

THE LOVE OF HIGH PLACES

CLIMBING DENALI WITH ALASKA MOUNTAINEERING SCHOOL



Dave 16 Ridge

BY LISA MALONEY

ON CLEAR DAYS, 20,237-foot Denali presides over every curve of the road into Talkeetna—not a skyscraper spearing into the sky, but a sprawling massif that makes its own weather and offers views of the distant ocean for those lucky enough to reach either of its summits. You can't see the tiny figures of climbers on the mountain, but in May and June there may be hundreds of them at a time, all vying for a few minutes atop one of the most unpredictable mountains in the world.

Something else you can't see, at least from a distance, is Alaska Mountaineering School. Of the six guide services that currently hold a National Park Service concession to guide on Denali, AMS is the only operation with its year-round headquarters in the heart of Talkeetna, right at the feet of the mountain. As the old adage goes, it's all about location, location, location.

In the mountain's shadow

Every so often, somebody—usually a visitor from out of state—wanders into the AMS office with questions about “hiking” Denali. If co-owners Caitlin Palmer and Colby Coombs share a private chuckle at such queries, there was no trace of it on Palmer's face as we stood outside the AMS office on a sunny afternoon in late May.

She'd just finished showing me around the AMS compound—a tidy little cottage and patio for an office, backed by a food room that's bigger and better organized than Martha Stewart's pantry; a garage-like space with round, department-store racks of puffy cold-weather gear and shelves of big blue plastic tubs, each holding gear sorted by type and size; and a tented-over plaza of sorts, with ropes dangling from the sturdy frame to facilitate a little extra hands-on practice with technical skills like knot-tying and ascending a fixed line.

We stopped the interview briefly so that Palmer could visit with a good friend, an older man who'd just pedaled up on his bike. Talkeetna is like that but, more to the point, Palmer and Coombs are like that, and their hands-on management style sets the tone for all of AMS. After all, once you get past the basics of survival and the fearsome logistics involved in climbing a mountain like Denali, two things color your expedition time more than anything else: The food you eat and the company you keep.

Palmer, 44, is calm, quietly confident, and athletic, with a bone-deep dose of the passion for teaching that makes AMS a bonafide school instead of “just” a guide service bent on getting you to the top. Although she worked for years as a mountain guide, she now focuses on the business end of the operation—“I am having a good time steering the ship,” she said with a smile.

Meanwhile Coombs, 48, handles the operations side, guiding trips, training guides and running the small AMS retail shop in Talkeetna. They make it a point to get Coombs on Denali at least one a year—in fact, when I visited AMS Coombs was on Denali,

guiding a blind client through the ascent. “It's nice to have the owner on the mountain,” Palmer said. “It's really important for all the guides.”

A new mission every day

“They put an emphasis on every day you accomplish something, and you focus on that day. They don't say ‘we'll get you to the top.’ That's not what it's about,” explained Dave Kestner, a long-time AMS client who'd just come down from a successful summit trip via Denali's West Buttress. Kestner didn't summit on his first attempt with AMS last year, despite spending eight days in high camp waiting for an opening—but he still describes his experience as phenomenal because of how the guides handled the trip.

“The mountain's always going to be there, and she's not going to let you climb her when she doesn't want to be climbed,” he said over coffee. Kestner likened the climbing process to creating a flight plan for a single-engine plane: You always leave yourself an escape route, just in case something doesn't go as planned. “If you climb looking for a reason not to make it to the top, and you make it [anyway], you did it safely,” Kestner said.

Meanwhile, what the guides and expedition members say, do, act—even how they smell—makes the difference between a fulfilling expedition (summit or not) and a miserable slog. Every person I spoke to echoed Kestner's opinion of Palmer, Coombs and the guides they hire: “[They're] safe, patient and extremely friendly,” he said, adding that they tend to be well-educated and well-rounded, with a great sense of humor. “Their ability to communicate about things other than climbing... it's so refreshing.”

