

'No Country for Old Men' North Triple Peak, Kichatna Spires, Alaska, 2015 May

Tim Blakemore and Mike Twid Turner ,two British Mountain Guides, made an Expedition to the Kichatna Spires in Alaska during May 2015. The Team generally had poor weather but managed to climb a fantastic first ascent of a new Climb. 'No Country for Old Men' on the North West Face of North Triple Peak. Here is a report of their Expedition. The climbers have given their permission to the Alpine Club, Mount Everest Foundation and the BMC to publish and use as they see fit the information.

Many thanks to the Sponsors including DMM (climbing hard ware) and Power Monkey (charger) without their support the Expedition would not have happened.

The Climbing

Alaska is a land of superlatives. It's big, wild, and hairy (and, as the joke goes, that's just the girls in Talkeetna). I'd heard so much about it that I knew sooner or later I'd end up there. And I did. And I came away again with a great new route.

Twid Turner and I had climbed together before in Senja, Norway, (climbing a great new thin ice and mixed route on Grytetippen at about M7 – "Pass the Dutchie") and we had hatched a loose plan to climb something in the Kichatna Mountains (sometimes called the Cathedral Spires). Twid has an almost endless enthusiasm coupled with an encyclopaedic knowledge of new route potential in different parts of the world that is so helpful when applying for expedition grants.

We were lucky on

this trip receiving help from the Mount Everest foundation, the British Mountaineering Council, and the Alpine Club.

In May this year we flew in on the Condor flight from Munich and immediately went shopping (!) in Anchorage. This done we then caught our arranged transfer to Talkeetna where we dossed in the infamous climbers' hut provided by Talkeetna Air Taxi. The next morning (Alaska is really quick) we met Paul Roderick who was enthused by our "little" expedition and told us it was to be "just like the good old days." We shoved all our kit into a little single-engine Cessna and set forth. The flight was a vomit-inducing, bumpy affair and at one point my foot hit the roof as we crested cols before violently circling in an ever descending spiral toward the Tatina Glacier. As we neared the wind did die and soon enough we were throwing kit out and soaking up the atmosphere of that wild place. Of course, what we should have done was test my satellite phone, but that'll come later.

The Kichatnas are a bit like Chamonix in that they are granite, glaciated, and steep. Traditionally most routes have climbed the big faces (sometimes in a big-wall style) and we had come with a couple of alpine-type objectives in mind (Twid

is an accomplished big-wall climber whilst I prefer icy alpinism). The first day or two we spent battening down the hatches, scoping the immediate area with binoculars and going for a recce to Monolith Pass (where one of our objectives lay). Taking skis was a great decision and it made getting around so much easier (and fun). Once at the col we dropped down onto the Monolith Glacier and discovered that our prime objective simply hadn't formed this year. I had mixed emotions as it looked hard, but had seen what I thought were two really excellent (though shorter) lines on North Triple Peak. According to the guide only the northwest couloir in that vicinity had been climbed, so we reset our objective to that peak.

Wanting to do a route and actually getting up out of bed each day are two very different things and experience had taught us both that going off too early can affect a trip badly. The wind just wouldn't settle and a few days were also dumping snow. Days settled in to the first week and we were eating like champions, but hadn't really got any nearer to getting out of the tent. Finally we got a break and ferried a load of kit up to the col again and skied back to the tent to await the next break. Again the weather was awful and it looked like it might be an expensive camping trip, but finally it dawned fine so we quickly set to and skinned up to the col and dug all the kit out.

We had decided that the route should go without a bivouac, so went pretty light (single push) and set off up the northwest couloir. This proved to be technically straightforward, but annoyingly insecure and slow, meaning we pitched it (six pitches). I could imagine this section being soloed in the future or at least simul-climbed quickly. Soon we crossed over onto the true right-hand bank and set up a belay under the weeping ice smears cascading from above. This was to be our route, and we had seen that much of it seemed "there," though there were a few ominous steep blank bits and it became vague underneath the summit.

Twid set off up into the maelstrom on what seemed to be pretty good, though thin here and there, ice and the couloir proper. These first pitches were around AI (Alpine Ice) 4+/5 and were fun, technical without being too desperate. We approached the crux, though, and could see it was going to be a bit trickier, an overlap barely iced with a vertical section leading to it. I led this and the first vertical section was classic 5+ (90 degrees, but good ice and protection). It led up to the overlap where I encountered rotten ice and I spent an age trying to fiddle protection in. Eventually I did find a small area of ice that would take a screw and I breathed deeply, gave Twid a shout of "watch me" and pulled through and upward to finish some 70 meters after setting out (Twid came with me at some point), a solid AI6 pitch and what was to be the crux.

