

# DENALI (McKINLEY) MOUNTAIN GUIDE COURSE



*Alaska Mountaineering School promotes excellence in responsible mountaineering and wilderness travel through educating and guiding others. AMS programs follow a progression that prioritizes safety, teamwork, skill-building, respecting wilderness, and having fun. Our hands-on approach leads to successful outcomes. We want you to be able to repeat the skills you learned without supervision.*

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

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At AMS, we have over 30 years of guiding on Denali (Mt. McKinley). This course is a culmination of that experience and will teach the essential skills for guiding unsupported, high altitude mountaineering expeditions. This course is for experienced climbers seeking to meet the eligibility criteria for being a guide on a Denali expedition. The course will cover technical, medical, and expedition management skills in addition to leadership, communication, teaching, and problem solving skills. This course recognizes the role of assessment and is staffed with AMS' most experienced instructors.

## SPECIFICATIONS

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**Prerequisites:** This is an advanced course and requires each participant to have prior climbing experience. 3 years roped rock and ice climbing and be familiar with building anchors, snow and ice climbing, self arrest.. Participants must have Avalanche 1 training. Each person must read the *Illustrated Guide to Crevasse Rescue*, which will be sent to you upon enrollment.

**Fitness:** Mountaineering in Alaska is more like a marathon than a sprint. You live in a physically demanding remote environment that changes from hot to cold throughout the day. Be prepared for all day outings carrying 35-40 lb backpacks while pulling a 60 lb sled.

**Deposit:** \$500, due upon registration

**Course balance due:** 60 days prior to the starting date

**Group limit:** 6 students, 2 instructors

**Tuition includes:** Professional mountaineering instructors, roundtrip glacier flight; all food during your course; all group camping equipment, such as tents, stoves, and shovels; all group climbing equipment, such as ropes and anchors; all emergency first aid, communication, and repair equipment.

**You are responsible for:** Transportation to and from Talkeetna, lodging before and after the course, entrance fees to Denali

National Park and Preserve, travelers' cancellation insurance, personal equipment and clothing, and AMS equipment rentals, if needed..

## FEATURES

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- 1:3 instructor-student ratio.
- Roped glacier travel techniques
- Crevasse rescue curriculum and choosing a venue
- Campsite selection, organization, etiquette, walls, igloos, and trenches
- Leadership and teamwork: building a shared mental model
- Belay techniques: fixing lines, running protection, roped travel

## EXPEDITION STYLE & REMOTENESS

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AMS mountaineering courses are self-reliant expeditions that travel in a remote mountain range in Alaska. Throughout the course, students learn to live in a glaciated environment, prepare their own meals, care for themselves, move camp, and climb peaks. The course format emphasizes hands-on learning and the application of new skills in a variety of terrains. It also teaches self-reliance. If the weather is unflyable, evacuating to modern medical facilities can be difficult and may take several days. As is common on mountaineering expeditions, students may be in mixed-gender tents.

## ENVIRONMENT & COURSE LOCATION

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Mountaineering courses fly into Denali National Park and Preserve, home to America's greatest mountain range, the Alaska Range. The exact location depends on current weather conditions, but this course plans to fly to the southeast fork of the Kahiltna Glacier.

## **WILDERNESS APPRECIATION**

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AMS is based in Talkeetna in order to access the incredible wilderness of the Alaska Range. Anyone who spends days in these mountains will naturally achieve a wilderness experience. By role-modeling best practices for conserving these areas, AMS hopes to develop the wilderness conservationist in all of us. Thinking ahead and preparing, staying organized, storm-proofing our camps, and paying special attention to hygiene. These Leave No Trace techniques make us a stronger expedition and more likely to achieve our climbing goals.

## **COURSE PROGRESSION**

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The goal of this course is to develop the skills and judgment necessary to work effectively as a guide on a Denali expedition. The course progression follows what a Denali expedition would do, from choosing equipment to loading the plane to camping and route selection up the Kahiltna Glacier. During the course, developing a healthy guide culture will be followed. Leadership and teamwork define success on multi-day unsupported arctic expeditions and getting there starts on day one. Your instructors will be teaching this curriculum while offering techniques on how to teach it well. This course plans to establish a high camp at Kahiltna Pass, 9200', and use Kahiltna Dome, 12,525' as its summit day objective. With transferring skills comes transfer of responsibility, and by the end of the course, students are leading back down the glacier.

