

Climbing Aconcagua

By James L. Doti

I wake up gasping for breath. This has become a nightly occurrence since ascending to an altitude of over 16,000 feet, not that its familiarity makes it any less horrifying.

After 10 or so heaving gasps, I feel my life returning – as well as the sudden urge to urinate. My hand gropes around inside my sleeping bag to find a bottle wrapped with duck tape. The tape serves a critically important function: to distinguish a pee-bottle from all the water bottles stashed inside my sleeping bag to prevent them from freezing. While I'm thankful that I don't have to venture outside to relieve myself in gale-force winds and a temperature 20 degrees below zero, the task of crawling out of a sleeping bag inside our tent at an altitude of 20,500 feet to kneel and urinate in a pee-bottle while sandwiched between my son, Adam, and our tent partner, Laura, is not a pleasant undertaking.

Finished, I close the cap of my pee-bottle as tightly as I can and place it back inside the sleeping bag, down near my feet for warmth. I fluff up the make-shift pillow formed from my down jacket and try to get back to sleep. I'm physically exhausted after the day's climb, but the thin air and the fierce winds loudly snapping the sides of our tent make it difficult to sleep.

Thoughts drifting, I realize that if the raging storm outside clears by morning, tomorrow will finally be our summit day. After three weeks of climbing, our team will venture out of the relative safety and security of our tents to attempt a summit of Mt. Aconcagua. Named "Kon-Kawa" or "Snowy Mountain" by the Ayamara Indians who lived in the Andes near Argentina's Province of Mendoza, the summit of Aconcagua stands at almost 23,000 feet, making it not only the highest peak in the Western Hemisphere but also the highest outside of Central Asia.

What follows is a daily log I kept during our summit attempt on Aconcagua. It explains how our climbing team got here... and what happened afterward...



Sunday, January 9, Day 1

This morning, after flying for nearly 15 hours, Adam and I arrived in Santiago, Chile feeling excited, but also somewhat anxious about our climb of Mt. Aconcagua. Six months ago, Adam called me and asked, “Hey, how about bagging another mountain?” Sounded great at the time. Now we wonder what we’ve gotten ourselves into. Together we’ve climbed Mt. Whitney, Mt. Rainier and Mt. Kilimanjaro, but at 23,000 feet and with a reputation for severe winds and intense cold, Mt. Aconcagua is in a different class.

When we went to check-in for our short, 45-minute connecting flight from Santiago to Mendoza, Argentina, I was told that something was wrong with my ticket. No one in the entire airport seemed to know exactly what the trouble was or what to do about it. All the passengers were seated for the flight, including Adam, who had quickly abandoned me back at the gate. At the last minute, I was allowed to board the plane, probably because the guy in charge felt sorry for me. He’d seen the tears welling up in my eyes as I contemplated a full-day, 211-mile bus ride over the Andes. When I finally took my



seat, feelings of elation were mixed with some anxiety over the ominous beginnings of our odyssey.

Soon after we arrived at the Hotel Nutibarra in Mendoza, our lead guide, Eric Murphy, and assistant guide, Joe Stock, checked out our equipment in the hotel parking lot. This check is critically important. Finding out you forgot gloves, crampons or an ice ax when you’re high on the mountain is not good.

Adam and I met our five fellow climbers. We all eyed each other from head to foot, no doubt searching for any weak links in the team. I had instant respect for the only female team member, Laura Ross, a physical fitness professional and triathlete from Florida, who didn’t seem to mind going on a climb with eight males.

After a fabulous dinner of the well-known Argentinean beef and wine from the Napa-like region of Mendoza, we’re back in our hotel room watching the only TV channel available – MTV. Adam tells me MTV is more “advanced” here, since viewers are able to vote for one of two music videos they want to see next. The running tab of votes shown on the screen must be pretty humiliating to the loser. Just now, Destiny’s Child beat out Britney Spears... poor Britney. Inexplicably, the dialogue of the show switches from English to Spanish, putting Adam in a foul mood.

Logging off at 10:30 p.m.

Monday, January 10, Day 2

Today we took a long van ride to the Penitentes ski area at an elevation of 8,600 ft. It was dusty, and looked pretty barren.

Most of my fellow male team members, wisely anticipating the next three weeks without a shower, sported buzz haircuts. It was too late to see a barber, so I used a small scissors to cut my hair as close to my scalp as I could. Looks a bit choppy, but all in all, not bad. Since all my uncles were barbers, I must have it in my genes.

