

# Infinite Alaskan Adventures

*Will Harris*



*High on Denali's West Buttress.*

*Photo Will Harris*

Those Rucksackers who regularly read the Journal might have noticed a pattern emerging from the stories that I've submitted to the last few editions. Each year another article has detailed another expedition culminating in yet another failure to reach the summit of some far-flung mountain. Happily, this year I've managed to buck the trend, and despite failing to climb the new route we had in mind, my partners and I reached a summit, and via a route that provided plenty of interest. And for once, this year the pence-per-foot-climbed equation came out in my favour, as despite the considerable cost of getting to the Alaskan mountains, our time on Denali along with our ascent of the 2,700m high Infinite Spur combined to give a favourable ratio.

Alaska attract hundreds of climbers each year, all with dreams of summiting its stunning ice-encrusted mountains. Of the 1,500 or so who arrive each season in Talkeetna, the starting point for most Alaskan adventures, around 1,100 attempt to climb Denali, the highest mountain in North America. For the remainder, a blend of steep rock, reliable ice, cold temperatures and 24 hours a day sunlight provide a perfect playground, providing steep technical challenges on the region's lower peaks.

It was with these steep, technical challenges in mind that Ben Silvestre, Pete Graham and I booked our tickets to Alaska for May 2016. Ben and Pete were returning after their successful first ascent of Jezebel, a challenging mountain in Alaska's Revelations, in 2015. For me, this was to be a return match after my trip in 2013 when a 50-hour sleepless mission on Mt Hunter saw my partner and me reach the top of 'Deprivation' on the North Buttress, but not the summit of the mountain. This was to be my first expedition with Ben and Pete, two climbers with a reputation for revelling in the harshness that alpine climbing offers, having earned the nickname of 'the Bivi Brothers' due to the numerous nights that they have spent huddled together without sleeping bags on ledges on some of the world's steepest mountains. With six weeks at our disposal, we were confident that we would have time to ride out the inevitable storms and, with luck, get a chance to climb something worthwhile.

The Alaskan mountains provide some of the most easily accessible 'expedition' climbing in the world. In place of porters, yaks and week-long walk-ins are a fleet of small planes stationed in Talkeetna waiting to whisk climbers off to the glaciers of the nearby mountain ranges. The convenience of being flown from Talkeetna to the base of your chosen mountain means that a trip to climb Denali can comfortably fit into a three-week holiday, with attempts on other mountains squeezable into two weeks or even less. This is undoubtedly attractive to those with conventional jobs with limited holiday allowances. After a flurry of last-minute shopping in Anchorage we drove up to Talkeetna. After our obligatory National Park ranger briefing and a final burger and beer we flew onto the glacier, three days after leaving home.

Our team's first objective was to explore the little-visited Thunder glacier, ten miles south of Denali base camp. We had seen photographs suggesting that this cirque of steep faces might hold potential for unclimbed

technical alpine routes, and with this in mind, we headed in with three weeks of food and supplies to see what we could find. After establishing camp, we set off to explore, seeking suitable lines for our first attempts.

In alpine climbing we often talk of 'objective' danger, meaning the types of risk that cannot be counteracted by good skill or judgement, such as falling rock and ice. One of the dangers often faced is that of serac fall, seracs being ice cliffs formed where hanging glaciers fall over the edge of cliffs. Sadly, we found the Thunder glacier to be awash with both serac fall and loose snow avalanches, greatly limiting the lines that we judged to be justifiable to attempt. The one safe possibility looked to be a steep line of snowed-up rock and ice on the unclimbed north face of Point 9,000ft.

Alarms rang at 3am and we were soon out into the freezing air, post-holing the few hundred metres from our camp to the base of our intended route. After two hundred metres of progressively steepening snow slopes we reached the first steep section of snowy rock-climbing. Using ice axes torqued into cracks and hooking small nicks in the rock we got up this short section, but what we found above was less than promising, deep unconsolidated snow on 80-degree granite slabs. We persevered for another six rope lengths, before it became obvious that the foot-depth of unconsolidated powdery snow was presenting both overly time-consuming, and at times dangerous, climbing conditions. We began to abseil, reaching our tents fifteen hours after we set off.

Failing to reach the top of an intended route is an experience which all climbers will be familiar with, and as you move towards exploratory alpine climbing on big mountains in faraway places the success rate begins to fall further. Pete, Ben and I have all experienced expeditions where we have failed to climb our intended objectives, and sometimes have come home empty-handed altogether. I know of people who have been away on expeditions and failed to reach the bottom of their mountain, or indeed any mountain. The expedition process in itself is hugely rewarding, and this is what keeps people coming back, year after year, regardless of 'success'. With this in mind, we called for a plane to give us a lift across to Denali base camp, from where we would start the second stage of our expedition.