## **THE FIRST DAY**

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On the starting day of the course, students meet with instructors at 8:00 a.m. at AMS. There will be muffins, coffee, tea, and juice. After an orientation, we divide into two groups for equipment check and lunch packing. Your instructor will go through all your equipment with you and ensure you are properly outfitted. Any items needed can be rented or purchased at this time. There is no need to reserve in advance. Please refer to the Equipment List for additional information. You will also be packing your lunches in the AMS food room. We pack our lunches individually and all the food is provided. By midday, we serve a hearty lunch at AMS. After lunch, we dress in our field clothing, put on harnesses and helmets, and teach our first class: fixed-line ascension using ropes hanging at AMS. After class, we take care of last-minute items, store belongings we are not taking, and head over to the Talkeetna airport. Our transportation to the glacier is on ski-equipped, fixed-wing airplanes like the DeHaviland Single-engine Turbine Otter. The 45-minute flight into the mountains is a spectacular highlight of the course. After arriving on the glacier, we take a few moments to appreciate the amazing setting before traveling a short distance and setting up our first camp. Once camp is built, we'll cook our first dinner.

## **UNFLYABLE WEATHER**

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Alaska's mountain weather is unpredictable and difficult to forecast. It can prevent flying into or out of the mountains on time. If your course is unable to fly, we are able to stay busy teaching classes at AMS and you will be given the option to camp here. Although rare, persistent stormy weather at the beginning of a course could result in a location change. During a course, expect to see a wide range of weather. Courses can also be weathered in the mountains and unable to fly out. We avoid running low on rations by flying in with a week of extra food and fuel. We recommend allowing 2 days on the return end of your travel plans (and/or purchasing flexible airline tickets) in the event of delays. Please refer to the Travel and Logistics sheet.

## **LEADERSHIP & TEAMWORK**

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Successful expeditions are properly equipped and have the necessary technical skills, but most importantly, they practice good leadership and learn to work together to achieve group goals. At AMS, developing leadership and teamwork starts with gaining experience and developing good judgment. We teach leadership which emphasizes the importance of taking care of our basic needs like hydration and nutrition and staying warm in order to make us stronger and more durable team members. How to make teamwork work is essential on any multi-day expedition and an important discussion built on throughout your course.

## **INSTRUCTORS**

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AMS instructors all started as climbers who fell in love with teaching. Like all good teachers, they are compassionate about laying a strong foundation for their students to build upon. They are attracted to AMS because, as a school, we prioritize education over guiding. Our format and curriculum can only be taught by climbers who are well-rounded in many aspects of the outdoors. AMS instructors know how to cook real food, but more importantly, they know how to teach you the fine art of one-burner cuisine. They work at AMS because they can teach navigation, glaciology, ice climbing, and glacier travel. Certifications are required in emergency medicine, avalanche, Leave No Trace, and Alaska food handlers. Instructors for this course have reached senior status, leading expeditions for AMS.

## **FOOD**

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What to eat and how to cook it is vital to the success of any multi-day backcountry expedition. Just as important as climbing skills, having a good kitchen setup with the right food will make or break an expedition. AMS is eager to share with you its favorite recipes, rations, and ultimate kitchen setup by providing it for your course. You will learn how to

prepare tasty, nutritious, and hearty meals. We know that looking forward to breakfast and knowing just what to do is a good way to start each day. Just as looking forward to dinner helps us push to the finish line. AMS' ration plan can accommodate vegetarians and other dietary needs pretty well. We have a section of our food packing room devoted to gluten-free, dairy-free, and wheat-free products, as well as others. Please contact AMS so we can make sure we can accommodate any specific dietary needs.

## REFERENCES

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Alaska Mountaineering School is a small, family-run operation that cares deeply about meeting the high standards it sets. Based 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 who they would recommend if you couldn't go with them. Most will be comfortable recommending AMS.

## COURSE OBJECTIVES

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Each course is unique due to variables such as course area, participants, and environmental conditions. Working with these variables, our goal is for each student to accomplish these objectives in the following areas.

