

# DENALI WEST BUTTRESS EXPEDITION

20,310 ft / 6,190 m

22 days

Difficulty: Very difficult, prior experience required

Group limit: 6 expedition members, 3 guides



*AMS' Denali expedition is a 3-week climb to the summit of North America's highest peak. It should only be attempted by those who enjoy the rigors of self-supported expedition life. There are no trails, no huts, no porters, and no helicopters. Camping in a tent with others and roped glacier travel is arduous and begins on Day 1. The rewards that come with working together through all the obstacles to achieving a seemingly impossible goal cannot be articulated well enough. AMS asks all participants to share a goal of becoming a better climber in addition to reaching the summit.*

## SPECIFICATIONS

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Deposit: \$3,000

Balance due: 120 days prior to the start date

Price includes: 3 guides, glacier flights, climbing permit, high-quality food, high-quality climbing and camping equipment, private shuttle to Talkeetna, two nights lodging in Talkeetna. The support of office staff and facilities. When everything is added up, AMS' price is competitive.

Also included: celebratory farewell lunch in Talkeetna, welcome back buffet, custom sleds and sled duffels, custom glacier rig, West Buttress guide book.

Price does not include: travelers insurance, personal rentals, additional lodging in the event of weather delays (camping for free at AMS), lodging or shuttle to Anchorage after the climb, guide gratuities.

A note on travel insurance: We recommend purchasing cancellation coverage in case your plans change unexpectedly for any reason out of your control.

## HISTORY

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The early pioneers in Denali's climbing history were explorers and gold miners who unraveled intricate and formidable approaches to find a northern route to the summit. In 1910, a group of miners struck out from Fairbanks and climbed the slightly lower North Peak (19,470 ft). In 1913, a team led by Hudson Stuck approached the mountain from the north traveling up the Muldrow Glacier, making the first ascent of the higher South Peak (20,310 ft). For 38 years the northern route was the only way Denali was climbed. In 1951, Dr. Bradford Washburn used a plane and landed on the Kahiltna Glacier on the south side of Denali. He followed a hunch

gleaned from his many Muldrow expeditions where he would stare down the south side of Denali confident there was a route up. He found one and it quickly became the most popular because it was so much easier. Like most climbs in Alaska, the approach to the mountain is harder than the actual climb itself. Flying from Talkeetna and landing at 10,000' on a glacier compared to hiking through the tundra and crossing rivers at 1000'. Bradford and Colby co-authored the guidebook, *Denali's West Buttress: A Climber's Guide*.



*Washburn looking down at the West Buttress from Denali Pass*

Denali is famous for being harder, longer, and more of a challenge than one expects. A lot of it has to do with the weather which is in a constant state of variability. With favorable weather and snow conditions, it will just be the heavy backpack, thin air, and roped glacier travel all day. In bad weather, that same day can be a real struggle for the unprepared. It is not one thing that makes Denali hard, but a combination of severe weather, altitude, cold, and the sheer amount of work involved.



*Moving camp on the Kahiltna Glacier*

## WILDERNESS APPRECIATION

The Koyukon people lived a subsistence lifestyle for thousands of years along the foothills of Denali before it became a National Park. Denali National Park was established in 1917, a year after the National Park Service was created. Designated as Wilderness, Denali receives the government's highest level of public land protection. The intent was to protect the entire ecosystem surrounding the mountain. In 1980, President Carter tripled the size of the Park to 6 million acres, larger than the state of New Hampshire. AMS exercises great respect and care for preservation when entering Denali.



*View of Denali from Dutch Hills*

## THE CLIMB

AMS climbs Denali in traditional expedition style, re-laying loads, and climbing gradually to give everyone the best chance to acclimate. Our rate of ascent will be dictated by the weather. After flying from Talkeetna, 350' to the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, 7200' the marathon climb officially begins. The first 9 miles is roped travel up the Kahiltna Glacier wearing snowshoes and carrying about 100 lbs divided between your backpack and sled. The pace is slow and steady and we try to have 10-15 minute breaks every hour. Familiarity with carrying heavy backpacks, layering for the weather conditions, and pacing on a rope team while keeping proper rope tension is essential. The weather funnels through Kahiltna Pass often causing difficult windy, cold, and white-out conditions. Crevasses are a seen and unseen hazard

and require constant vigilance. We work our way up the glacier, breaking trail and building camps at 7800 ft., 9,700 ft., and 11,000 ft.