Tuesday, January 11, Day 3

This morning I took my last shower for the next three weeks. Tried to enjoy and relish every moment of it. My Spanish is improving. All on my own, I figured out that the foil packet with “A condicionador” printed on it is conditioner. Helping me figure that out was the other Spanish on the packet: “Reduccion de Friz.”

We all hopped into the van for the half-hour ride to the trailhead of the Vacas Valley route, where we began our three-day, 30-mile trek to Base Camp. The trailhead is at an altitude of 8,000 feet. While longer than the more commonly used Normal Route, the less traveled Vacas Valley route is more scenic. And with fewer climbers on this route, the lower campsites are much cleaner and quieter.

We have mules helping carry the heavy stuff to Base Camp. They’re packed with our tents and all the other equipment we’d need higher up on the mountain, like ice axes and crampons. So all we needed to carry in our packs to Base Camp weighed only 40-pounds or so. Since my physical conditioning for the climb had progressed up to carrying a 65-pound backpack on steep inclines, this seemed pretty light – at first. After climbing for about two or three hours in the 90-degree heat, the weight of my pack seemed to grow exponentially and I began to feel like I was on a chain gang. It’s ironic, considering the cold and wind that Aconcagua is so well known for, that it’s the intense heat that is wearing me out.

The heel of my left foot hurts. It turns out that the light-weight hiking shoes I brought for the first part of the climb are not nearly sturdy enough for this rocky trail. Af-



ter soaking my feet in a stream (boy, did that feel good!), I put pads and mole skin on my developing blisters. It's a bit discouraging that we're not even at Base Camp, and I'm already feeling hurt and tired. Adam seems fine except for his griping about the heat.

After almost six hours of climbing, I drag into our first camp, Pampa de Leñas at 9,400 feet, at least 10 minutes behind everyone else. Looks like I may be the weak link on the team.

Setting up our tents involved threading long metal rods through the nylon fabric and then anchoring the tent cords with heavy rocks. Not too difficult, but it seems like it'd be impossible to do in gale-force winds and extreme cold higher up.

After drinking some steaming hot chocolate, I felt my strength and spirit slowly returning. It's funny how everything around us we typically ignore back home takes on more clarity when living under the stars. I saw shades of darkness over the horizon. I smelled the pine needles in the wind and could almost taste the sage in the air. And as I looked up at the star-filled sky, I saw the Southern Cross for the first time in my life.

Wednesday, January 12, Day 4

After a breakfast of cereal and canned fruit, we set out to our second camp, Ref. Casa de Piedra, at 10,600 feet. Although we ascended only 1,200 feet, it was a long, eight-hour march.

For awhile, I listened to my new Rio Forge MP-3 player. With its 512K internal memory and a 1G chip, I had room to store 25 CDs of my favorite music as well as three books I downloaded from Audible.com. Unfortunately, the book I'm listening to is a little boring, and I wasn't in the mood for music. So I had plenty of time to think.



In fact, I was thinking about why people climb mountains. When we took our first rest break, it gave me an opportunity to share with my teammates an economic theory about mountain climbing that I'd been noodling around in my head.

I explained that mountain climbers and other adventurers know they must give up most of the basic creature comforts of life to do what they do. But they also realize that when they return to civilization, all the things the ordinary folk take for granted – like hot

water, clean toilets and a cushy bed – will yield a great deal more pleasure to them as adventure seekers than to those who find fulfillment in the hum-drum of daily life.

I then presented an example to nail the point: “Back home, when I get up in the morning and take a shower, I hardly think about it. I just go through the motions. But when I get home after experiencing more than three weeks without a shower and stand under that beautiful spray of water, I will experience a burst of ‘utils’ like you wouldn’t believe. Utils, by the way, is a term economists use to measure and compare different levels of pleasure or happiness.”

Our assistant guide, Joe, who has a penchant for new words, suggested that this burst of utils from that shower be called “utiliphic.” But other than Joe, who listened carefully to my theorizing, the other members of the team, including Adam, eyed me suspiciously. Maybe I’d better keep my trail thoughts to myself.

We got our first view of Aconcagua’s east face just before reaching camp. It looks majestic, beautiful, stunning... and impossible to climb. My God, it looks like photos I’ve seen of Mt. Everest! But it’s too early to



worry. My new mantra: “One day at a time.”