### Safety and Judgment

AMS teaches mountaineering skills that promote the health and safety of all expedition members. Each graduate is expected to:

- Select appropriate sites for crevasse rescue, self-arrest, snow climbing, and ice climbing.
- Selecting an appropriate climbing objective.
- Recognize and prevent cold and altitude-related injuries
- Display knowledge of personal limitations and the judgment to stay within them

### Leadership and Teamwork

Students are exposed to different methods of outdoor leadership, teamwork, and expedition behavior. Each graduate is expected to:

- Display understanding of instructors' decision-making processes through discussion and questioning
- Demonstrate good expedition behavior with a positive attitude and desire to achieve group goals
- Effectively communicate ideas and concerns with individuals and within the group
- Use good judgment and attention to detail to participate fully in a safe, environmentally sound expedition

## Environmental Ethics

An important part of every AMS course is a wilderness experience and learning Leave No Trace skills. Each graduate is expected to:

- Practice minimum-impact camping and traveling skills appropriate to a glaciated environment

## Winter Camping

AMS courses teach camping skills that protect the user and the environment:

- Select a campsite, build a fortified perimeter camp, and stay within the confines of wanded areas
- Live comfortably camping, cooking, and dressing for a variety of conditions
- Building snow shelters: cave, quinzee, igloo, trench, crevasse
- Build a snow kitchen and prepare nutritious meals

## Mountaineering Skills

Each graduate is expected to:

- Master basic knots and rope handling techniques
- Place snow protection and build anchors
- Understand and demonstrate belay techniques appropriate to the situation: glacier travel, running protection, and fixed lines
- Set up 2, 3, and 4-person rope teams with sleds for glacier travel
- Set up a Z-pulley hauling system and ascend a fixed line
- Demonstrate efficient and safe glacier travel, route-finding techniques, and navigation skills
- Demonstrate snow and vertical ice climbing techniques
- Recognize and avoid avalanche terrain, make stability assessments, and demonstrate transceiver search techniques

## DAY-TO-DAY ITINERARY

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The 8-day mountaineering course's day-to-day is a sample itinerary of how the course will progress.

### Day 1

8:00 am: Meet at AMS for course orientation and overview of the day. Check equipment and issue gear. Pack lunches. Calculate weights. This is a busy day, so please be on time.

12:00 pm: Lunch provided at AMS.

1:00 pm: Fixed line ascension at AMS. Classes on harness, knots, carabiners, helmets

4:00 pm: Load van. 3-minute drive to the airport. Organize loads for fixed-wing flights.

4:30 pm: Fly onto the glacier. Reorganize loads for glacier travel. After a snowshoe-use orientation, rope up and travel a short distance and establish camp: probe and wand the perimeter, build walls, make sleeping platforms, set up group kitchen, and establish the bathroom.

6:00 pm: Make dinner; students learn camp cooking.

Classes: Site selection, tent spacing, shovel and snow saw use, wall building, tent pitching, hygiene and sanitation, group kitchen basics, stove use and care, cooking basics, storm proofing the camp, staying warm at night. Evening discussion: Course goals and expectations, establishing a tone, DNP&P history and regulations.

## **Day 2**

Basic climbing skills: More knots, rope identification and care, rope handling and coiling, snow protection and anchor systems, and belaying.

Roping up for glacier travel, rope travel techniques, crevasse fall scenarios, transferring a load, mechanical advantage, use of ice axe, and self-arrest. Head out of camp for glacier travel. Evening discussion: Teaching techniques to empower clients and your fellow guides, quizzing, building a shared mental model, and normalizing learning error.

## **Day 3**

Group ropes up and establishes a safe area for crevasse rescue practice. Lowering and hauling systems. Evening discussion: Setting behavior and performance boundaries, sending a client down, daily feedback patterns

## **Day 4**

Break down camp and move up glacier 4 miles.

Set up camp. Evening discussion: altitude-related and cold injuries, treatment, and prevention, pulse oximetry, and medications.

## **Day 5**

Break down camp and move up glacier 4 miles.

Set up camp. Evening discussion: Selecting appropriate climbing objectives.

## **Day 6**

Summit Attempt Day, Kahiltna Dome, 12,525 feet  
Route finding on a ridge with crevasses, headwalls, utilizing running belays.

## **Day 7**

Return to Basecamp. Student-led rope teams.

## **Day 8**

Fly back to Talkeetna. De-issue gear, discuss gear maintenance issues, and debrief course.