

Alaska

Will Harris



Mt Francis as seen from Mt Hunter's north buttress.

Photo Will Harris

In May Aly Robertson and I headed out to Alaska for our first trip to the big mountains. We had been talking about trying something a bit further afield for a while, and when Aly realised that he had a four-week gap before his final year studying medicine began we jumped into action. Grant applications were sent off, gear companies were badgered and websites, guidebooks and magazines were scoured for useful information. We quickly realised that it is logistically easy to get to the climbing in Alaska, just a few plane flights and you find yourself stood on the Kahiltna glacier, which is like an Argentière basin on steroids. We were blessed with a very stable high-pressure weather system whilst we were away, but the downside of this was unseasonably warm weather which forced us to cut our trip short. The locals that we spoke to seemed to agree that we got late-June temperatures in May, hence the ice falling down at a depressing rate towards the end of our trip.

After a winter spent training in all of the usual places (Chamonix, the Ben, Kinder Downfall, Dovestones Quarry) I felt ready for action. Unfortunately the weather in Chamonix this winter was extremely snowy, so far more time was spent sliding around on skis than climbing north faces, but a few routes were ticked along the way (including some great days out with Rucksackers Robin Illingworth, Phil Smith and Mark Jennesson). Aly's comment as we got on the plane that the last time he had swung an ice-axe was two years ago on the north face of the Droites did not comfort me, but then he has an annoying habit of making climbing look easy. He seems to spend much of his time repeating E-hard bold trad-routes, but had the decency to look at least concerned, if not scared, twice on our trip, so showing that he has an almost human sense of fear after all.

After a very tiring couple of days flying in to Anchorage and buying all of the food and supplies we needed for the trip we found ourselves in Talkeetna, and then swiftly deposited onto the Kahiltna glacier by our Talkeetna Air-Taxi pilot. The scenery on the flight in was awe-inspiring, the rock architecture in the Ruth gorge is breathtaking and the mountains stretch away for a seemingly endless distance. The first views of the North Buttress of Hunter elicited manic nervous giggling – the mountains look big and steep when you step off the plane onto the glacier for the first time.

We found an unoccupied spot in which to make camp for the next week or three, and then had a ski around to check out conditions. There was a really friendly scene in basecamp, with lots of keen people willing to share information on routes and pass the time chatting.



Team at camp with the North Buttress behind.

Photo Will Harris



Mt Francis summit ridge.

Photo Aly Robertson

Our first objective was the south-west ridge of Mt Francis. This small by Alaskan standards peak was a perfect warm up for the size of things to come, and despite being a fixture on the basecamp day route circuit still boasts 1,100m of vertical height gain between the ‘schrund and the summit.

The climbing was on generally moderate snow slopes, with a few pitches of excellent rock and mixed climbing up to 5.8 (UK ‘VS’-ish) thrown in to maintain interest. We found the route in OK condition, but did a lot of trail-breaking/post-holing. One mixed pitch contained some of the worst sugar-like unconsolidated snow I’ve ever had the displeasure to climb, and it looked like it was going to turn into a bit of an epic if that continued, but luckily the grimness was short-lived. The guidebook time for the round trip is 12 to 20 hours, so we were pleased to do it in 12 hours considering the time-consuming snow conditions. All in all, an excellent, fun introduction to climbing in Alaska, and one that I would highly recommend.

Bacon and Eggs

After a rest day we jumped on the modern classic 'Bacon and Eggs', on the Mini-Mini Moonflower Butte. This gave 300m of excellent ice climbing up to around WI4+ to the final snow slopes. We decided to turn around at the snow slopes (which seems to be the done thing) as we didn't fancy the deep powdery snow on 60-degree ice, nor the massive cornice guarding the exit onto the ridge. Massive cornices seem to be a feature of the Alaskan mountains, and poking them with an ice-axe seemed like a really bad idea to us. The car-sized chunks of fallen cornice found at the base of the Mini-Moonflower North Couloir played a significant part in us choosing not to climb that particular route.



Perfect ice.

Photo Aly Robertson

The climbing on Bacon and Eggs was similar to that found on routes like the Modica-Noury on the East Face of Mont Blanc du Tacul, but without the crowds (or the burgers and beer in town afterwards). A couple of pitches of fairly unpleasant grey ice provided access to six pitches of awesome single-stick blue ice, through some impressive rock buttresses. A fast descent on Abolokov threads saw us back at our skis incredibly psyched for more of the same. We skied back down to the tents, picking out line after line of cool-looking steep ice and mixed (some unclimbed) on the Mini-Mini, Mini and Moonflower Buttresses.

Deprivation

Mark Twight's book 'Extreme Alpinism' has been required reading for this generation of Alpinists, and in it he details his ascent of Deprivation on Mt Hunter. When Aly suggested a trip to Alaska this was the route that instantly sprang to mind. Research showed the route to have reasonable climbing on a scale that we could comprehend. Other parties who had climbed or attempted it in the past kindly shared information about the route, all agreeing that it would make for a great experience. We set off to Alaska armed with laminated topos and bucket's loads of psyche to get on the route.

Feeling warmed-up and with a good weather-window we decided to get on it, crossing the 'schrund at around 5am. Our initial plan to skip part of the route and start up a variation to the Moonflower were discarded as we followed obvious ice runnels for several hundred metres up to the crux pitches on Deprivation. We had been told that the pitches were out, having turned around a strong American team a few days earlier. Where they saw melted-out ice we saw a possible free/aid/mixed/frigging pitch, which looked to me like the end of my block of leading and the start of Aly's. He spent a couple of hours on one of the most impressive leads I have witnessed in the mountains, including a couple of moves spent using his picks as hooks in a shallow crack, with a prussik draped over the top of the pick which he then stood in.