*Traveling up the Kahiltna*

Above 11,000 ft., the terrain steepens and gets icy and requires crampons for traction and an ice axe for self-arrest on the exposed slopes. Camp 4 is located at 14,200 ft. and we often arrive there on the 8th day. Located in a large flat basin, 14 has amazing views of the Alaska Range stretching out below. After 4-5 nights acclimatizing and making a carry to 16,200 ft., we depart for High Camp, 17,200 ft. Leaving the sleds behind, packs often weigh 50-60 pounds depending on how many personal items you bring. Between 15,000 ft. and 16,200 ft. we encounter a steep icy headwall, 40-45 degrees which requires additional belaying using fixed lines. Above 16,200 ft. we follow a narrow ridge and weave in and out of boulders while the leader places running protection. The real work begins after we arrive at 17,200' and have to build a camp. In your favor is all the time and effort you and your team put into teamwork. You will have become an expert in what needs to be done to survive the night well and prepare for the next day.

Summit day takes 12-14 hours round trip and requires good weather and winds less than 25 mph to avoid frostbite. Be prepared to climb the next day or wait a week to get a decent summit day. Leave at 8 am, back by 8 pm. It takes 2 hours to climb Denali Pass clipping through 24 pieces of running protection in the shade. 3 more hours of climbing and you arrive at the Football Field. 1 hour to climb Pig Hill. 1 hour to climb the Summit Ridge. 3 hours to get back to Denali Pass and 1 more to descend it back to camp. 1 hour of breaks throughout the day. 12 hours, more if snow conditions make travel difficult. Please read the guidebook we send you and familiarize yourself with the route.

The following day we will start our descent to 14,200 ft, weather permitting. We usually spend the night at 14,200 ft. and leave the following evening, traveling all the way to base camp. We usually arrive the following morning at 5-6 am, sleep a couple of hours, and take the first flight out.



*View of summit day*

Once in Talkeetna, you will be picked up and brought over to AMS for a celebratory greeting with fresh fruit, orange juice, and other goodies. Arrangements for travel to Anchorage or staying in Talkeetna can be made then.

## **PRIOR EXPERIENCE**

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Denali is an excellent climbing objective for those with the experience and attitude to enjoy the rigors of unsupported expedition life. Denali is an advanced climb and requires a significant amount of climbing and backpacking experience to ensure success. The mountain is far too severe to be learning these basic mountain skills for the first time. When you arrive on the mountain you will be putting on snowshoes and a climbing harness and tying into a rope team. You will be expected to be familiar with basic climbing knots, coiling a rope, and packing your own pack. Most of the climb is done wearing crampons and using an ice axe while carrying a backpack. You need to be familiar with roped belay techniques using the munter hitch and prussic knot. You will need to pay attention and maintain proper rope tension the entire climb with other people also on the rope. You will need to match the rope team's moderate pace the entire climb. You will be expected to know how to self-arrest using an ice axe in order to stop yourself and your rope team. Sections of the route require that you bend to clip through running belays while carrying your backpack. How best to train and prepare for Denali is discussed in another document, and demands a great deal of commitment. Denali is an unsupported, high-altitude mountain and requires you to perform mountaineering skills in exposed locations while wearing crampons and carrying a heavy backpack.

## **WHEN TO CLIMB**

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The best time to climb on Denali is between May 1–June 20. It is possible to climb outside this window and people do every year. But it is more of a gamble with the weather being too cold in April or too hot end of June. The best time is when you have the time to be patient for 3 weeks' worth of effort.

## **WEATHER**

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It is often said that the greatest challenge climbing Denali is

weathering the long storms. Denali is far north, close to the Arctic Circle. Fierce storms full of moisture come out of the Bering Sea and Cook Inlet and slam into the mountain uninterrupted. Being prepared to weather storms by having the means to build fortified camps is essential.

The weather dictates our every move on the expedition starting with flying to the glacier. When weather delays our departure from Talkeetna, we store all food rations in a designated chest freezer. When the unflyable weather requires spending another night in Talkeetna, we help you look for lodging or you can camp for free at AMS.