After that it went in a bit of a blur, but we climbed pitch after pitch of good ice in a great atmosphere (all the belays being good, which helps the head a bit also).

We did lose a lot of time in the upper third of the route as I climbed into a cul-de-sac, but finally we found a way through (the route generally follows a strong, gully-like line all the way to the summit) to the finishing couloirs.

The temptation to finish at the end of the rock (a pitch from the top) was strong, particularly as the cornices resembled grotesque meringues and had the

consistency of sugar. I had spotted a vertical (or horizontal?) crevasse and squirmed up into it and sort of “back and footed” to the top, where I tunnelled through, only to find a larger, and even more difficult, cornice blocking the way. Eventually I found a “merely vertical” section where, with a bit of heavy breathing and levitation, I found myself on top with no more up. My first Alaskan summit, by a new route.

A buried axe and a body belay had Twid up and after a quick check to make sure we definitely were on top, he set about making a bollard for our descent. I got the satellite phone out

which had failed to work at these latitudes in steep valleys) and at around midnight local time got a call out to Tamsin Gay, screaming into the wind that we needed to get picked up and could she relay the message to Talkeetna?

All that was left was the familiar routine of abseils, threads, and checking anchors. I can't remember exactly the timings of the descent, but we were probably quite tired by the time we reached the col again. Certainly our racks were lighter. I do remember skiing back to our “base camp,” loaded with all our kit, happy but tired.

Tim on the Summit

Travel

both climbers travelling from their houses to meet up at Geneva airport. Transfer company and train used. Both flew together from Geneva to Frankfurt then directly to Anchorage Alaska. Flights booked with Condor an airline subsidiary of Thomas Cook. The direct flights take the hassle out of flying with the lower states. Avoiding changing flights. Downside is that excess and extra luggage is expensive. On the whole the team would recommend this route but watch the extras like online food and baggage costs.

From Anchorage a transfer company Go Purple www.gopurpletransfers.com was used to get to Talkeetna. A very reliable and personal service. We had a pick up from REI in Anchorage. It's a good spot as you have a food hall, Sat phone hire, second hand gear shop (hoarding Marmot) , AMH shop, REI (dehydrated food and gas), Tidal Wave book shop and Midway cafe!

Flying into mountains Www.talkeetnaairtaxis.com

In Alaska often there is no choice but to take a light aircraft the glaciers.

Talkeetna Air Taxis were used by the team. They have the Lion share of the market supplying climbers. The team recommend Paul Roderick and his excellent crew to take you into the mountains. Paul (owner) is an experienced pilot plus a keen climber and he along with his experienced staff made the team feel secure and looked after. They keep tabs on the weather and the snow

conditions. They offer also:

A free bunkhouse while in Talkeetna

Store any equipment while in the mountains

Hire of wands, sledges, skis

You can purchase white gas

Excellent support moving gear around talkeetna

Advice on routes

We booked by email prior to arrival. Paid by credit card in dollars. They have a big operation with 10+ planes and a helicopter.

Each person gets 125 lbs of weight. Excess weight charges apply and can mount up.

The flight was very exciting and about one hour. The final approach into the Tatina glacier was very turbulent at one point hitting an air pocket and dropping 60ft. Twid hitting his head on the roof. The landing was perfect but Paul Roderick didn't hang around after dropping the team off as a bug storm was quickly approaching.

It is possible to buzz your objective if you ask nicely to check out from the air your routes conditions. This was not possible on this day.

Food

A combination of dehydrated and more tradition food was used.

Mountain food for routes. The team bought custard powder, cup soups, tang, dehydrated meals, smash, noodles, chocolate, cereal bars and dried fruit.

Recommend the pkts of beef jerky and trail mix at Walmart.

Camp food: all cooking was done on a gas stove and jet boil cooker. 2 stoves taken. It's possible to take fresh food in. Veg and meat and then bury in the glacier on arrival to keep fresh. Excellent instant rice in us. Bagels, porridge for breakfast, cheese and dried meats used. All food shopping was done at a monster REI in Anchorage. Dried meals at REI.

