

Denali (Mount McKinley)

On the 8th May 2010, Club Member Andy Hewison, set off to Alaska on an expedition to climb North America's highest mountain - Denali (also known as Mount McKinley).

With an altitude of 20,320ft (6,194m) Denali is situated 150 miles to the north of Anchorage in the Alaska Range, close to the Arctic Circle.

Despite its fearsome and well-justified reputation for bad weather, the mountain draws climbers from all over the world. However, it is wise not to underestimate the undertaking, as Denali is a very big mountain, offering an experience more akin to the larger Himalayan giants. Dealing with the commitment, physical endurance, altitude and Arctic cold and storms, provides an incredible challenge. Also known as the "coldest mountain on earth" it is common for temperatures to be minus 40 degrees Celsius at night.

The team of 13 including Andy and all of their food and equipment to survive the next 3 weeks were flown onto the Kahiltna Glacier by ski plane "an amazing experience in itself" said Andy "we flew very close to the mountains and through "one shot pass" as it is aptly named, before dropping swiftly out of the sky to land on the compact snow of the glacier at base camp".



The last push to 14,000ft camp

The next 14 days were spent 'Load Hauling' from Base Camp to "High Camp" at 17,200 feet. Up to 14,200 feet the team used sleds and their 100 litre rucksacks to move all of their food and equipment up the mountain. "We were carrying heavy loads often 65 to 70 lbs on our backs whilst dragging 50lbs on our sleds and after 10,000 feet the oxygen in the air starts to decrease making it even more challenging". "The weather was generally kind to us although the first 2 days were a whiteout with visibility often down to a few metres. Temperatures were in the range of 5 degrees Celsius to minus 25 degrees in the day and in the tent at night it was usually colder than minus 10.

Even though it was so cold the sun was very intense and several of us got burnt and blistered lips and noses, we had to wear sunglasses inside the tents as it was so bright.”



“The edge of the earth” viewpoint at 14,000ft

After reaching “High Camp” at 17,200 feet the team waited 2 days before making an attempt on the summit, this allowed them time to rest, acclimatise further (at this height oxygen levels are 45% of what they are at sea level) and also provided a better weather window. (Previous groups had waited 5 and 7 days at High Camp but couldn’t progress further due to high winds). On the 25th of May with good weather predicted and clear skies overhead the decision was taken to attempt the summit so the group set off at 10:15 am. At 20:30 the first team of 4 including Andy reached the summit, by now the wind was blowing, visibility was low, it was snowing at the temperatures were down to minus 30 degrees. But they had done it and were now standing on the summit at 20,320 feet and the highest point in the whole of North America. After 30 minutes at the summit allowing time for the compulsory photos and for the other teams to catch up, the group headed back to the tents at High Camp, arriving nearly 6 hours later, (overall an epic of a summit day at 16 hours).



The summit of Denali (20,320ft)

The next 2 days were spent travelling back down the mountain where they retrieved 2 caches of food and equipment on the way, this again made the packs and sleds heavy and on the down hill the sled “has a mind of its own”. Snow bridges over the crevasses on the lower glacier were very soft making it very difficult to travel even short distances without sinking into the snow, but they all made it back to base camp safely where a final night was spent before they flew off the glacier back to civilisation the next day.



On top of “Washburn’s Thumb” 16,500ft, on the way down

Andy said "It felt great to have a shower, shave and wear clean clothes for the first time in 3 weeks and the first beer tasted pretty good to. Despite getting frost bite in 3 fingers (they are recovering very well now) and losing 9lbs in weight it was an amazing experience, not only on the mountain but in Alaska itself".

So what is next everyone always asks "I'd like to climb in the Himalaya in Nepal or go to Antarctica, if my wife lets me!"