We will listen to the weather forecast, but it is often wrong. Now-casting is more accurate. The constantly changing weather will require us to be flexible, patient, spontaneous, and organized. It is important to remind ourselves that we can't change the weather, only our attitude towards it.



*Building High Camp*

## **ALTITUDE**

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Everyone on a Denali expedition is going to suffer from the lower-oxygen environment. While some may acclimate faster, everyone will struggle with the high altitude. The health problems vary from mild to life-threatening. Most AMS guides are not doctors, but we are all trained to be familiar with the recognition and treatment of the early signs of high altitude-related illnesses. Often, one extra day is all that is needed for symptoms to disappear. While prior experience at high altitude is not a prerequisite, we do recommend that you climb to high elevations and see how you acclimate at 18–19,000 ft. on another mountain.

## **UNFLYABLE WEATHER**

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Alaska has unpredictable weather, which can prevent flying into the mountains on schedule. Sometimes the weather may be unflyable for days. While unfortunate, this is one of many obstacles that climbing teams must overcome. The most important thing is not to let your food spoil. AMS has empty chest freezers to store all field rations until we are ready to fly. Staying ready while still being able to access your equipment is essential for being organized and efficient with the time doing the "Talkeetna Hang." AMS is located close to the airport, in a private location with plenty of space to keep equipment,



people, and class space organized. We will hold classes and skill reviews, such as crevasse rescue, rope glacier travel, and tent/camp management.

We are prepared for unflyable weather at the end of the climb with supplies that each team leaves at base camp. Seven days of meals and other extras like toilet paper and playing cards are left in secured containers.

A Denali climb, with possible weather delays, may take a month from the time you leave your front door to the time you return home.

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## GRATUITIES

In the guiding industry, it is customary to tip. Determining the amount is a personal decision that depends on your personal circumstances. After a Denali climb, you have all been through a lot. Please consider giving a gratuity that is meaningful to you. Most guides use Venmo and PayPal.

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## LEADERSHIP & TEAMWORK

Successful expeditions are those whose participants learn. What sets Denali apart is the vital role leadership and teamwork play in having a successful experience. The by-product of good teamwork is comradery, having fun, and owning the expedition. AMS' leadership style is not to irritate but to agitate and spark your behavior and motivations to participate and engage. When you arrive at AMS you are no longer an individual, but an important member of a team.

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## REFERENCES

Alaska Mountaineering School is a small, family-run operation that cares deeply about meeting the high standards it sets. Based entirely in Talkeetna, Alaska, we are focused on the mountains in our backyard, the Alaska Range. Please research AMS and tell us what you find. Ask the other companies that pop up who they would recommend if you couldn't go with them. Most will be comfortable recommending AMS.

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## GUIDES

AMS Denali guides combine a broad range of mountain climbing skills with leadership and an intimate knowledge of the mountain. Reading the weather, monitoring everyone's health, knowing when to break down camp and move and when to wait, and cooking nutritious meals are essential skills. AMS mentors new guides and supports veteran guides through role modeling all the way to the owner who leads Denali expeditions every year. Certifications are required in emergency medicine, avalanche, Leave No Trace, and food handlers. All instructors must go through formal training prior to arriving at AMS.

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## TRAINING

A future Denali climb is a great motivator for getting in the

best shape ever. Try to incorporate each element of a Denali climb into your training. 1) Every day requires stamina. Train by doing long days in the mountains. A typical Denali day is 5 hours of climbing with 15-minute breaks every hour followed by 2-3 hours of camp building. 2) You camp up Denali. Plan some overnight backpacking trips where you carry everything. Among other things, this teaches you what not to bring. 3) Backpacks. Denali packs can weigh 50-60 lbs. Depending on what you decide to bring. Expect 20 lbs of group gear, food, and fuel. The weight of the backpack at high altitude while balancing on crampons is accentuated and requires practice to be comfortable. 4) Crampons. Train with your boots, crampons, and a backpack at every opportunity. Find the nearest 30-40-degree ice face and build your own headwall so you can practice. Crampons are worn during most of the climb and need to feel like natural appendages. On any mountaineering expedition, there are factors completely beyond anyone's control, like the weather. By joining a professionally run expedition, you leave logistics, food, equipment, and leadership to us; you are responsible for your mental preparedness, physical fitness, and climbing ability. The more previous climbing experience you have and the better condition you are in when you arrive, the more you will enjoy the climb and the safer it will be for you and your rope team.

