

# Mt. Hunter, West Ridge, 14,573 feet / 4,372 meters



View of Mt. Hunter from Mt. Crosson, West Ridge follows the right sky line. Photo by Brian Okonek

## **ROUTE: WEST RIDGE, ALASKA GRADE III, 7,373 FEET ELEVATION GAIN, 14 DAYS**

Deposit: \$1000                      Balance Due: 90 days prior to the starting date

Group Limit: 4 expedition members, 2 guides

Cost Includes: Professional guiding, round trip glacier flight, field food and fuel, group camping and climbing equipment, personal issue sleds, space in the AMS campground (tents are not provided).

You are responsible for: Transportation to and from Talkeetna, lodging (AMS campground is free, tents are not provided), National Park Service Entrance Fee (Totaling \$10) to be paid in Talkeetna during the first day of the expedition, 2-4 lbs of lunch/snack food, travelers cancellation insurance (highly recommended), personal equipment and clothing, AMS equipment rentals, guide gratuities.

## **GROUP SIZE AND RATIO**

2 guides and up to 4 expedition members.

## **THE MOUNTAIN**

Native Alaskan's called Mt. Hunter, Begguya, meaning, "Denali's Child." Towering 7000 feet above the Kahiltna Glacier, Mt Hunter is the steepest and most technical of the three great peaks in Denali National Park. Like Denali and Foraker, Mt. Hunter has a north, (14,573') and south summit (13,966'). With the status of being the hardest 14,000' mountain in North America, few people attempt the climb and less than 40% typically succeed. Gaining the higher north peak is difficult by any route and requires the utmost in stamina, fortitude, and perseverance. We will attempt to climb the West Ridge with a combination of expedition and alpine climbing strategies. Our route will gain the West Ridge by the Northwest Basin variation. *A guidebook description of the West Ridge can be found in, "Alaska: A Climbing Guide" by Mike Wood and Colby Coombs, The Mountaineer's Books.*

## **HISTORY**

In 1953, Bradford Washburn inspired the first ascent by publishing an article with photographs of the West Ridge in the American Alpine Club Journal urging someone to try it. The following July, Fred Beckey, Heinrich Harrer, and Henry Mehböhm teamed up and made the first ascent of the complete West Ridge which was the first ascent of Mt. Hunter.

## **GRADE/DIFFICULTY**

Alaska Grade III. It is difficult to judge the grade of a climb such as the West Ridge as so much depends on current snow conditions. Expect mostly 4<sup>th</sup> class terrain with the occasional 5<sup>th</sup> class section and fixed lines in the access couloir to the ridge.

## **PRIOR EXPERIENCE**

Mt Hunter is a tremendous challenge for people with the experience and attitude to enjoy the rigors of expedition life. As an advanced climb, Mt. Hunter requires a significant amount of prior climbing experience and training beforehand. All participants must submit a climbing resume to the AMS office. Expedition members must be in excellent physical condition and have climbed mountaineering routes that require roped glacier travel, winter snow camping, extensive use of ice axe and crampons, and the use of fixed lines. The figure eight knot series, rope coiling, and belaying with a munter hitch should be familiar. The ability to arrest a fall on a steep snow slope with a pack is paramount to your safety and the safety of your rope team. Mt Hunter is an exceptional climb, and will draw on all your prior experience.

## **WEATHER**

It is often said that the greatest challenge in Alaska is not the climbing, but the weather. While most of the world's highest mountains are near the equator, Mt. Hunter is closer to the North Pole. Its location in the southern Alaskan mainland is 205 miles south of the Arctic Circle at 638°. This is 358° further north than Everest, the same latitude as northern Hudson Bay and central Scandinavia. The weather is fickle and un-predictable and determines the quality of the snow pack. It will force us to be flexible and patient and sometimes spontaneous traveling at all hours of the day and night. Hunter is a lower elevation mountain, so we should not expect the extreme cold found on the upper slopes of Denali or Foraker.