Once in Anchorage the team took a taxi direct to Wall mart where the trips food was bought.

It was handy having s sharp knife, chopping board and extra big pan for cooking.

Gear

Once into the mnts you are completely committed on your kit. Don't forget the tent, stove, lighters or bog paper!

We planned our gear meticulously before we left. We had our alpine climbing kit and rock gear. As we expected a big descent off our summit we took extra (4 sets) of wires and bunch of pegs. No bolts taken. Our rack on the route consisted of a set of Dragon cams, 12 quick draws, 2 full sets of nuts, 6 pegs, and 6slings. 12 ice screws. We carried an extra 20m of 5mm cord for abseil tat.

As the weather was poor and very cold we climbed most of the route in a base layer, thin fleece, warm fleece and shell. The second climbed in an extra down

duvet.

We aimed to keep climbing and carry a stove to make brews on route. In the end we didn't bother as the spindrift kept us moving.

We took both skis and snow shoes. The skis being fantastic esp. on return from the col. The 2 hr slog to the col only taking 10 min in descent. We also took our ski touring boots for this along with our mountain boots. We climbed in double boots. Scarp phantom 6000 and Sportiva? Double boots were very welcome. It was too cold for single skin mnt boots we felt.

We had a big base camp tent v25 which worked well. Also we had a small Alpine bivvy tent with us. Spare poles are handy so was a shovel to dig in the tent and build snow walls. The tents were secured down with snow filled rubble bags that we bought in Anchorage.

We cooked exclusively on a gas and had a jet boil and pocket rocket. A set of big pans was handy for cooking so was a frying pan.

Environmental impact

we took a minimalistic approach to the Expedition. Two people only. Every think in every think out. We used gas instead of column fuel so no pollution with spilt fuel. All rubbish was taken out in bags and disposed of in the right place in Talkeetna. Human waste. When you register at the ranger station they give you CMC clean mountain cans. Resalable waste cans. Bio degradable bags are placed inside the canister. We reckoned on one full can for a week. We used two cans but it obviously depends on lots of factors! Cans are brought out to Talkeetna and left with the Ranger station to dispose of. This is a great facility and free.

Weather

The Kichatnas has a reputation for having some of the worst weather in Alaska! Being at the western fringe of the Alaska Range the kichatnas is one of the first ranges to be hit by the Pacific storms coming in from the West and South weather patterns. The direction of the weather and winds can change dramatically and in a short space of time. The weather section in the guidebook Alaska mountaineer g by Colby Combes is excellent.

On our Expedition we arrived with some good weather and luckily managed to fly into the range on our first day in Talkeetna. The flight in gave us great views of the mountains. The winds were quite strong for landing which gave Paul Roderick, our pilot, some issues with controlling our approach to the Titina Glacier. By the time we landed both Tim and myself felt pretty squeeze and glad to be on terra firma.

Once on the glacier Paul didn't hang around as it was obvious the weather was turning for the worst. Infact we spent 5 days in the tent unable to move with a bad storm putting down significant snow. Strong winds could be seen wiping the

clouds above the peaks and for most of this period we couldn't see the Triple Peaks. Snow stopped after 5 days and we were able to head out for a recon. The peaks were plastered and in places lots of ice was visible. After a long day of checking out our original objectives it was obvious they hadn't formed ice as was hoped. There was ice on the North Triple North face. A line was seen on a previous trip. We contemplated our options and headed off to the ice line on this face. The weather wasn't great with virtually no view. Climbing in clouds and snowing on and off. The time in the tent had made us keen to get out and climb ASAP. We summited in a white out with strong winds and snow. Temperatures were very cold. Tim climbed most of the route in all his clothes including a big duvet jacket. Both climbers had very cold hands/ fingers on every stance and hot aches on many pitches.

The day after we returned back to our tent typically the weather improved and a flight out was possible.

Weather in the Kichatnas can be very different to the high Denali area. So a forecast for Denali isn't always much use. General observations

March super cold and little ice generally

April cold and can have some ice but depends on the winter.

May is warm enough for the glaciers to firm up and allow neve to form also ice to build up in the gullies. It can get hot in the sun so avalanches occur until the shade has moved round.

June can be hot and lots of good weather but if the weather comes in it can rain.

July lots of rain and wind. After July it can be difficult to land a plane on the glaciers.