I frigged my way up on second, pulling Aly's sack with me. He led another short, steep pitch, and I then took over for a 60m rope-stretcher up steep ice to a gently overhanging exit. Pulling over onto the first icefield we knew that the technical crux was now behind us, with lots of reasonably moderate Alpine ice above. We dug a small ledge in a snow patch and spent a couple of hours melting snow and eating, having already been climbing for around ten and a half hours and aware that we had much more to go.

We set off at 7pm, in still stable weather, quickly covering the first icefield. We paused at the base of the ice ramps through the second rock band to listen to the weather report on our radio – more sunny stable weather forecast. Shortly after that it began to snow lightly, which continued for the next ten to twelve hours. Cue spindrift avalanches and a fairly grim and intimidating few hours pitching moderate ice where we would have moved together had we been fresh and climbing through a sunny Alpine morning. We found out when we got back to camp that the snow had

flushed teams off the Stump/Bibler-Klewin 'Moonflower' route, but we just about kept things together on Deprivation (which channels snow to a lesser extent) and cracked on.

We climbed through the night to stay warm, not that we saw any good places to bivvy. We climbed without head-torches, and 'dawn' saw us finding our way through the third rock band and pitching the easier-angled snow slopes across to the third ice band on the Bibler-Klewin Moonflower route. Here we found a good bivvy ledge chopped into a snow arête, finally coming to rest 26 hours after beginning our climb. We spent five hours on the ledge, two sleeping and the rest melting snow and eating.

Feeling fairly refreshed we continued up the Bibler-Klewin route, climbing the 'Bibler/Come Again' exit through the fourth and final rock band. At this point we decided that we didn't fancy climbing more 50-degree ice slopes up to the cornice at the top of the buttress proper, and began rappelling. It took us nine eventful hours to rap back to our skis. A particular highlight for me was prusiking 60m up a very frozen iceline through a waterfall to free a rope that had frozen into place.

On our penultimate rappel the tail of our falling rope wrapped around a flake. Unable to get up to the flake, we were left with one rope for a final 20m rappel down to the snow slope above the 'schrund'. We then dug a snow bollard to see us over the 'schrund' and onto the 50m-high snow slopes back to our skis. Unfortunately the entire 2m wide snow bollard collapsed as I was rappelling over the overhung bergschrund, causing me to fall four or five metres onto the snow slope, which I then rolled down. Through incredible luck I found myself uninjured, wrapped in the rope which had coiled around me as I log-rolled down the slope, ice-axes and crampons still attached. I can remember feeling surprised and oddly disappointed as the accident happened, and came round feeling dazed and overwhelmingly tired (we had been climbing for around 50 hours, with two hours sleep in that time). I dusted myself off, sorted out the rope and climbed back up to throw the rope over the bergschrund to a concerned looking Aly, still stranded above. He caught the thrown rope, found a peg placement and joined me on the snow slopes. The ski back to camp was thankfully uneventful. In retrospect, it would have been better for us to have climbed the extra 200m up snow slopes to the cornice bivvy, slept and rested for a few hours, and then rappelled the buttress.

Deprived of success?

We did not summit Mt Hunter, and this has to be the gold standard for completing routes on the mountain. Historically most teams have finished at the top of the buttress, either where we did at the top of the fourth rock band or at the cornice bivvy 200m above this. Mugs Stump claimed the first ascent of the North Buttress, finishing level with where we chose to turn around, yet this claim has been contested by those who see a route as finishing at the mountain's summit. Some will see our climb as an attempt, as we finished below the summit of the mountain, and I would accept this. I'm happy that we climbed a big, steep north-facing buttress to a place

where it felt logical for us to turn around, and had a pretty intense experience in doing so. I learnt a lot from the climb, and intend to put that knowledge to good use in the future.

We spent a few days recovering on the glacier enjoying the sunny weather. An attempt to retrieve our stuck rope was abandoned when we were greeted by a sagging, overhung bergschrund running with water. We knew that soaring unseasonable temperatures meant that the ice was done for the year, so flew out for breakfast at the Roadhouse cafe and a fun night of beers at the Fairview inn. A few days sport-climbing and wildlife-watching saw us safely on the plane back to the UK.

When we got back to Internet access I picked up a message on Facebook with details of a possible expedition to the Charakusa Valley in Pakistan in Summer 2014. A week after getting back to the UK Mt Hunter feels like half a lifetime ago, and it's time to get excited about the next trip.

A massive thank-you to everyone who supported our trip. The BMC and Alpine Club gave generous grants, and both cragxclimbing.com and Arc'teryx/ Bigstone UK provided excellent gear at reduced rates. Bloc eyewear provided us with goggles.

Alaska Beta

We flew onto the glacier with Talkeetna Air-Taxis, who fly the vast majority of climbers out there. They were really friendly and helpful, and have a free bunkhouse in Talkeetna. They have more planes than the other companies and fly in worse weather. Flights onto the glacier cost around £400.

In Anchorage we stayed at the Arctic Adventure Hostel. The owners were very friendly, and the hostel is ideally located within walking distance of a massive Walmart and the two excellent outdoor shops AMH and REI. This was the cheapest hostel we could find at \$24 a night, but was clean, comfortable and the price included all the pancakes and syrup you could eat. Highly recommended.

For shopping use Walmart, REI and AMH. Sportsmans Warehouse was recommended to us as a place for cheap camping gear, but it's probably not worth the taxi ride from a mountaineering trip point of view, although it is an amazing place to ogle Americans buying massive guns whilst surrounded by stuffed animals.

The sport-climbing at Mile 88/Wiener Lake is well worth a visit, excellent steep granite-ish sport-climbing. You will need a car to get there. The sport-climbing on the Seward Highway is considerably worse.