Dinner tonight was stew – no meat, but lots of beans. Adam (first name alphabetically) had KP duty.

The camp toilet is awful – just a hole in the ground in an open-doored, ramshackle enclosure. All the people queuing up can see you do your thing. It seems even worse given that the toilet at our first camp was the best I’ve ever used in a backpacking environment.

That one even had a porcelain seat! Adam is constipated, so I gave him a laxative out of my bag of tricks. But given the status of the latrine, he should consider himself lucky.

Thursday, January 13, Day 5

We started out today at 8:00 a.m., right after breakfast. Almost immediately, we crossed two shallow rivers. Not really a problem, except for the fact that all my blister protection came off in the water, and I'm beginning to run low on the special blister pads I brought.

Much of the time, we no longer walked on trails but on long, bolder-strewn paths. So now my ankles are beginning to bother me. The ankle I twisted yesterday really hurts.



Thankfully, it's cooler at our higher elevation. Unfortunately, the wind is beginning to kick up with gusts of 30 to 40 miles per hour.

When we finally arrived at our Base Camp at Plaza Argentina, the mules were there waiting for us. It was already cold, even though it was only 4:00 in the afternoon. A park ranger is stationed here throughout the short climbing season and is in radio contact with climbing teams at higher camps. "Permanent" tents, including a Quonset-like mess hall, are already in place at Base Camp. What a relief not to have to set up our tents, especially in this wind.



The pee-bottles we use in our tents at night are highly valued. Since we're drinking a minimum of five liters a day to prevent dehydration, we'd be getting out of the tent all night long if we didn't have them. The only problem is that we each have only one pee-bottle, one liter in size. Adam had to get up twice last night to empty his bottle. I think he may have set the Guinness Book of Records for the most volume of any single urination – one liter!!

Ah... to be young again.

Friday, January 14, Day 6

Slept fitfully last night. I woke up in the middle of the night, gasping for breath. The sudden feeling of drowning caused by irregular breathing and hyperventilation, known as Cheyne-Stokes Syndrome, is a common malady at higher altitudes.

I was glad that today was an acclimatization day at Base Camp, so we were able to sleep late. Acclimatization is all about allowing your body to adapt slowly to the increasingly thinner air. To do this, we try to limit our altitude gains on any single day to less than 2,500 feet. We also have an acclimatization day several times a week, when we stay active at camp rather than progressing on up the mountain.

Staying active today involved going down to the river bed to wash our clothes, namely the same underwear I'd worn for the last four days.

In the afternoon, the mules left us. From now on, we'll do all the carrying. I can hardly walk around Base Camp without getting seriously winded, so I don't know how I'm going to carry a backpack that weighs 50 pounds or more. And when I gaze up toward the top of Aconcagua, it looks unclimbable. I need to keep thinking: "One day at a time."

Saturday, January 15, Day 7

Today was the first of two carries up to Camp 1 at 15,500 feet. The double carries keep the weight of our packs down and also help in the acclimatization process.

We took food, fuel and other team provisions to our next camp site and cached (deposited) them under rocks and boulders. We returned to Base Camp for the night, and will go back up tomorrow with a second load of food, fuel and our tents.

For me, today's carry was brutal. The thin air made my pack feel even heavier than its actual weight. The grades were steep, and we passed through long stretches where there were large boulders in our path. Trying to "skip" over these boulders with heavy packs was agony.





The blisters covering the heel and sole of my left foot made the going even worse. Thankfully, Joe had a special kind of glue to help keep the mole skin on my foot. Without that covering, I don't know how I could have made it back to Base Camp. As it was, I hobbled into camp at least a half hour behind everyone else.

Tonight, I had a heart-to-heart talk with our lead guide, Eric Murphy. I told him I didn't think I could make it with all my

hurting and lagging behind. I pointed out that this is the third try for our teammate, Kurt Gusinde, to summit Aconcagua. Here is a guy I marvel at in the way he prepared and planned every detail of the climb so that this time he'd make it to the top. Just watching him is a lesson in how planning is so important in reaching one's goals. Yet, if I have to be helped down from a higher altitude, the chances of the team summiting would be jeopardized.

After explaining all this and droning on about my aches and pains, Eric looked me in the eye and, pointing his index finger close to my face, said, "You can do it."



Writing that now, I realize how trite this sounds. But something about the look in his eye and that pointing finger convinced me that Eric really meant it. He believes in me.

