

# Vinson Massif

by Atte Miettinen

**Weather** had delayed our flight from Punta Arenas in southern Chile to Antarctica by several days, so when the time finally arrived to go, the entire expedition team was excited to board an Ilyushin cargo plane, leased from an airline in Kazakhstan.

In the plane's cargo hold was a Motley Crue of researchers, mountain climbers and people looking to ski the last degree to the South Pole, to celebrate the centenary of Roald Amundsen reaching the South Pole on 14.12.1911. In addition, right behind our seats was a giant snow cat vehicle, which we hoped would stay still – otherwise it would turn us into snow-cat food.

Our flight took off just before midnight and just 4.5 hours later we landed on the blue-ice runway at Union Glacier, some 1000km from the South Pole.

Antarctica enjoys 24-hour sunlight during this part of the year, so it looked like middle of the day, despite us arriving at 0430 in the morning. The views all around us were stunning!

We spent only a few hours at Union Glacier before a small Twin Otter plane flew us into Vinson Base Camp, located at 2140m altitude, from which we would start our climb towards the summit of Vinson Massif, the highest mountain on Antarctica.

Due to the amount of gear and food we need for the expedition, we made two trips to each camp; first a "load carry" taking roughly half the gear on an up-and-back trip and then the next day, another trip with the remaining gear.

This process of "climbing high and sleeping low" also helps our bodies to acclimatize i.e. getting used to the lower amount of oxygen in the air at higher altitudes. At 5000m altitude, the amount of oxygen is roughly half of the amount at sea-level, so for every breath of air you take at sea-level, at 5000m you need to do it twice, which makes even simple tasks a bit harder.

The first load carry was straightforward; we used

backpacks and sleds to move the gear to Camp 1, located at 2900m.

Vinson Massif is riddled with crevasses so whenever moving we followed glacier travel guidelines, which means everyone wears harnesses and roped up in three-person teams. The idea is that if any of the climbers slip on a steep ridge or fall through a crevasse, the other two should be able to arrest the fall.

Lady luck seemed to be on our side as the weather was great all day – on Antarctica that means sunshine and low winds, but very low temperatures, which often reach -35 degrees centigrade and even lower!

The loads were not too bad either – I had spent endless hours climbing the stairs of my 55 floor apartment building in Dubai Marina with a 25kg backpack in preparation for this trip and I was finally feeling the payoff.

The round trip, with only a short stop at Camp 1 to dig a hole in the snow and cache our gear and food, took 9.5 hours.

Despite the relatively easy day, I got a reminder to stay switched on. Moving in the snow with a heavy load, your body heats up quickly, so you need to adjust your layers. However, you also need to add layers whenever stopping to trap the heat and avoid your body cooling down, which at subzero temperatures can happen very fast.

Wearing heavy gloves, I got my hands sweaty whilst pulling the sled, which meant when the gloves came off they got very cold as soon as we stopped – a dangerous reminder that doesn't need to be repeated.

Heading to bed shortly after midnight I saw the first sign of Antarctica's attack on me: I had sunburn on my face and lips – thanks to the ever-present sun as well as the snow and ice reflecting the rays!

The following day we packed rest of our gear, including the tents, and made the move to Camp 1. Despite the heavier loads, thanks to the acclimatization from the previous day's climb, we moved faster and reached the camp in just over five hours – almost an hour faster than earlier.

At the camp, it took us three hours to build a sheltering wall for our tents to protect them from strong winds and storms, which are common and unpredictable on Antarctica. To do this, we needed to literally saw blocks of ice and snow off the ground to create a Lego-block like wall.

During the wall-building exercise we discovered that our tents were going to be pitched on top of smaller crevasses, as nervous as we were the silver lining in the cloud was that the air conditioning was sorted out!

The next morning, we continued with a load carry to Camp 2, located at 3800m. The route followed a steep ridge that's exposed to Antarctica's unforgiving elements. Fortunately, we had fixed ropes, so we used ascenders to pull ourselves up the steep incline.

At Camp 2 it was very cold, therefore we quickly cached our gear and headed back down to Camp 1 – finishing the round trip in ten hours.

Back at Camp 1, our guides Mike and Chris prepared

a Thanksgiving dinner. Although I was not celebrating the holiday like my American teammates, I was thankful for the salami starters as well as the chicken dinner with mashed potatoes and vegetables – a gourmet delight!

The following day was a rest-day. We spent it eating and chillaxing with most people plugged to their iPods – showing how technology is penetrating even the most extreme locations!

The next day, we packed up our camp once again and headed up the now familiar ridge – again moving a bit faster than before as we were all well rested and better acclimatized.

Our daily weather report brought positive news with the forecast suggesting that the great weather we had been enjoying would continue for another 48 hours. Great weather on Antarctica is not common, so we made a decision to take advantage of the weather window and push for the summit the very next day.

Summit day was the first time when our three rope teams struggled to stay together as a few of the climbers began to experience problems. However, after adjusting the teams, we managed to keep a good pace and shortly after 1600, seven hours since we had started, my team reached the top. Just 30 minutes later all of our three teams were standing on the roof of Antarctica!

Exhilarated but short of breath, we soaked up Antarctica's stunning views for 30-45 mins in -30C before heading back down – remembering that the summit is just half way!

Reaching the summit always gives you a boost of energy, so we had a spring in our step that took us to our camp in just three hours. Freezing, most of us headed straight to the warmth of the sleeping bags and were fast asleep by the time dinner was ready.

Despite the long summit day, we got up early and began our almost 1700 vertical meter descent to Vinson Base Camp. My rope team led the way down and we managed to keep a very good pace, stopping just long enough to dig up our cache before continuing onwards and downwards.

On arriving at Vinson Base Camp, we dug up the last cache, pitched our kitchen tent and cooked some food. The mood was terrific with excited chatter punctuated with laughter while waiting for a Twin Otter to come and take us back to Union Glacier, where our expedition had started about a week and a half ago.

Eight hours later, the Twin Otter touched down and 45 minutes later we walked into

the heated mess tent at Union Glacier. We had hoped lady luck was still with us and we would have an immediate return flight to Punta Arenas, but apparently she was too busy with someone else and the weather intervened again. We were stuck at Union Glacier for two further nights before news arrived that the familiar Ilyushin was on its way to pick us up.

Climbing into the Ilyushin after 11 days on Antarctica led to mixed feelings; I felt privileged to be in one of the last untouched wildernesses of the world but at the same time, heading back to civilization and luxuries like a real bed felt good.

Once on board, I along with many others, fell straight to sleep only to wake up when the plane's tyres hit the runway in Punta Arenas, Chile. From the tarmac it was straight to a hotel for a warm shower, first one in two weeks, a shave, as well as some room service before resting for a few hours ahead of a final, celebratory dinner, with the expedition team.

Climbing Vinson Massif is a rare treat! The summit has been reached by only 1,000 mountaineers, compared to for example over 3,000 people that have summited Mount Everest.

However, as the evening progressed, I found my thoughts starting to shift towards the next of my Seven Summits, the 6962 metre Cerro Aconcagua in Argentina, where I'd be heading in just a week's time.

ATTE MIETTINEN