## **UN-FLYABLE WEATHER**

Be aware, Alaska has unpredictable weather which can prevent flying into or out of the mountains on schedule. Bush planes can only fly if the weather is suitable. In the event that expeditions are unable to fly to the glacier at the scheduled time they will base out of the AMS Talkeetna Facilities which consists of the office and staging area, Schoolhouse, and Matt Porter Rock Gym. This allows expedition members to view slideshows and additional educational media, practice fixed line ascension and other climbing techniques. Usually un-flyable weather persists only for a day or two and then expeditions are able to fly into the Alaska Range. Sometimes expeditions can be weathered in the Alaska Range beyond their end date. We will do our best to ensure that your expedition ends on schedule and most do. However, we recommend allowing 2 days on the return end of your travel plans (or purchasing flexible airline tickets) in the event that weather inhibits you from flying off the glacier on time.

## **WHEN TO CLIMB**

Although it is impossible to predict when the storms will roll through the Alaska Range, May and early June is typically the best window of time for favorable snow conditions on steeper, lower elevation mountains such as Mt. Hunter.

## **ACCLIMATIZATION**

Mt. Hunter does not pose a significant risk for high altitude related illnesses given it's lower elevation, but it pays to be cautious and we will always observant for the early signs of problems. Our number one defense for any medical injury or illness is avoidance via safe mountaineering practices and climbing strategy. We will rely first on the basics of hydration, adequate rest, and reasonable rates of ascent. If traditional means of acclimatization fail, all members will have Diamox to try and medicate mild forms of altitude distress. In an emergency, the expedition drug kit contains prescription medications for pulmonary and cerebral edema to aid in descent.

## **LEADERSHIP AND TEAM WORK**

Successful expeditions are properly equipped, have the necessary skills, but most importantly they learn to become a strong team. All members will be expected to maintain good expedition behavior, a key ingredient to overall success. AMS guides take a leading role in decision making and route finding, but will rely on you to stay involved and aware of all aspects of the climb. Being organized and able to take care of personal needs: hydration, eating well, rest, and patience are all important leadership qualities which start with one's self.

## **GUIDES**

AMS guides are professional climbers who love the mountains and have a gift for climbing, teaching, as well as mountain guiding. Just being a good guide is not enough to guarantee effective leadership. Our employees are made up of talented climbers with extensive personal climbing experience to draw upon. Lead guides have climbed the route previously and all guides are comfortable leading rope teams on the route's terrain. AMS guides are knowledgeable with altitude-related problems, extreme weather, and know how to set a pace for a successful expedition. They have mountain rescue, avalanche safety, and wilderness medical training. Their knowledge of the natural history and climbing history and personal stories of climbing in Alaska add immensely to the climb. AMS guides' strength, stamina, and leadership make the difference for a climb of this caliber.

## TRAINING

Members of this climb must adopt a goal of being in excellent physical condition at the start of the expedition. On any mountaineering expedition there are factors that are completely out of the control of anyone, namely weather and individual acclimatization rates. By joining a professionally run expedition, you leave expedition logistics, food, equipment and leadership to us. You are responsible for and have control over your physical fitness and climbing ability. It is imperative that everyone joining our expeditions be physically fit when the expedition begins. The better condition you are in, the more you will enjoy the climb, the safer it will be for you, and the better chance for summiting. The more climbing experience you have prior to the climb, the better prepared you will be for Mt Hunter.

The amount of time needed for training depends on the level of fitness at the start. Climbers make it a priority of being in good shape. Those that are able get out and climb. Climbers with less time exercise to stay in shape: lift weights, run, bike, swim, martial arts, and stair master. Fitness enthusiasts need only to adjust their training habits to include specific routines which will help them on this expedition. Others may have to plan a year or more of serious training in advance to ensure preparedness.