Eric went on to say that he's been watching me and likes the way I'm pacing myself. PACING! What I thought was "lagging," he considers "pacing." Damn the blisters! ... Damn the thin air! ... Damn the heavy packs! ... I'm going to follow this guy wherever he leads me.

Sunday, January 16, Day 8

Today was our second carry to Camp 1. I don't know if it was my little talk with Eric or what, but I felt better today. Instead of holding up the rear, I arrived at camp with everyone else. With all the glue Joe gave me, my mole skin and bandages are holding up, so my blisters don't hurt as much.

Adam and I adopted a team member, Laura, to share our tent. As we continue our ascent, we'll reduce the number of tents to save on weight and have fewer tents to set up at each camp. I volunteered to be the first of the three-person tents, since I'm the smallest guy on the team.

When I complained about the trouble I have breathing at night, Laura gave me a saline solution that helps lubricate nasal passages in dry conditions. I don't know if it's Laura's saline solution or maybe the new falling snow that's increasing the humidity, but whatever, I can breathe through my nose again. Hopefully, I'll sleep better tonight.

Monday, January 17, Day 9

Another acclimatization day. We took a short hike up the stretch we'll be covering on our way to Camp 2 at 17,600 feet tomorrow. I'm feeling stronger. Tonight we had vegetable soup, followed by couscous with tuna and tons of garlic. We're all smelling so bad that the garlic on everyone's breath is like perfume to us.

Tuesday, January 18, Day 10

The eight-hour trek on our first carry to Camp 2 at 17,600 feet was a nightmare. The worst part of it was near the beginning, when we had to go through a steep stretch of "Penitentes," sharp, cone-like spikes of snow and ice. The name comes from the fact that these three-to twelve-foot tall cones resemble rows of repenting monks. The only way to negotiate the dark, narrow and claustrophobic passageways is by gripping the cones tightly and then jumping to the next cone, trying not to fall into the deep gullies between them.

This was particularly difficult for me because of my shorter stride. After one jump, I wrapped my arms around a penitente and grasped it tightly while I caught my breath. I looked to the side and saw a climber from another team doing pretty much the same thing. In a thick, British accent he said, "I've never been through anything like these bloody penitentes."



When I finally made it out of this frozen hell, my elation was tempered by the realization that I'd have to go through all this again in a second carry. All the confidence

I'd built up the last few days disappeared. There was no way I could enter the "bloody penitentes" again. I convinced myself in no uncertain terms that I had to quit. "You can do it" wouldn't work this time.

As it turned out, Eric was also troubled by the penitentes. He told us that getting through the penitentes was much harder today than he'd ever experienced before, so tomorrow we would go by a different route. It would be longer, but at least we'd avoid the "bloody penitentes." So my quitting was put off, at least for now.

Curiously, Adam loved the whole penitentes experience and found it a great adventure.

By the time we made it to our Camp 2 site, it was getting windy and cold. We quickly cached our gear and started to make our way back down to Camp 1. Just above the penitentes was a steep slope of loose rocks and pebbles, called "scree," that gave way like sand as we climbed down. When we positioned our plastic climbing boots at a certain angle, we could "ski" down these slopes. One "run" was every bit as "utiliphic" as a great ski slope.

Again, I crossed paths with the English guy who remarked, "This scree is as soft as potty." I asked, "Do you mean putty?" He replied, "No, I mean potty!"

As I write, it's night and we're in our tent and sleeping bags. Adam and Laura are laughing about our experiences. While they laugh, I groan and tell them that this is definitely – without equivocation – the last mountain I will ever climb. To make the point more dramatic, I borrowed indiscriminately from the great Native American Chief Joseph, "When we get off this mountain, from where the sun there sets, I will climb no more forever."

Wednesday, January 19, Day 11

As Eric promised, on today's second carry to Camp 2, we bypassed what has become known by all of us on the team as the "bloody penitentes." We arrived at camp beat after an elevation gain of more than 2,000 feet.

One of our team members seems to have a bad case of altitude sickness. The rest of us are in pretty good shape, although some members of the team are experiencing headaches, nose bleeds and the runs. Having diarrhea is never fun, but having it on a mountain is serious business, especially because it worsens the dehydrating effects of higher altitude. There is another problem with diarrhea, more annoying than the impact on one's health. Let me explain.