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More than Denali

During peak season, AMS is home to flurries of activity as guides prep for the logistics of each climb, shuffle teams onto planes bound for base camp, or help clients practical technical skills until the weather clears enough to fly. The Talkeetna airstrip is just a five-minute walk from AMS headquarters, and on any given day they may have up to half a dozen teams on the mountain, all hoping for a chance at the summit or coming back down after taking their best shot.

“We get all types of people,” Palmer explained. “We get everybody from [Pacific Crest Trail] and [Appalachian Trail] hikers to people who've never seen snow before because they live in LA. Mostly we find that it's people who are really busy in their lives and want to increase their odds of success by going with some-

one who knows the mountain really well. It's the logistics and expertise, having someone that has it in their backyard.”

And if anybody knows Denali, it's the guides from AMS. But guiding Denali isn't the only thing they do—they also offer glacier travel and mountaineering courses, multi-week high school summer camps, whitewater rafting, summer trekking trips and safety/logistics support for film and television crews. They're embarrassingly rich in the one thing that makes a true mountain guide: Boots on the ground wilderness experience.

Living a double legacy

Brian Okonek, now president of the Alaska Quiet Rights Coalition, has an unusual perspective on just how important it is to log plenty of miles in the mountains. He grew up on the fringes of Talkeetna, steeped in the early days of Denali mountaineering, when mountain guiding in the U.S. was in its infancy.

Guiding in Europe, however, was already well-advanced, with standards that had been in place for a long time. Okonek started working as a guide for Swiss-born Ray Genet, who's credited as being the first professional guide on Denali. “Looking back on it now I was young and naive... but I learned a lot along the way and felt comfortable and good at it and just kept doing it,” Okonek said.

As time went on, Okonek said, it got easier to find people who'd been exposed to instruction and courses not only from their peers, but also from instructors in organized programs. In 1983 Okonek and his wife, Diane, started Alaska-Denali Guiding in Talkeetna.

In the mid 1980s, a young man named Colby Coombs took a trip with ADG for his senior project in high school. “He was very enthusiastic, very excited about being in the big mountains of Alaska, a joy to be with. Just... very good energy and appreciation for what he was experiencing,” Okonek remembered. “Colby was the type of person who was there for the whole experience, no matter what came along.”

Years later, Coombs approached the Okoneks about guiding for them. Okonek remembers saying that'd be great, but asking him to first get a little more mountaineering experience on his own. “It takes a lot of time in the field to get good at [mountaineering,]” Okonek explained. “Just the school of hard knocks, learning from others and from experiences you have on your own in that sort of environment.”

“[Coombs] came back with a lot of experience under his belt and was a very, very good guide,” Okonek remembers. “...and I learned a lot from him, too. It's always a two-way exchange of ideas.” Palmer also worked for ADG; she and Coombs continued to guide trips for the Okoneks while also starting their own company to offer a few different trips—AMS. When the Okoneks started thinking they might be ready to give up the hectic summer pace of guiding Denali expeditions in peak season, the perfect successors were already close to hand.

“We had great admiration for both of them, and felt they could continue on with the same philosophy,” Okonek recalled. “A real attempt to make every trip an instructional experience, so with every trip people weren't just led on the way but were learning something, with skills they could take and use on their own private outdoor adventures.” In 2000 Coombs and Palmer pur-

Denali cooks tent



Denali food rations



Matanuska Glacier workshop



chased ADG from the Okoneks, inheriting ADG's concession to guide on Denali.

Since then it's been a continuous process of evolution, with the aim of creating a good experience for clients and an equally positive work environment for the guides. "We're always constantly tuning up and trying to make things more efficient and better for everybody," Palmer said.

Some of the most notable changes over the years have included trimming the client/guide ratio from the original three clients per guide to two clients per guide,

with big snowstorms, and you have an environment where you can do everything right, but still endure a disaster.

Craig Hanneman, an experienced mountaineer who's climbed around the world and stood on the top of Everest, was on a 2004 Denali expedition with AMS when just such a disaster occurred: What the National Park Service termed an "unexpected massive rock slide" struck the team. One climber died on the scene; two more were evacuated by helicopter for serious injuries.