AMS can provide you with a discount code for the Uphill Athlete Program, a 24-week expeditionary mountaineering training plan. Our *Fitness & Training* and *Training Resources* sheets contain helpful guidelines for expedition training.

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## EQUIPMENT

Denali is a climb that tests your equipment better than any other. Please read the Expedition Mountaineering Equipment List. Denali is not the mountain to just get by using mediocre equipment. Your gear will be put to the ultimate test. A carefully planned layering system is comfortable, efficient, lightweight, and holds up. "Quality" does not necessarily mean expensive, and a trip to the Army surplus store or secondhand backcountry outfitter often turns up many of the basics. The equipment list gives recommendations for particular items. You can also get your equipment questions answered by a knowledgeable staff member at AMS or a senior salesperson at a local climbing store; they are often most informed about the pros and cons of a particular brand or style. The Equipment section of the guidebook we send you also provides tips and suggestions. Your guides will ensure you are properly outfitted, checking equipment with you on your first day at AMS. They will issue any rental gear you need and you will have the opportunity to purchase equipment at the AMS Mountain Shop, which is able to provide all of your equipment needs and offers you a 10% discount.

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## FOOD

AMS provides hearty, nutritious, and balanced meals on its expeditions. We use a spreadsheet and faithful recipes to balance enough calories with fats and proteins, while also

being concerned with weight, packability, and freshness. Demands on your body will be high, and despite a 4,000–5,000 calorie per day diet some people still lose weight over the course of the expedition. We use minimal freeze-dried meals, so when we do we supplement with extra meat and vegetables. Our rations come from specialty companies, organic wholesalers from Washington, and supermarkets in Anchorage. AMS provides all of the food for this expedition, but to ensure satisfaction we encourage you to bring 5 lbs (2.25 kilos) of your favorite lunch snacks to supplement what we have available. Make sure to contact us if you have any dietary restrictions or allergies. While not always easy, we will try to accommodate all dietary needs. See our *Expedition Food* sheet for more details.

## TALKEETNA FACILITIES

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The expedition price includes van transport from Anchorage to Talkeetna and two nights in a double occupancy room in Talkeetna before flying into the Alaska Range. After flying into Anchorage, Alaska, meet our van shuttle at the Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport south terminal taxi lane at 5 pm the day before your expedition start date. The drive from Anchorage to Talkeetna takes about 3 hours. You will be dropped off at the team's downtown Talkeetna hotel, the Swiss Alaska Inn, where you will stay for two nights. Details are provided on the *Expedition Travel and Logistics* sheet. After arrival, you can relax and walk around town, grab dinner at a local restaurant, and get a good night's rest. Note: Expect to leave Talkeetna no earlier than the morning following the last day of your expedition. You are responsible for paying for your transportation from Talkeetna to Anchorage as well as lodging upon your return to Talkeetna. The AMS office will provide lists of available options for lodging and transport when you return from the Alaska Range.

If you wish to make your own pre-expedition transportation and lodging arrangements, we will be happy to provide suggestions; the *Expedition Travel and Logistics* sheet contains details about transportation and lodging options.

## ARRIVAL

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Please arrive at AMS at 1:00 pm on the first day of your expedition. Your guides will provide an expedition and safety orientation. Next, you will pack your mountain lunches and perform a thorough gear check with time to rent or purchase equipment. You'll be free at 6:00 pm to enjoy the evening in Talkeetna.

On your second expedition day, the team meets at 8:00 am at our Talkeetna headquarters. This is a busy day that ends at base camp on the Kahiltna Glacier, so please be on time and take care of all personal business beforehand. Your team will walk from AMS four blocks to the National Park Service (NPS) Walter Harper Talkeetna Ranger Station for the required check-in and mountaineering briefing. You may wish to start your day with a hearty breakfast at one of the local restaurants. AMS provides baked goods and hot drinks all morning. After our NPS Mountaineering briefing, we return to AMS headquarters to review technical skills for the climb, including roped glacier travel, sled rigging, and fixed-line ascension. We ensure all packs are rigged for glacier travel and

double-check that you have all the necessary hardware for your glacier setup. At mid-day, a tasty lunch is provided at AMS. After lunch, you'll dress for the mountains, finish packing, and fly onto the glacier in a ski-equipped fixed-wing Cessna 185 or DeHaviland Beaver or Otter. This 40-minute flight into Denali National Park and Preserve is the fastest way to access the Alaska Range and is a spectacular and memorable highlight of the trip. Once you arrive at the Kahiltna Glacier base camp, the rest of the afternoon consists of selecting a campsite, setting up personal and group kitchen tents, receiving guides' advice on how to sleep warm, and settling down to a good, hot dinner.