Alpine Ascents is an environmentally concerned climbing outfit. In fact, that was one of the major reasons Adam and I chose to climb with them. Their philosophy is to leave the mountain as you found it. That means packing out everything we pack in ... so we use “Wag Bags” to dispose of our solid waste. The bags are like blue bags for dogs but more sophisticated. Inside the bag is a plastic sheet with a funnel in which a chemical agent is present and activated with a little snow, water or urine. You do your thing, hoping to hit the funnel target – tough to do, especially in an extreme wind.

When you’ve completed your business, you fold the bag and place it under a rock for reuse – up to three times! On the way down the mountain, we will pick up all of our fully used and stored bags and put them in our backpacks. We’ll dispose of them at Base Camp in a special receptacle that will be removed off the mountain by helicopter.

I’ve used blue bags for my dog, Cindy, so I know what it’s like carrying bagged doggy-do. I only wish Cindy were here on the mountain to pick up after me for a change.

I’d better quit writing now before my altitude-induced fantasies become even more delusional.

Thursday, January 20, Day 12

We lost a team member today. He was really sick last night. By morning, his face was visibly swollen. It was important to get him off the mountain while he could still walk. Joe started down with him, and they were met part way by an Alpine Ascents guide who had come up from Base Camp. This guide will take him back to Base Camp, where he will be evacuated by helicopter or mule, depending on his condition.

Now we’re down to six climbers and, when Joe returns, two guides.

We did our first carry to Camp 3 at 19,200 feet today. By the time we got back to Camp 2, it was freezing outside, with wind gusts over 50 miles per hour. Good thing our return to Camp 2 meant we didn’t have to put up our tents.

We ate dinner, and just after we got back into our tents, I was summoned from the Oval Office (my teammates have gotten into the habit of calling me El Presidente and referring to my tent as the Oval Office) to give feedback on an argument they were having about, believe it or not, the global economy.



I don't know how they got into it at an altitude of 17,600 feet, but for some strange reason the topic of outsourcing captured their attention. Funny, but earlier today I noticed that my Eddie Bauer water bottle (I used one for a pee-bottle, too) had stamped on it in small print "Made in China," and in larger print "Made with Lexan by GE."

I pointed out to my teammates that Eddie Bauer evidently found a manufacturer in China that could produce the thermo-plastic extruded bottles more cheaply than U.S. manufacturers. But to meet Eddie Bauer's specs for heat, sturdiness, etc., the Chinese company had to buy the high-tech, plastic pellets used in the manufacture of the bottles from GE in the U.S.. My guess was that for an Eddie Bauer bottle that retails for \$10, most of the revenue would pay for GE's plastic pellets and Eddie Bauer's marketing services. Very little would go to the Chinese manufacturer engaged in a low-tech, low-margin, commodity-like business.

Ergo, we shouldn't be afraid out outsourcing, as long as we hold the technological edge.

As I lectured on, I noticed that my teammates were not as attentive to my pearls of economic wisdom as they were to the weather that had suddenly turned nasty again. So as they drifted back to the safety of their tents, I headed back to the Oval Office clutching my Eddie Bauer bottle.

Friday, January 21, Day 13

Our second carry to Camp 3 was a killer, not so much because of the climb, but because Adam and I came in leading the group. As a result, Eric, gave us a terrible camp site because he evidently felt we had the strength to do the physical work required to remove rocks from the pad where the tent would be placed as well as rebuild the rock wall protective screen. At an altitude of 19,200 (almost as high as Kilimanjaro) any physical work is exhausting, but it's especially tough moving heavy boulders around.



For supper, we had soup with carrots and onions, followed by a potato broth with what Eric said were strips of Argentinean “Spam.”

I’m trying to eat as much as I can, but I’ve lost my appetite in the thin air. I have to force down food and liquids to keep me going. Metabolism isn’t efficient at high altitude, so you have to eat even more to get your body to absorb the nutrients it needs for all this exertion and cold, windy weather. Thankfully, I have a secret weapon. When candy bars, trail mix and hardtack were being distributed for our lunches and snacks, I noticed a round log that looked like a roll of salami. A closer look revealed it was a roll of crushed fig. All of a sudden I remembered my dad telling me when I was just a kid that all anyone needs to survive is not bread and wine but figs and wine. Dad passed away almost 25 years ago, but it seemed like he was out there somewhere telling me to take that fig roll that no one else wanted. When I pulled that fig roll out of my pack today, everyone laughed at the way the crushed fruit oozed out of its plastic casing. Our teammate, Matt Franklin, who is always making everyone laugh, said, “It looks like potty – not putty!”