Focus on developing stamina over brute strength. Upper body strength is necessary for lifting your pack, shoveling snow, and building camp, but most strength should be aerobic for the long hard days breaking trail and moving camp. Train on irregular terrain in poor conditions. Maintain a pulse rate 80% of maximum for a half hour during the workout. Vary your routine to prevent overuse injuries and push yourself without injuring yourself. Think about how much stronger you will be in a blizzard with that 50 - 60 pound pack. Exposing yourself beforehand to similar activities will condition your body. Scramble up peaks, climb snow and ice routes, embark on a rigorous multi-day winter backpacking trip, ski uphill as well as down hill, go and break some trail. Pushing yourself in uncomfortable environments while staying focused and alert is helpful training. You cannot successfully prepare for this expedition in your office or solely by training indoors. The more familiar you are with environmental stress, the better you can pace, acclimate, and be a team player.

## EQUIPMENT

Mt. Hunter is not the mountain to "just get by" with mediocre equipment. Your gear will be put to the ultimate test. A thought out layering system will be more comfortable, efficient, lightweight, and hold up. "Quality" does not necessarily mean "expensive" and a trip to the Army surplus store often turns up many of the basics. Carefully read the equipment list written for this expedition; it answers many questions and gives recommendations for particular items. Try to have equipment questions answered by a knowledgeable sales person in a local climbing store; they are often the most informed about the pros and cons of a particular brand or style. Please wait until the morning of the first day to check equipment at AMS, as we are busy preparing for the expedition a full three days before. Your guides will insure you are properly outfitted before you go.

## FOOD

AMS provides hearty, nutritious, and balanced meals on its expeditions. Do not be surprised if you gain weight on the expedition! A spreadsheet rations program and faithful recipes balance calories, carbohydrates, fats, proteins, and weight to create a variety of tasty and creative meals that build strength and maintain health. Typical meals hash browns, noodles, rice, mashed potatoes, Ramen, couscous, soup, tortellini, dried vegetables. We avoid freeze-dried meal-in-a-bags as they are typically inadequate portions and lack taste. Our rations come from organic wholesalers from Washington and Oregon and supermarkets in Anchorage. All our meals can accommodate vegetarians; please call if you need more specifics. AMS provides almost all of the food for this expedition. To ensure satisfaction, we ask that you bring your preferred hot and cold drinks for 14 days: tea, cocoa, instant coffee, and cold drink mixes like Gatorade. Go easy on the sugar mixes that can end up weighing a lot. We also ask that you bring 2-4 pounds of your favorite lunch food to supplement AMS rations. Please contact us if you have any dietary restrictions or allergies.

## TRAVEL & LOGISTICS

Plan to arrive in Talkeetna one day before the expedition starting date. This gives you the best chance to rest and be ready to go at 8:00 a.m. the starting day. Fly to Anchorage, Alaska. Catch a shuttle to Talkeetna. Once in Talkeetna, check into the Chinook Winds B&B or another Talkeetna motel or camp at AMS. Relax and walk around Talkeetna. Check out the river, ranger station, and the climbing museum if you have time before your expedition. Expect to leave Talkeetna the morning following the last day of your expedition. Please read the Travel and Logistics form for more information.

## THE FIRST DAY

On the starting day of the expedition, members, and guides will meet at 8:00 a.m. at AMS. This is a busy day, so please be on time and take care of all personal business before hand. Guides will do a check of each expedition members gear and equipment to make sure that it is adequate. Any rentals which are issued will be done at this time as we prefer not to do this prior to the start date as we are busy briefing and packing group gear and food. After guides go through your equipment and issue any rental items you will need they will provide an expedition orientation. At 12 pm, lunch at AMS is provided. After lunch, we will cover fixed line ascension, visit the NPS Ranger station in Talkeetna, and then we pack, dress, and fly onto the glacier in a ski-equipped fixed wing Cessna 185 or a DeHaviland Beaver. The 30-45 minute flight into Denali National Park is the quickest way to access the snowy, glaciated peaks of the Alaska Range, and is a spectacular and memorable highlight to the trip. Once you arrive at the glacier the

rest of the evening will consist of campsite selection, tent spacing, group kitchen set up, and of course dinner!

