt. Ice Axe 70 cm | 1 |
| Regular Carabiners | 6 |
| Locking Carabiners | 6 |
| Ice Screws | 3 |
| Snow stake | 2 |
| Crampons | 1 |
| Foot Prussic, 14' of 6mm | 2 |
| 6mm Perlon | 1 |
| 11/16" Super tape webbing | 1 |

MEDICAL

| | |
|------------------------------|----|
| Personal Medical Kit | 1 |
| Antibiotic - Cirpo (2*7days) | 14 |
| Diamox -20, 250 mg. tablets | 20 |
| Ibuprofen (400) | 60 |
| Ibuprofen (800) | 30 |
| Benadryl (Anti-hist) | 30 |
| Immodium | 20 |
| Phenergan (nausea) | 10 |
| Tessalon Perles (Cough) | 20 |

CAMERA & VIDEO

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| TVR950 | 1 |
| 5 * Battery | 5 |
| Cleaning Kit | 1 |
| 10 * Tapes | 10 |
| Mini Tripod | 1 |
| Mini Crabs | 2 |
| Weather jacket | 1 |
| Hand Warmers for batteries | 21 |
| Insulated Battery Pouch | 1 |
| Neutral Density Filter | 1 |
| Skylight Filter | 1 |
| Insulated Tape Stock Pouch | 1 |

FOOD (3 * 7 days)

| | |
|-----------------------------|----|
| Energy bars (2/day) | 42 |
| Power gels (2/day) | 42 |
| Fruit bars (2/day) | 42 |
| Sugar cubes (4/day) | 84 |
| Energy drink powder (1/day) | 21 |
| Milk powder (1 quart/week) | 3 |
| Zip lock bags (1/day) | 21 |
| Tea Bags (2/day) | 42 |
| Coffee Powder (1spoon/day) | 21 |
| Hot Chocolate (1/day) | 21 |
| Stuff Sacks (med) | 3 |

Group Kit

SLEEPING

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Tents - 2man | 2 |
| Tent - 3man | 1 |
| Posh Tent (Kitchen) & Pole | 1 |
| Tent Repair Kit | 1 |

TRAVEL

| | |
|--------------------|----|
| Sled | 6 |
| Sled Prussiks | 6 |
| Sled Lashing Lines | 6 |
| Bamboo Wands | 50 |

MEDICAL

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Trauma Kit | 2 |
| Emergency Shelter | 1 |
| Emergency Blanket | 2 |

FOOD

| | |
|----------------------------|----|
| Stoves (MSR) | 3 |
| Stove Repair Kit | 1 |
| Fuel - white gas, 1 gallon | 8 |
| Breakfast/Dinner Food Bags | 21 |

CLIMBING

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Ropes (9mm, 60m) | 2 |
| Snow Pickets | 6 |
| Slings | 6 |
| Spares Bag | 1 |

COMMUNICATION

| | |
|---------------|---|
| CB Radio | 1 |
| Mobile Phones | 2 |
| Batteries | 3 |

MISCELLANEOUS

| | |
|-----------------|----|
| Map | 2 |
| Compass | 2 |
| Snow Shovel | 3 |
| Spade | 1 |
| Snow Saw | 2 |
| Park Permits | 6 |
| Minidisc player | 1 |
| Speakers | 1 |
| AA Batteries | 12 |
| Playing Cards | 2 |
| Cribbage board | 1 |
| Toilet Bags | 10 |
| CMC's | 3 |

Denali National Park

Only a solitary gravel road less than 100 miles long dares to interrupt Denali's six million acres of snowcapped peaks, braided streams, and glacier-carved valleys. Visitors to the park are guests of the countless grizzly bears, moose, caribou, wolves, and Dall sheep that thrive here. With 18,000 of its 20,320 feet towering over the surrounding lands, the park's centrepiece, Denali (Mt McKinley), is the world's tallest mountain from base to peak.

For mountaineers, the climbing season stretches from May to July, with most ascents being achieved in June. Winter ascents have been made, but the conditions are so extreme that it is a rare event.

For other visitors, August can be an excellent time to visit - fall colours peak, the mosquito season has virtually ended, and September's snows have not yet arrived. Be sure to check out the park's newspaper, *Alpenglow*.

The best place to secure a ski-plane flight over the mountains is in Talkeetna, where about 5 companies operate mostly Beavers or Cessnas. The "Grand Denali" flight run by Talkeetna Air Taxi costs \$195, takes about 2 hours, and is one of the best. For a small supplement, you also get the opportunity to land, and then take-off from the glacier itself!

The park was established as Mt. McKinley National Park on Feb. 26, 1917. The original park was designated a wilderness area and incorporated into Denali National Park and Preserve in 1980. The Park was designated an international biosphere reserve in 1976.