Like most climbers hoping to ascend technical routes on Denali or Foraker we chose to acclimatise on Denali's West Buttress. The relatively low height of most of Alaska's mountains, alongside the convenient fly-in, is a factor that makes a short trip to the range possible, however if you hope to climb on the higher mountains of Foraker (5,304m) or Denali (6,190m) then a sensible approach to acclimatisation must be taken to avoid potentially life-threatening altitude related illnesses. Acclimatising our bodies to deal with higher altitudes involved a process of gradual ascent, with days spent resting at new elevations and return trips to higher altitudes to safely shock our systems into adapting to the lower oxygen levels in our blood caused by lower atmospheric pressure.

Whilst every climber setting foot on Denali or Foraker is well-briefed by the National Park Service about the well-documented need for physical acclimatisation, the need to acclimatise psychologically is often overlooked.



*Attempting a new route from the Thunder glacier.*

*Photo Will Harris*

Climbing alpine-style on big mountains, just you and your partners cast adrift in a vertical world of rock and ice, can be an intimidating experience. By gradually immersing oneself into the mountains the mind becomes ready to accept the challenge ahead. Our trip up the West Buttress eased us gradually into the Alaskan experience, preparing us psychologically to try hard on Foraker.

The vast majority of climbers who come to Alaska do so to ascend Denali by its West Buttress, and we were unsure as to whether we would enjoy joining the hordes, worrying that the crowds would detract from the mountain experience. Instead of being overwhelmed by the number of other people around, we instead enjoyed the social scene, a welcome contrast to the solitary nature of the Thunder glacier and the intensity that we would later find on the Infinite Spur.

Ascending the West Buttress has been described as a high-altitude camping trip, and indeed it does involve a lot of carrying heavy loads uphill and time spent cold camping. To disparage an ascent of the route as ‘only’ winter walking and camping though would be to miss the point. Hauling sleds and carrying heavy loads at altitude is hard work, and I have a huge amount of respect for the people toiling away, often through the harshest of conditions, to attempt to reach the highest summit in North America.

For our purposes, we needed to be acclimatised up to the height of Denali’s 17,000ft camp, and to do this we established a camp at 14,000ft and then made several progressively higher trips up the mountain. We had hoped to have a chance to sneak in a trip up to the summit, but sadly the weather didn’t play ball, and we decided to head back to base camp after our second trip to 17,000ft, in order to give ourselves as much time as possible to wait for a weather window in which to attempt Foraker.



*Acclimatising on Denali, with Foraker in the distance.*

*Photo Will Harris*



*The Author on Infinite Spur, Mt Foraker.*

*Photo Peter Graham*

The Infinite Spur is one of Alaska's biggest routes, taking a direct line up the chaotic South Face of Mt Foraker, soaring 2,700m from the Lacuna glacier to the mountain's south summit. First climbed by Michael Kennedy and George Lowe over eleven days in June 1977, the route has since gained test-piece status. The difficulty of the route lies not only in the technical challenges that it presents but in its committing nature; it would be extremely difficult to retreat from high on the route in case of injury or bad weather, and the descent from the summit is long and complicated. After a flurry of repeat ascents at the turn of the century it had lain untouched, with the exception of the tragically ill-fated attempt to climb the route made by Sue Nott and Karen McNeill in 2006 and an ascent by a Swiss team in 2009. There were suggestions that melting ice may have made the start of the route unclimbable, so it was with some trepidation that we made the ten-hour ski around to its base.

Crossing the bergschrund on an outing like the Infinite Spur can be the hardest move of the route, psychologically if not physically. As will be familiar to many Club members, in the weeks leading up to a hard, committing and potentially dangerous ascent a lot of time is spent considering motivations and envisioning possible outcomes, along with a small amount of soul-searching. Curiously, once a climb is underway I rarely feel the 'hunted' sensation that some climbers describe feeling on big routes. Rather, a total engagement in the process of forcing upwards progress strips away the self-doubt, with total focus replacing pre-route nerves. This process was magnified for me on the Infinite Spur, the biggest climb of my life so far loomed large in my thoughts in the weeks and months leading up to our trip, during the endless training sessions and sleep-disturbed basecamp nights. It was a great relief to start climbing.

By the end of the first day on the Spur we had reached a lower-angled section of snow where we hoped to dig a small ledge to camp on. Up to this point we had ascended around 700m of steep snow and rock, now fully immersed in the climbing. After constructing our reasonable ledge, we put up our two-person tent and piled inside. After a much-needed rehydrated meal we lay down to sleep at around 8:30pm, only to feel the ledge slowly collapse and the ropes tying us to the slope become tighter. After a change of tactics and a few hours sitting in the tent on what was left of our ledge we opted to give up the false pretence of sleep. We were back outside with bags packed and tent away by 2am.