Well, they could laugh all they wanted. They could eat their Snickers. They could eat their Oreos. They could eat their jerky. Dad and I could laugh back, for I was eating from the staff of life.

Saturday, January 22, Day 14

I woke this morning at Camp 3 happy that it was another acclimatization day. We had a great breakfast of scrambled eggs (from dried eggs) and bacon. Although I like my bacon crisp, the virtually uncooked bacon we ate tasted great.



On our acclimatization hike we went uphill for about an hour to see the Polish Glacier that’s close to a magnificent ice wall and sharply plunging cliff. What an incredible vista and view!



Ominous reminder of where we are: Near the bottom of the glacier is a cross memorializing a climber killed in a fall.

After dinner, Joe asked me for a new word he could think about tonight. I suggested the economic term “equilibrium.” This led to a discussion about the value of the dollar and oil prices. I’d like to write what we discussed, but at this altitude, I’ve already forgotten.

Sunday, January 23, Day 15

Long, agonizing traverse to Camp 4, or High Camp, at 20,600 feet. We had to set up three tents in a cold, raging blizzard. It would be bad enough doing this under any conditions, but at this altitude it was pure misery.

Hard to eat... Hard to breathe... Hard to sleep... Tomorrow... Summit day!



Monday, January 24, Day 16

We woke to Eric’s 6:00 a.m. call. The winds had calmed and the sky was clear. It was a “go.”

In spite of all our talk and preparations for summit day, there was general pandemonium in camp. Like the Three Stooges, Adam, Laura and I scurried around in tight quarters trying to get ready. While Eric and Joe were trying to get us to eat oatmeal and down as much liquid as possible, we were fussing around and looking for all our clothing and equipment.

We left at 7:30 a.m., an ice ax and one climbing pole in hand. Eric placed us in two groups, with Adam, Laura, Matt, and me in the advance team. Will Prittie, a highly skilled climber who has ascended Mt. Everest three times, joined our team from Base Camp. So we had a ratio of six climbers to three guides.



We could feel the lack of atmospheric pressure in our gasping for air. After a long and relentless upward climb, we hit Independencia Hut, supposedly the highest man-made structure on earth. It looked to me, however, to be little more than a large dog house in an advanced state of disrepair.

We then entered a very windy, long traverse. We had to scramble to negotiate several steep, rocky areas on what is called the West Face.

At about 12:00 noon, I ate from my beloved fig roll before we hit the dreaded Canaleta, a scree-filled, rocky stretch that is the most challenging segment of an Aconcagua climb. We took off our snow crampons to negotiate the loose scree and steep grades.

The frustrating part was that the summit was now in our sight, and it looked so tantalizingly close. But after all our strenuous efforts in such rarified air, it appeared we weren't getting any closer. I counted as



many as ten gasps for air as I made each step.



In the loose scree, it seemed that for every step forward I lost a half step sliding back down. Particularly nerve-racking was dodging the falling rocks knocked loose by the climbers above us. Each time a rock gave way under my foot, I looked down in dread hoping it wouldn't hit a climber below.

Just when I felt my body could take no more, I realized that I was beyond the Canaleta and had literally stumbled upon Summit Ridge.

At 4:00 p.m., Eric walked on the summit toward the well-known cross that marks Aconcagua's peak. Adam and I followed him. Although the wind gusts were 30 to 40 miles per hour and the temperature was -15° F, the magnificent view of the Andes Mountains, including several 20,000 feet plus peaks, was exhilarating. Especially striking was the South Face of Aconcagua, which is thought to be one of the great mountain faces in the world.



We all took lots of photos, including one of Adam and me holding a Chapman University pennant. Since Himalayan climbs are rare at this time of year, we realized we might be the highest humans on earth.

But it wasn't that, nor was it the view, that struck me most. My goodness, you can see better views outside an airplane window. Most rewarding for me was the fact that I hadn't given up. Pushing myself to the limit of my endurance led to an epiphany of sorts.

In many ways, it was a spiritual awakening, not in a religious sense, but in the way Aconcagua revealed through self-discovery that the spirit can transcend physical boundaries.