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offering a wider variety of trips, and bringing on more staff to increase the number of trips without compromising on the client experience.

Denali remains the perennial bread and butter for AMS, even though Palmer says climber numbers seem to be down for all guide services across the board this year. "I'm not really very worried about that," Palmer said, explaining that it could be due to any number of factors, including a natural cyclical downturn. In the meanwhile, the 12- and 6-day mountaineering courses—two other exceedingly popular options at AMS—are still going strong.

One of the most difficult mountains

Coombs and Palmer have long since proven themselves more than equal to guiding and managing the inherent risks and staggering logistics of climbing on a mountain like Denali. After all, as Okonek explained, "You can't eliminate risk in the mountains. There are too many things out there that can go wrong... I guess that's part of the thrill and the allure and the adventure of mountaineering."

Going strictly by elevation, Denali is the third-highest mountain in the world, topped with crevasse-riddled glaciers and slopes steep enough that if you can't immediately self-arrest to control a slide, you're going to be falling for a very long time. And then there's the weather.

"Environmentally, it's a horrendous mountain," said Kestner who, as a pilot for FedEx, is intimately familiar with the workings of the atmosphere. Denali's maritime weather system makes it prone to unpredictable high winds, heavy snow and biting cold.

The same frontal systems that create that weather can also wreak havoc with your acclimation to the altitude, as columns of air move in to suddenly make 20,000 feet feel like 23,000. "If it were nothing but cold, you'd just wear the summit suits," Kestner said. "But it can go from 70 degrees in the sun to blowing and 20 below on the ridge."

Add in the altitude and risk of rockfall, icefall and avalanches, not to mention the perpetual snow-shoveling hell that comes

an act of God and an unfortunate tragedy," Hanneman told me over the phone from his home in Oregon. "What I'll never forget is how everyone at AMS did everything in their means to help the survivors and the family of the deceased. It really does illustrate just the kind of people they have and how caring they are. I remember Caitlin literally moving to Anchorage to be near the two injured men, who were hospitalized for two weeks before they were able to go home."

Why climb?

Scratch a dozen mountaineers, and you'll find a dozen different reasons for risking the inescapable dangers on every climb. But you can be sure that being totally comfortable isn't one of them. "[Suffering] is definitely part of the experience. I think most mountaineers enjoy feeling their body working," Okonek said. Still, he added, if you're suffering every day, it's hard to have fun.

"Anyone who says it's not about getting to the top is probably not being completely honest," said Hanneman. "I think anyone who sets out to climb a mountain really wants to get there. But yes, at the end of the day, it's about the journey, not the destination. It's the friendships that you have, the guys that you're climbing with, the people you meet along the way... It's very different, the unique breed of cat that you find in the mountains."

"This is an organization with people who genuinely care about their clients," Hanneman continued. "[Coombs and Palmer] are fully engaged in every aspect of their operation on a daily basis. They're involved without micromanaging. That's pretty tough to do."

That involvement sets the tone and culture for the organization, bringing repeat clients like Hanneman back, dropping in to say hello and spend time with the AMS crew even if they're not scheduled for a trip. After all, they're practically family. "How can you not go to Talkeetna and spend some time with the good folks at AMS?" Hanneman asked with a smile in his voice.

GETTING READY

- 90–125 pounds of gear** an AMS climber typically starts with on Denali
- 4,000–5,000 calories/day** a climber consumes on Denali
- 17–19 days** average duration of an expedition on Denali
- 3–5 days** AMS' average wait for a weather window to summit Denali
- 12 days** AMS' longest weather wait in high camp
- 6 maximum number** of guiding concessions allowed on Denali

GETTING TO THE TOP

- 1913** year Denali was first climbed
- 40,884 recorded attempts** to climb Denali since 1903
- 52% the average** summit rate on Denali
- 50% this year's** summit rate as of Friday, June 12
- 11 years age** of the youngest person to summit Denali (Galen Johnston, 2001)
- 78 years age** of the oldest person to summit Denali (Tom Choate, 2013)