## RETURN TO TALKEETNA

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We strongly suggest that you plan to spend the night in Talkeetna once you have returned from your expedition. Transportation schedules may require that you catch your shuttle to Anchorage the following day. AMS staff will provide a current list of options for transportation and lodging upon your return; it is often most convenient to arrange this transport upon your return to Talkeetna (see the *Expedition Travel and Logistics* sheet). Many climbers feel that extra time spent in Talkeetna after their expedition helps them transition from the quiet of the mountains back to their busy lives by attending to practical things, like sorting gear, dealing with travel details, and taking a shower. A night of sleep before traveling is recommended. Some climbers plan extra time at the end of their expeditions for sightseeing while they are in Alaska. In addition to attracting climbers from all over the world, Talkeetna boasts world-class salmon fishing and other activities.

## WEST BUTTRESS ITINERARY

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Weather and snow conditions will ultimately determine our progress on the mountain. This itinerary is a suggested timeline and outlines a typical schedule. Your expedition schedule may deviate from this one, but not by much. Our time on the mountain is flexible and will fluctuate on a 24-hour clock depending on weather conditions. With good weather, expeditions can return as much as a whole week early.

### Travel Day

Meet the provided shuttle at the south terminal taxi lane, Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport, at 5:00 pm for arrival in Talkeetna the evening before your start date. Check into AMS-reserved Talkeetna lodging. Be sure to get dinner by 9:00 pm in downtown Talkeetna, an easy walk from the hotel.

### Day 1

1:00 pm, meet at AMS: Orientation and gear check, with time to rent or purchase gear from the AMS Mountain Shop and to select and pack mountain lunches. You are free at 6:00 pm to enjoy the evening in Talkeetna.

### Day 2

8:00 am, meet at AMS: team NPS registration and orientation. Denali skills review, lunch at AMS, final packing, weighing, and loading gear for a 3:00 pm flight to 7,200-ft. base camp. Distance: 60 miles, elevation gain: 6,850 ft.

**Day 3**

Base camp to 7,800 ft.: glacier travel and crevasse rescue drill, pack and single carry to 7,800 ft., Camp 1. Distance: 5.5 miles, elevation gain: 600 ft.

**Day 4**

Carry to 9,700 ft., Kahiltna Pass. Distance: 5 miles (RT), elevation gain: 1,900 ft.

**Day 5**

Move to 11,000 ft., Camp 2. Distance: 4 miles, elevation gain: 3,200 ft.

**Day 6**

Back carry to 9,700 ft. Distance: 2 miles (RT).  
Acclimatization/weather contingency day at 11,000 ft., Camp 2.

**Day 7**

Carry to 13,500 ft., around Windy Corner. Distance: 3.5 miles (RT), elevation gain: 2,500 ft.

**Day 8**

Move to 14,200 ft., Camp 3. Distance: 2.75 miles, elevation gain 3,200 ft.

**Day 9**

Back carry 13,500 ft. cache. Distance: 2 miles (RT), elevation gain: 700 ft.

**Day 10**

Carry to 16,200 ft. Distance: 2 miles (RT), elevation gain: 2,000 ft.

**Day 11**

Acclimatization/weather contingency day at 14,200 ft., Camp 3.

**Day 12**

Move to 17,200 ft., Camp 4. Distance: 1.75 miles, elevation gain: 3,000 ft.

**Day 13**

Rest day/acclimatization/weather contingency day at 17,200 ft., Camp 4.

**Days 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19**

Summit day/weather contingency days, 20,310 ft. Distance: 5 miles (RT), elevation gain: 3,120 ft.

**Day 20**

Return to 14,200 ft. Distance: 1.5 miles, elevation loss: 3,000 ft.

**Day 21**

Return to base camp, 7,200 ft. Distance: 12.25 miles, elevation loss: 7,000 ft.

**Day 22**

Fly back to Talkeetna.