

A COOL FINISH!

Atte completes the 7 Summits challenge

Less than two weeks after returning from Mount Everest, I was back on a plane. My destination was Alaska and North America's highest mountain, Denali, also known as Mount McKinley.

The climbing season on Denali starts in late April and ends essentially at the end of June, so I had little choice but the short rest after Everest, as I wanted to climb Denali and complete my Seven Summits in 2012.

I was climbing Denali with Alaska Mountaineering School (AMS), one of just six companies licensed to guide climbers on the mountain. I chose AMS because it gave me a chance to team up with Mike Hamill, with whom I had climbed on Antarctica last year and who was also my guide on Everest, although he got sick and failed to summit.

The AMS team for the expedition consisted of eight people; two guides Mike and Alex as well as six clients, including me. For most of my teammates, Denali would be the biggest mountain they had ever been on, so there was a sense of nervousness within the team as we reviewed and prepared our gear.

Depending on the weather, an expedition to Denali can take anywhere from two to



Words: Atte Miettinen



ON THE COVER

Atte is a climber originally from Finland and is currently taking on the Seven Summits. Refer to our December 2011 issue and learn more about him in our people section.

three weeks and given re-supply is not possible, we prepared for the worst case scenario and packed food for 21 days. This meant that between my backpack and a sled that I would be pulling, I had about 150 pounds to haul up the mountain.

Our expedition started with a bush-plane flight from Talkeetna, a small town a few hours north of Anchorage, to the glacier on the evening of June 11th. However, the mountain made it clear right away that the last of my Seven Summits was not going to be easy. Moments after landing, bad weather closed in and we were forced to set up camp before even taking our first step in snowshoes!

We were stuck at base camp for almost 30 hours before the weather cleared enough for us to put on our snowshoes and backpacks as well as attach our sleds and start moving. We were travelling during the early hours of the night in order to benefit from the colder temperatures, which freeze snow bridges that have developed over crevasses, therefore reducing our risk of falling into the deadly cracks, which are created by the continuous movement of the glacier.

We were using snowshoes, which are designed to distribute the weight of the person to help them "float" on top of the snow as well as moving in two four-person rope teams in order to make sure that there would always be three people to arrest a fall in case anyone would break through a snow bridge and fall into a crevasse or slip in any of the steep ridges we would need to navigate.

We made good progress after leaving the Base Camp and reached Camp 1 at 2,380 m in just a few hours. Then we spent a couple of hours setting up camp, digging the tents as deep into the snow as possible to protect them from strong winds as well as establishing toilet facilities, which basically means digging a deep hole for a bucket that we would carry with us throughout the expedition, and building some walls from snow or ice around it.

Later we enjoyed dinner at noon and went to bed in the early afternoon after a full day's



work to make sure we would be ready to go again shortly after midnight!

During the night, a Japanese climber came to our camp and asked if he could use our satellite phone. He told us that a Japanese team had been caught by an avalanche, and four out of five climbers in the team were now missing and presumed dead. This climber was from another team, but wanted to make sure his family knew that he was OK when the news broke. I could easily put myself in his shoes.

After a night at Camp 1, we prepared our backpacks and sleds for a load carry to Camp 2. We basically have so much gear and supplies that carrying and pulling everything, especially in steep terrain, is not only very difficult but also very dangerous. Therefore, instead of moving everything at once, we carried half the gear up, cache it in a snow hole and return to the lower camp for the night and then take the rest of the gear and supplies up the next day.

The day after the load carry, we moved to Camp 2 and this also meant switching back into a normal day schedule as we had passed the most dangerous crevasse area.

Camp 2 is situated in between three ridges and feels like a well sheltered place, but the rangers searching for the bodies of the still missing four Japanese climbers caught in an avalanche just 100 m from the camp was a stark reminder that even if something looks safe on Denali, it probably isn't.

We ended up spending an extra day at Camp 2 due to another snowstorm, but



this eventually died and enabled us to do a load carry and move up the following day. We picked up our cache and headed to a well-known place on the mountain called Windy Corner.

The Windy Corner is famous for having regular rock fall and hence, Mike wanted us to move quickly through the danger zone. However, we were also traversing a steep ridge, which meant that our sleds would either slide or roll downhill pulling us sideways off the mountain. With a lot of weight in my sled, I had several close calls but managed to stay on my feet. However, I felt that the heavy sleds were more dangerous than the potential risk of rock fall.

Fortunately, lady luck smiled at us in Camp 3. Two AMS expeditions on their descent stopped by and told us that they had cached so much food and supplies in camp 4 that we could skip the planned load carry, winning a crucial day as forecasts suggested bad weather was moving in again.

Therefore on June 21st, we left all our extra gear behind and headed towards Camp 4. En route, we passed a place where a German climber had slid to his death earlier this season and I also kept an eye on The Orient, a near-by ridge on which a Finnish climber/skier had lost his life just a week before we



TRAVEL + ADVENTURE

set off.

The weather was great and we made good time, reaching our high camp at 5,175 m in the early afternoon. We set up camp, ate dinner and squeezed into our sleeping bags to get as much sleep ahead of our summit push as possible. I fell asleep thinking that my Seven Summits dream, which once felt so distant, was just 24 hours away from being fulfilled.

The next morning, June 22nd, we set off for the summit at around 09:00. Mike estimated that we would take 8 to 9 hours to reach the summit and another 4 to 5 hours to descend, so it was going to be a long day.

I had felt great throughout the entire expedition, probably thanks to spending two months on Everest, and the summit day was no different. At 16:25, after just over seven hours of climbing, I took the last step towards the 6,196 m summit of Denali, North America's highest mountain as well as my Seven Summits dream, joining a group of just 350 people that have stood on all the highest mountains of each continent, as the first person from my native Finland.

As my rope team was taking summit photos, our second rope team reached the summit – making us the first AMS expedition of the season with the entire team summiting the mountain!

I spent an hour on the summit before we unceremoniously turned around and started our descent. I felt like running down, but due to some tired legs in the team, we moved slowly but safely, reaching the camp at around 22:00. Although everyone was happy, there were no big celebrations, everyone simply ate their dinner and squeezed into their sleeping bags.

The next morning we got up early and started our descent. We moved at a pretty good pace and were almost at Camp 1 when, Joe, a British climber on the rope between Mike and me punched through a snow bridge into a crevasse. However, only one of his legs went through and with the safety rope also doing its job, Joe avoided injury and got a great story to tell his mates once his adrenaline levels returned to normal!

At Camp 1, we slept for just three hours before continuing to Base Camp, hoping that we would avoid further punch-throughs by moving at night. We arrived at Base Camp without any more surprises and my thoughts were already shifting to the menus of the restaurants in Talkeetna, but the mountain wasn't quite done with us yet.

Bad weather closed in again and we ended up waiting for three nights before the weather cleared enough for the ski-equipped bush-plane to land, pick us up and fly us back to civilization.

The three days at Base Camp gave me a lot of time to think about new projects...and consider how lucky I have been to be able to pursue my Seven Summits dream and complete it!



OVERBOARD

waterproof technology case series 



Great For



Features

100% Waterproof

Protect your gadgets and valuables from water and sand.

Submersible upto 6m



Arm Pack

Camera Case

Ipad Case

MP3 Case

Phone Case

Available at: **Go Sport** in Ibn Batutta, Mirdif City Center, Mall of Emirates, **Intersport** in Times square, DFC, **Picnico** in Jumeirah. **Adventure HQ** in Time square. **Act Marine JBR.***