Sat phone

the range has no phone signal and SAT phone is not great. This just adds to the feeling of remoteness the range has. A SAT phone is not essential but very handy in case of emergency and to talk to the pilots. We spoke to the pilots prior to them picking us up. They are interested in the wind direction and speed. They need good Vis for flying. As the glaciers are very tightly held in by the walls Vis is essential for landing. We had a Sat phone of Times which was a global sat system. It only worked from the summit of the Tower. Luckily Tim managed in the storm to contact Katrina his girlfriend who order our flight out with TAT. The best type of SAT phone is the iridium phone for this area. Generally you get an ok reception with this system.

It's possible to hire from a shop in Anchorage opposite REI which is very convenient. You get two charged batteries which generally does the trip. Batteries need to be kept warm. Put in a bag off the snow. The batteries die quickly if in contact with cold. We had a power monkey solar charger which was excellent. It charged our cameras and the Sat phone. It wasn't too big or heavy. Well recommended.

It goes without saying make sure you have the phone numbers of TAT and the

ranger station in TALKEETNA before you head out! The ranger station will organise any rescue if required but generally TAT will pick you up. Paul Roderick is the chief pilot/ owner and knows the area as well as anybody. Hess a climber and also can help with climbing info.

Contacts ref

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Expenses over view

Travel to Alaska
 Flights £900 each £1800 total
 Transfers £150

In ALASKA					
ITEM DESCRIPTION	TIM			TWID	
Whiskey for Pilot	29.65				
petty cash	134.88		Food wall mart	199.6	
camp food	43.69		Rocks gear	69	
gaz	46.39		Petty cash	134.39	
Flights TAT	1103.97		Petty cash	134.48	

extra bags GVA	110.39		extra bag 26thmay	68.61	
Fairview food	24.21		food latitude	19.9	
hotel	202.27		food uk	5	
gwennies food	26.81		Petty cash	67.56	
ski bag	62.08				
extra bag	102.26				
Sat Phone use age	10				
Total	1896.6		total	698.54	

Spent total £4545.14

Income

£1350 MEF

£300 Alpine Club

£1200 BMC

Total £2850

Bios

Tim Blakemore, 43, British Mountain Guide

Been climbing for more than 20 years on every continent on earth. Many Alpine routes and North Faces including Matterhorn, Jorasses, Droites (3 times), Sans Nom, Beyond Good and Evil etc. Longer ridges like Salbitschen, Peutery Integral, Innominata, Brouillard.

New routes and repeats of hard ice in Norway (Lofoten, Senja and Aurland/ Laerdal/Gudvangen) : Gully of the Cods (new route on Vagakellan Scottish VII), Pass the Dutchie (Senja) M7 600m and 1st ascents of Fossil Monster WI 6 and Voldafossen WI6+.

New routes in UK include Northumberland and Scotland (Ben Nevis and Glencoe, Beinn Bhann etc) Inc. early hard repeats to VIII (when that was hard)

and solos of ice routes to VI.

Attempted new routes in Nepal.

Various expeditions to Nepal, Africa, Ecuador, Mexico, Kyrgyzstan, Antarctica.

Exploratory ski/sail trips to Western Greenland, Arctic Norway and Antarctica.

I am a full time IFMGA/UIAGM Mountain Guide

Mike 'Twid' Turner, 48, British, Mountain Guide.

Rock climbing generally happy on E5 have climbed E7 in 2014. Climbed over 70 E7/8 routes many first ascents, many 8a sports routes. Winter climbing at Scottish 7 ice and mixed 8. M7, Extensive experience winter climbing worldwide. Scotland 30 yrs. of winter climbing, Norway, Iceland, Canada, US, Morocco, Alps, Slovenia. 30 yrs. of Alpine Summer 25 years of winter Alpine Climbing. High lights North faces of Eiger, Jorasses 3x , Doites, Divine Providence, Fisch etc

25 yrs of Expedition Alaska 11, Baffin 2, Patagonia 8, Borneo, Pakistan 3, Mali 2, Madagascar, Greenland, US, Morocco 15. Last 6 nominee Piolet D'Or.

High Lights Vitalstics E8 Gogarth, Scrabble mixed 8 Scotland, Octopussy M8, Super Supa Alaska, Nawas Pakistan 1300m Big Wall, Arctic Monkeys Baffin 1600m 23 Days,

Mike 'Twid' Turner

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