Eric then gathered us around for group photos. He must be very proud that six of the seven climbers who started on this team actually summited. This high rate compares to an overall average of about 50 percent for all climbers attempting this mountain. Eric then asked Adam, Matt and me to lead the team back to High Camp. I kept up with Adam and Matt through the Canaleta but then ran out of steam and was the last to arrive in camp at around 8:00 p.m..



One member of our team, Frank Thomas, was hurting badly with fatigue and symptoms of altitude sickness. We all had to admire and be inspired by him for making it to the top in spite of his condition.

Too tired to celebrate our summit success, we skipped dinner so we could crawl back into our tents, our little homes that provided us with warmth, comfort and sleep.



Tuesday, January 25, Day 17

Another difficult carry today, though now we are going downhill. Cognizant of the fact that most accidents occur on the descent, we trekked downhill carefully from High Camp with a goal of reaching Base Camp, a descent of almost 7,000 feet, by the end of the day. Moving downhill, our feet took a different sort of pounding, with our toes rather than our heels taking the most abuse.

We struggled with even more weight, adding to our packs the cached goods (and Wag Bags!!) left at the various camps we'd created along the way. By the time we got to Base Camp at around 8:00 in the evening, we were carrying 70 pounds in our packs. In two consecutive days, we went from an altitude of 20,600 feet up to almost 23,000 feet, and then back down to 14,000 feet.

Frank, who was hurting badly, valiantly struggled into Base Camp on his own and immediately sought out medical care. Just watching him carry on makes us all feel proud that he's on our team. Looks like Frank will be OK, but he'll require a mule ride out and a lot of rest and fluids to counteract the effects of dehydration.

Along the way today, it seemed that all anyone could talk about was the beer that awaited us at Base Camp. I was getting more and more excited myself, even though I don't much care for beer. Maybe all the hype worked, since the Chilean bock beer we had tonight was incredibly good. But maybe it was the indescribably delicious hamburgers that accompanied the beer. Whatever, our appetites had returned.

The high point of the day for me, besides the beer and hamburgers, was skiing down the scree-filled "ski runs" between Camp 2 and Camp 1.

Wednesday, January 26, Day 18

I write this log in our tent during a rest day at Base Camp. I sold some of my gear to the locals for about \$100. I could have sold almost all I had, but most of my gear has a tender place in my heart. In addition, I still need my sleeping bag for the two-day trek out of Base Camp.

The reason the “market” is so hot is that Argentina has a 40 percent tax on imported goods and services. Nothing like a tax to create a hot black market.

We have another celebration – a pizza dinner, no less. I don’t know how Eric and Joe made pizza for eight ravenous climbers with one small burner at an altitude of 14,000 feet, but somehow, they did. Mixing up a type of Bisquick dough and topping it with cheese, hearts of palm, white asparagus, salami and sardines, they created about the best pizza I’ve ever had... and I’ve had the best.



Thursday, January 27, Day 19

Long, gruesome descent from Base Camp to Pampa de Laños (our first camp site). Started at around 8:00 a.m., and I was last to come in at around 7:00 p.m. – 11 hours of trekking downhill. Several rushing stream crossings that we negotiated by hopping over widely scattered boulders really freaked me out.



I kept thinking that after all I’d been through on the climb, if I fell into one of these torrents, I’d end up in Buenos Aires.

This was our last camp site before marching out tomorrow. There was a solar-heated bag of water that I used to take my first shower in 16 days. The water was still pretty cold and there wasn’t much of it, but ohhhh... what a heavenly, utiliphic feeling!

Friday, January 28, Day 20

Left camp at 7:45 a.m.. Eric challenged us to a “Vacas Valley Race.” Only Adam and I joined in. I passed Eric early in the race downhill when his pants fell off as he ran. He’s lost so much weight, as all of us have, that he had to tie a rope around his pants to keep them up. After leading for the first half, I took a wrong turn in a river valley, and that’s where Adam and Eric passed me up. I was never able to recover. Eric won, about a minute ahead of Adam, and Adam about a minute ahead of me.

We knew we’d reached civilization when the van driver waiting for us at the trail head, in celebratory fashion, handed each of us a tepid can of Coke.

As we gulped down our Cokes, we all traded stories about the trip. I reminded everyone of my promise: “From where the sun now stands, I will climb no more forever.”

Two Weeks Later

A call from Adam: “Dad, Alpine Ascents has just posted on its website next year’s scheduled climbs of Mt. Elbrus – the highest mountain in Europe. Come on, let’s bag another mountain. Should I sign us up?”

... Hmmm.