The next day turned into a gruelling example of when alpine climbing feels like hard work, 24 hours of steep snow, rock and ice. From freezing cold steep rock pitches to sun-baked snow slopes we headed up the 1,000m that we knew we would need to ascend before finding the next possible place to pitch a tent. At 1am the following morning we arrived at a steep ridge and began digging; excavating a platform big enough for our tent, giving one of the most thrilling camp sites around.

There is always a balance to be struck on big alpine routes, carrying enough food and equipment to give a margin of safety, but not so much to make sacks too heavy to climb with. To save weight we had brought the



*First bivvy on the Infinite Spur.*

*Photo Ben Silvestre*



*Pete on the notoriously loose black band.*

*Photo Ben Silvestre*



smallest single-skin tent available, along with two sleeping bags between the three of us, zipping these together to make a blanket under which we huddled. We equally cut down on the amount of food that we would carry, taking five days' worth, which we could stretch to seven if we were forced to sit out bad weather.

Halfway through the second day on the route we were overtaken by two friends of ours, Colin Haley and Rob Smith, on their way to making a blisteringly-fast single-push ascent of the route. They chose to carry no bivvy gear and very little food, staking everything on their ability to keep moving fast with tiny rucksacks. This was pretty awe-inspiring stuff, showing how far the light and fast ethos can be pushed. Even more mind-blowing was that Colin went back to solo the route a few days later, once again cementing his reputation as one of my generation's best alpinists. Carrying no ropes, climbing protection, bivvy gear, and almost no food, it's hard to



*18 hours into our second day on the Spur.*

*Photo Ben Silvestre*



*Descending the Sultana Ridge.*

*Photo Ben Silvestre*

emphasise just how committing an ascent this was, particularly as the tricky Scottish Grade VI crux pitches would be very difficult to down-climb. On his second ascent, the weather didn't play ball, leading to an epic stormbound descent with little food or water, from which I gather Colin felt lucky to survive.

By day three on the route we could smell the distinctive odour of our bodies beginning to eat themselves, energy created by breaking down muscle and fat used to supplement the 2,000 calories a day that we were carrying. Another 1,000m of ascent on gradually shallowing snow and icefields led upwards, and by that evening we were high on the summit ridge, staring into the distance at the endless mountains to the south and the vast tundra to the west. A realisation of the raw beauty of our surroundings brought tears to our eyes. After 2,800m of climbing we were feeling battered but knew that we still had a long way to go down. We savoured the briefest of stops on the summit then began our descent of the Sultana Ridge, setting up what we hoped would be our final camp a few hours later.

The descent from Foraker is in itself an alpine climb, involving a traverse of several sub-summits forming the Sultana Ridge, with over 600m of ascent. The good weather that had accompanied us on the Spur continued as we traversed these sub-peaks, but as we summited Mt Crosson, the final point from which we would descend back to camp, conditions became distinctly 'Scottish'. We were now blindly following our compass down 50-degree snow and ice slopes in near white-out conditions, a nerve fraying experience at the best of times. Pete plunged through a snow bridge, ending up dangling from the rope inside a crevasse, luckily extracting himself uninjured. We were relieved to drop out of the snow clouds and onto the mountain's lower face, only to encounter waist-deep wallowing in snow that was yet to refreeze. We pitched our tent for one last time and climbed in at 2am, setting our alarms for three hours later.

Up and away by 5:30, the snow had frozen a little, although we were still sinking up to our knees. A final 400m of descent put us down on the Kahiltna glacier, a mere three miles from our tents. As the last of the snow began to clear we were treated to a sunny wade across the glacier, threading in and out of crevasses. By this point we were spent, digging deep to get back to camp safely. We shared our last scraps of food, Pete giving me his final energy gel, an act of kindness made all the more significant by the worn-out state of our bodies after uncountable hours of hard work. Four hours later we collapsed into our tents.

Back in base camp we were happy to begin to compensate for the days of calorie deficit inflicted on our bodies, gorging on the tastiest of our treats and gleefully attacking the last of our whisky supplies. Having left skis near the base of the Spur, however, meant that the sentiment that it's not over till it's over proved true once again. My feet were very sore from the descent, so Pete and Ben very kindly offered to collect my skis with their own. An abortive attempt to collect skis on a sunny afternoon was quickly abandoned after Pete endured a second crevasse fall, with a night-time

collection booked for round two. This was more successful, but with unfrozen snow, and later white-out conditions, this descended into a full-on suffer-fest. After a two-day wait for clear skies we were flown back to Talkeetna, to burgers and beers and all of the comforts of civilisation, feeling fully sated by our alpine experience.

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*Climbing through the Alaskan night.*

*Photo Ben Silvestre*