

Denali

By Ben Swart SC, Pretoria Bar

Only a brief glance at a map of Alaska is necessary in order to understand why it is referred to as the Last Frontier. Its largest city, Anchorage, is situated in the southeast of the state and houses 40% of its population of less than 700 000 people. There are a few roads east of Anchorage and virtually none west. Alaska has seven national parks consisting of pristine wilderness, which constitute two thirds of the parks in the USA. And it has Denali (also referred to as Mount McKinley), the highest peak in North America (6 194m), with a West Buttress route, accessible to amateur mountaineers like myself.

Several factors contribute to Denali being a difficult climb. The ascent from base camp (2 200 m) to the summit is almost 4 000 m, more than any of the other climbs on the seven summit circuit. There are no porters or animals to assist with gear hauling. The air at the poles is thinner than at the equator, with the result that the altitude effect is comparable to a 7 000 m climb. And finally, Denali's notorious bad weather is one of the major reasons for a summit success rate of only 50%.

Guided climbing on Denali is strictly regulated and only six companies are licensed to operate on the mountain. We opted for Mountain Trip, a small company with years of experience. Our team convened in Anchorage on 22 June. Apart from myself there were Mandy Ramsden and Jason Vliantis, whom

I had climbed with on Aconcagua, Arthur Marsden, Donald O'Connor, and an American from Boston, Jeff Arlee. Donald has only four and a half fingers on his right hand as a result of frostbite contracted on Aconcagua – a stark reminder of the potential hazards of cold climbing. We met our two guides, Pete Inglis from Colorado (lead guide) and Joe Butler from Anchorage (second guide), who conducted a thorough kit check. They had the appearance of seasoned mountain men.

On 23 June we departed for Talkeetna by bus. Talkeetna is two hours' drive north of Anchorage. It is a touristy and colourful town and is the gateway to the Denali National Park. The local airport is the base of a buzzing Denali sight seeing industry. The same afternoon we flew to base camp, situated on the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, in a De Haviland 'Otter,' a single prop turbine plane, equipped for ice landings. The flight into the Alaska Range entailed squeezing through narrow passes in deteriorating weather, skirting 300 m of sheer granite face. In bad light and with snow falling the pilot made a perfect landing on the glacier. It was an unforgettable experience.

Glacier travelling is dangerous because of the existence of crevasses. They are deep cracks of up to 40 m in a glacier, which can be concealed after snowfall. We received a comprehensive briefing on crevasse rescue and

related issues. We had no intention of touching the void and paid close attention. The safest time to travel, especially on a lower glacier, is early in the morning before soft snow conditions set in. Our plan was to rest and to depart for our next camp at 03h00 the next morning. That evening we experienced our first taste of Denali weather. The mild snowfall that prevailed when we landed changed into a proper snowstorm, and we had our first snow in. We woke up with our tents virtually covered in snow and had to dig our way out. There was nothing else to do but to wait. Fortunately the weather cleared by the afternoon and early the next morning we were on track, although 24 hours behind schedule.

In order to provide for the possibility of a crevasse fall, we walked in two rope teams with each of us attached to a safety rope by way of a harness and carabiners. It was impossible to store all the equipment in a backpack and, in addition, we pulled sleds attached to our packs. We were hitched like a team of Afrikaner oxen and we started our journey up. Our heavy loads made for slow progress. Pulling the sled felt like doing a mini Iditarod, but without the dogs. We used snow shoes in order to manage the deep fresh snow. It took us five hours to reach camp one, with an elevation gain of only 180 meters and a mere nine kilometers traversed.

Proper nutrition is of the utmost impor-

With the team and the flag on the summit, from left to right: Jasin Vliantis, Arthur Marsden, Joe Butler (guide), Mandy Ramsden, Pete Inglis (guide), Ben Swart



tance on a long climb. At each camp our guides constructed mess facilities by digging a snow pit, complete with entrance steps, a cooking counter and sitting place. A small circus-like tent, upheld by a single central pole and anchored with ice axes, provided the roof. In these pits Pete and Joe prepared the most wonderful meals for us on two elementary gas cookers, including spaghetti bolognese, blueberry pancakes (crumpets) and French toast. We were occasionally treated with desert, and once even with ice cream. Meals in these basic facilities were the highlight of the day and provided for much fun and laughter. We slept three in a tent. With three down sleeping bags spread out, there was not much room for anything else - one could say that accommodation was cramped but adequate.

The route from camp one onwards is too steep to move all the equipment in one haul. The routine from thereon would be to cache gear between the present and the next camp, to move to the next camp the following day, and to retrieve the cached equipment the day thereafter (a so-called 'active rest day'). In this manner we proceeded to camp two (3 400 m) at the foot of Motorcycle Hill (apparently so called because someone remarked that it was too steep for a motor cycle), where a ferocious blizzard caused us a sleepless evening, and thereafter to camp three (4 300 m). The route from camp two became icier and snow shoes were exchanged for crampons. We were starting to feel the effect of altitude and it took us 7,5 hours to traverse the distance of 4,6km to camp three, with an elevation gain of 1 010 m. The temperature dipped to -20 degrees Celsius the first night at camp three. We were for the first time above the clouds and a spectacular view made up for the cold weather.

