

Denali Nights: A commercial expedition to climb Mt McKinley's West Buttress (Footsteps on the Mountain travel diaries Book 20)

Mark Horrell

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The sign behind the desk in the National Park ranger station in Talkeetna, the gateway town for Denali, North America's highest mountain, had some news which could be interpreted one of two ways depending on whether you were a pessimist or an optimist.

79% of climbers had reached the summit that season, and the normal success rate was just 50%. Surely that meant it was a good year to climb Denali?

There had been an unprecedented spell of good weather on the peak known as Mt McKinley, one of the Seven Summits, a peak notorious for its severe conditions and cold temperatures that trapped climbers in storms for days on end. This year people were climbing straight up and reaching the summit without a hitch, and coming back down again days ahead of schedule.

But it would take two weeks of hauling 30kg sledges while carrying 20kg backpacks before Mark Horrell's team would be in a position to launch an attack on the summit themselves, and they knew these statistics evened themselves out eventually.

Would the weather hold, or would they find themselves fighting to survive in the teeth of a storm?

This is Mark's account of his expedition to climb Denali's West Buttress as part of a commercial team, and contains lots of useful advice, like not falling asleep while using a pee bottle, how to avoid bonking on the trail, and how to make a sledge travel in the right direction by shouting at it.



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