## TALKEETNA FACILITIES

AMS is the oldest and only outdoor school and guiding company based in Talkeetna. We are not seasonal visitors; we live here. Denali National Park is where we do the majority of our climbing and we consider it our back yard. Our office and staging area is located at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> street, adjacent to the local airstrip. We have an excellent location and proper facilities to outfit expeditions and serve our expedition members. A large staging area allows us to check gear and practice fixed line ascension. In the event of un-flyable weather, our facilities provide a comfortable area to teach classes, show slide shows and videos, and be productive during a "Talkeetna hang."

## REFERENCES

AMS is a professionally run operation committed to high standards at all levels. We urge you to carefully research and look into climbing with us. Search for Alaska Mountaineering School and the directors Caitlin Palmer and Colby Coombs on the Internet. Talk to climbing rangers in the Talkeetna Ranger Station ph. 907-733-2231. While they are not permitted to openly brag about AMS, many of them were AMS instructors before becoming rangers. Try calling your local climbing store and ask if they have heard of us. We are small, but our word of mouth reputation extends far. Our guides and instructors represent a tight group of over 50 professional educators and mountain guides whose professional affiliation includes: Jackson Hole Mountain Guides, Exum, AMGA, NOLS, Valdez Heli Guides, Mountain Trip, and Mountain Madness. A note on certification: other than AMS' Mountain Guides Course, there is not an available certification in the US or Europe that takes into account the expedition skills necessary to guide in the Alaska Range. AMS has spear headed an initiative to develop an expedition component to the AMGA Alpine certification, but it is a slow and political process involving Europe's UIAGM.

## THE CLIMB

We climb the West Ridge of Mt. Hunter in a combination of expedition and alpine styles. We will climb expedition style, ferrying loads and placing fixed line, until establishing ourselves on the crest of the West Ridge. The second camp on the ridge will be made in a single move and be our high camp. The extra time built in is to wait out bad weather or if conditions require a third camp on the ridge.

AMS' approach to guided climbs falls in line with our mission as a school of mountaineering. Mt. Hunter's summit is a logical end goal, but we will focus on the means of getting there, pushing every day to increase our mountaineering performance. We expect all members to share a goal of becoming better climbers on our expeditions.

## ITINERARY

Weather and snow conditions will ultimately determine our progress on the mountain. This itinerary is a rough guide and outlines a possible schedule. Our style on the mountain is flexible and will fluctuate on a 24hr. clock depending on conditions. With lucky weather, most expeditions return a day or two early. On the other hand, delays at the start with un-flyable weather and storms at high camp may result in running out of time. It is possible at high camp for us to extend the length of the expedition and allow those who wish to tough it out and have a flexible schedule more time. There is a cost associated with this to compensate the guides'.

Day 1 8:00 am meet for orientation, gear check, NPS registration, pack lunches, fixed lines.

3:30 pm fly to Base Camp, 7,200 feet. Distance: 60 miles, elevation gain: 6850 feet.

Day 2 Move to 7000 feet, Camp 1, at the entrance to the Northwest Fork of the West Ridge. Distance: 3 miles, elevation loss 200 feet.

Day 3 Move to 8,600 feet, Camp 2. Distance: 1/2 mile, elevation gain: 1600 feet.

Day 4 Carry to the West Ridge, 10,200 feet. Establish fixed lines. Distance: 1 mile, elevation gain: 1600 feet.

Day 5 Move to 10,200 feet, Camp 3. Distance: 1/2 mile, elevation gain: 1600 feet.

Day 6 Move to 10,800 feet, Camp 4. Distance: 3/4 mile, elevation gain: 200 feet.

Day 7 Rest day

Day 8 Summit Attempt. Distance: 4 miles round trip, elevation gain: 3770 feet.

Day 9, 10, 11, 12 Weather days or move high camp to 12,900 feet.

Day 13, 14 Return to Base, fly back to Talkeetna.