All climbers attempting Mt. McKinley or Mt. Foraker must register with Denali National Park & Preserve and pay a special use fee of \$150 per climber.

This fee offsets costs to the South District related to mountaineering, such as maintaining the high-altitude ranger station, staff, and mountaineering booklets. In addition to the special use fee, a 60-day pre-registration regulation allows mountaineering rangers to have direct contact with climbers before they arrive in Talkeetna. In doing so, rangers are able to suggest appropriate routes for different levels of expertise and offer first-hand knowledge of conditions



encountered in the Alaska Range.

Denali National Park & Preserves Mountaineering Booklet, available in eight languages, covers mandatory requirements, search and rescue information, clean climbing requirements, high altitude medical problems, glacier hazards, and self-sufficiency. You should have a solid understanding of potentially serious medical problems and awareness of the extreme mental and physical stresses associated with high altitude mountaineering. Visit the Alaska Natural History Associations Bookstore online to find the mountaineering and guide books available for Denali as well as literature on high altitude climbing.

Ranger Services

| | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Anchorage Office | 800-622-7275 |
| North Side Visitor Centre | 907-683-1266 |
| Talkeetna Ranger Station | 907-733-2231 |
| | DENA_Talkeetna_Office@nps.gov |

Guiding Services

If you plan to use a guide service, make certain that the service is authorized by Denali National Park & Preserve. Only six companies have been granted permits to provide mountain guide services on Denali, including:

1. Alaska Mountaineering School, www.climbalaska.org
2. Alpine Ascents International, www.alpineascents.com
3. N.O.L.S., www.nols.edu
4. American Alpine Institute, www.mtnguide.com
5. Mountain Trip, www.mountaintrip.com
6. Rainier Mountaineering, www.rmguides.com

All members of groups, whether guided parties or individual groups, are required to pay the National Park fee of \$150 per person.

Climbing History

Although Mt. McKinley can be seen from Anchorage on a clear day, its base is deep in the Alaska Range. Explorers in the early 1900s used river boats, mules, and dog sleds to gain access to the mountain's glaciers in order to establish base camps.

Beginning in 1932, plane access to climb Mt. McKinley began saving the mountaineers a few months travel time. That same year, bush pilot Joe Crosson set the "Cosmic Ray" Party down at the 5,700-foot level of the Muldrow Glacier. Coincidentally, two members of this party became the mountain's first fatalities during the descent.

Twenty-two years later, in 1954, pilot Don Sheldon flew the first commercial flight from Talkeetna to Kahiltna Glacier. This has become the norm for most McKinley climbers beginning their expeditions.

Selected Climbing Timeline:

- 1910 Sourdough Expedition climbs the north peak of Mt. McKinley
- 1913 First ascent of the south summit by Stuck, Harper, Karstens & Tatum
- 1932 Joe Crosson, first pilot to land an aircraft on the Muldrow glacier
- 1947 Barbara Washburn is the first woman to summit Mt. McKinley
- 1951 Bradford Washburn with 7 others pioneer the West Buttress route
- 1959 A party of four makes the first ascent of the West Rib of McKinley
- 1961 An Italian party led by Cassin make the ascent of the Cassin Ridge
- 1967 Davidson, Johnston & Genet make the first winter ascent
- 1970 First solo ascent - Naomi Uemura
- 1971 First female Native American to reach the summit, Betty Menard
- 1976 First hang glider descent
- 1979 First dog team ascent
- 1982 Dr. Miri Ercolani is the first woman to solo
- 1988 Vernon Tejas is the first solo climber to ascend in winter and survive
- 1993 Joan Phelps completes the first blind ascent of Mt. McKinley
- 1993 The highest short-haul was accomplished in June to 20,320 feet by Daryl Miller and Lama Helicopter Pilot, Bill Ramsey
- 1995 Youngest female to reach the summit, Merrick Johnston, age 12
- 1997 First ski descent of the Wickersham Wall, Adrian Nature
- 2001 Youngest male to reach the summit, Galen Johnston, 11

2003/4 Statistics

2003

- # Registered Climbers: 1,179
- # Successful Summit Bids: 688
- % Successful Summit Bids: 58%

2004 (as at 7 June 2004)

- # Registered Climbers: 1,243
- # Currently Climbing: 482
- # Concluded Climbs: 423
- # Successful Summit Bids: 137
- % Successful Summit Bids: 32%

The first half of the 2004 climbing season has seen a relatively low percentage of successful summit climbs, mostly due to the difficult and windy conditions on the upper mountain

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Go to www.namaste-promo.co.uk to buy the Denali Expedition Film on DVD. Available from Sept 2004