On 2 July, after having returned to camp three from a cache walk, Jeff informed us that he was quitting. He left the next morning with another Mountain Trip group who were on their way down. The real climbing began above camp three. A climb of 370 m of moderate terrain led to a 240 m 40 - 55 degree ice face known as the Headwall. We could no longer use the sleds. Ski poles were exchanged for ice axes and we ascended the Headwall with ascenders (jumars) on a fixed line. The Headwall has a history of slab avalanching and includes a bergschrund crossing (a crack where the glacier meets the mountain). It was a nervous but exciting climb. It was followed by a dangerous but spectacular ridge walk that weaved through rocks. We utilized a running relay system as an additional safety measure. En route to High Camp Donald appeared to be unstable on his feet as a result of the altitude. Pete and Joe considered returning

to camp three, but decided to push through to High Camp. It took us nine hours to traverse 2,6 km from camp three to High Camp, with an elevation gain of 900m. We were exhausted. The following day was utilized as a rest day with the intention of summiting the day thereafter, weather permitting. The question on everybody's mind was whether the weather would allow us a summit attempt. We were aware that a previous group who wanted to summit in the middle of June got weathered in for five days and had to return home after running out of food. Pete gave us a summit briefing that evening. He informed us that an Alpine Ascent climber had died earlier that day of a heart attack, shortly before reaching the summit, and warned us that we might encounter his body.

We woke up on Sunday, 6 July, to find out that the mountain gods were smiling upon us. It was a clear and windless day - a bluebird day, as the guides called it. Donald had not recovered sufficiently and Pete made the decision that he could not summit. It was a difficult and hard decision but the correct one in the circumstances. Donald accepted and respected it.

Summit day commenced with the ascent of Denali Pass, a long traverse on a steep slope from the southwest. On the face of it the pass did not appear to be too steep, but it has a long history of falls which resulted in serious injuries and deaths. We once again used a running belay system and carefully made our way up. At the top of Denali Pass the route turned south with a steep climb to Zebra Rocks. Hereafter the route became flatter and brought us to a 0,4 km plateau called the Football Field. As we climbed, the surrounding peaks disappeared one by one until there was only the summit left. Between us and it was a monster of a hill aptly named Pig Hill. We ascended Pig Hill and reached the summit ridge at 6 100 m, with less than 100 m to ascend to the summit by way of a ridge walk. The weather was holding and I was feeling good. It dawned on me that, bar an accident on the ridge, I would summit. The ridge walk was dangerous, with sheer drops on both sides, but beautiful. After 50 minutes we had the summit in sight. Approximately 30 m from it I noticed that the deceased Alpine Ascent climber had been buried next to the route, with cache stickers marking the grave. Tears ran down my face as I passed the lonely ice grave. I felt a deep sadness for this fellow climber, who was not even afforded the satisfaction of summiting before meeting his fate. A mountain can be a cruel place. I subsequently heard that it was too dangerous to attempt to remove the body and that it would remain there.

We proceeded to the summit. It had taken us two weeks to reach it, with a mere 26,7 km from base camp traversed. The sky was blue and the view breathtaking. To my joy I found that, after three mountains, the feeling of summiting had not waned - that is how it should be. After taking the customary photos we commenced with our descent, which was uneventful. 13,5 hours after having started we were back at High Camp, utterly exhausted.

We ditched our tents late the following morning and descended to camp three, where we stayed for the night. The next morning we received more bad news. A twenty year old Indonesian climber, who was part of another Mountain Trip group consisting of two Indonesians, had collapsed and died twenty minutes away from High Camp, after having summited. We had more or less followed the same schedule as the Indonesians. We saw them every day and had wished them well with their summit attempt. This second death had a sobering effect on our group. It made me think of the renegade whisky priest in Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*:

'His mind was full of a simplified mythology: Michael dressed in armour slew a dragon, and the angels fell through space like comets with beautiful streaming hair because they were jealous, so one of the Fathers had said, of what God intended for men - the enormous privilege of life - this life.'

After a day's rest at camp three, we commenced our descent to base camp at 02h00 in the morning, in order to ensure that we reach the lower glacier before it got too hot. After a grueling walk of nine hours we were back where we started. As a result of bad weather the Otter could not fly in and we spent our seventeenth night on the mountain. We did not really care - Denali had taught us patience. Shortly before flying out the next morning, the mountain bid us farewell with a spectacular avalanche higher up on the glacier. As the Alaska Range grew smaller I reflected on eighteen incredible days. I thought of blizzards and bluebird days, pulling my sled up the mountain, cold hands trying to pitch a tent, laughter in the mess pit, the two deaths, and the feeling of standing on Denali's summit.

Three remaining days were spent in Seward located by the broad fjord of Resurrection Bay. I fished silver salmon and halibut. I saw families of Orcas playing in the bay and I heard the sound of massive chunks of the Aialik glacier falling into the sea. Alaska is a place of unparalleled beauty.

I shall probably never return to Alaska. But Alaska will always be with me. 