

Griffith-Sim Alaska 2010

Introduction

Jon Griffith and myself decided in the Autumn of 2009 to head to Alaska the next spring. Jon, a professional photographer living in Chamonix and myself, a dairy farmer/full time climber also living in Chamonix most of the year are regular climbing partners. The type of climbing that Alaska offers is right up our street, i.e. big mixed and ice routes, that lend themselves to being climbing in long single pushes. Single pushing is a style that fascinates us both and is an area in which we have been experimenting for some time. It means you can climb huge technical routes equipped as if you are going for a day climb off the Aguille Du Midi.

We wanted to climb one of three (but mainly 2) objectives in the Ruth Gorge in April, then fly over to Denali base camp, from where we wished to climb the Moonflower buttress of Mount Hunter.

Summary

After deciding on our 11300 objective due to conditions, we set up camp at the mountain house and managed to make the most of the weather. With two days climbing in 1 month. In these two days we made attempts at the line on the east face but were turned around for various reasons including a large fall from Jon at about 400 metres height. We then went to the Kahiltna glacier and climbed The West Ridge of Mount Francis, the south west face of Kahiltna Queen, and two thirds of the Moonflower, before we were forced to bail for various reasons.

Expedition Diary

April

12th Leave UK

12th-17th Shop in Anchorage Anchorage, travel to Talkeetna and wait for flying conditions.

18th Land on glacier and set up base camp.

19th Poor weather, but tour up to the rooster comb and recce the glacier beneath objective.

20th Attempted to recce the glacier again but turned around due to weather.

20th-24th Tent bound.

25th Hauled sledges and gear 5 miles up the glacier to establish a small advanced base.

25th – 2nd May, tent bound or poor weather, a lot of snow fell in this time.

3rd Made a tentative attempt on the line. Reached c400 metres where a dangerous pitch stopped us. Planned to come back with another picket.

4th-7th Bad weather a lot of snow. Inactivity.

8th Attempt the line once more, the pitch doesn't go, Jon falls, bail.

9th -13th Bad weather lots of snow, very warm.

13th Paul Roderick flies us to Kahiltna.

14th and 15th bad weather

16th Climb west ridge of Francis.

17th ski tour

18th Climb south west couloirs of Kahiltna Queen.

19th Recce schrund and bottom section of Moonflower.

20th-23rd Bad weather.

24th Moonflower

25th Rest

26th Fly out.

27th-5th June, Due to a complication with our flights we had to wait, in this time we hired a car and went fishing.

The following is a little essay I wrote for a blog I am currently contributing for at <http://marmotukathleteblog.blogspot.com/> . It is an account of the month or so spent in Alaska from my point of view and although written in a not so factual style as most reports, I feel it explains and describes effectively.

Just back from a 5 week trip to Alaska with Jon Griffith. Although ultimately unsuccessful in achieving our original aims, we had an awesome time, and did some of the most outrageous climbing ever.

After a frustrating few days in Anchorage, shopping and getting generally organised, and then a wild night in Talkeetna with some rednecks, our pilot Rico dropped us off in the Ruth Amphitheatre in his three seated Beaver ski plane on the 18th of April. Although Alaska had had one of the driest winters in living memory, the week before had seen huge amounts of snow throughout the range, and when we stepped out of the aircraft we went straight up to our hips in the lightest snow imaginable. We joked about the irony of it while we relayed our many bags through the snow to where we were to set up base (about 2 hours to move 6 bags 200 yards!), however, if we knew what was to come we probably would have saved the jokes!

The Ruth amphitheatre is a vast basin of ice that you could sit a large town inside and have room around the edges. Its formed by the jumble of immense glaciers which spill off Mount Silverthrone in the east, and Denali and Huntington in the North to culminate in ????? of ice, which at the end of the amphitheatre is squeezed through a gap a tenth of the size and forced down the gorge proper, which is the reason there are so many huge faces in this region.

The next day, in a state of excitement we made our way up to the very head of the amphitheatre to try and get a glimpse of the line we wanted to climb, which splits a large unclimbed face in a gigantic 1400 metre gash. It was snowing lightly all day and felt unseasonably warm, but we reached a point a kilometre or so from the bergschrund, where the glacier turns nasty. Up to this point the glacier is straight forward, with only a couple of broken sections where holes have to be negotiated, but to get to our line we had to take a sharp right and navigate our way through a frightening maze of poorly covered snow bridges. On this attempt we persevered for a few hours before skiing back to base, a little disappointed we didn't get a glimpse of the line.

The next three weeks went in a haze of digging, trail breaking and card games. It would snow heavily, putting down a couple of feet every night and then clear up marginally in the day before the next snow hit. It took us three attempts over the period of a week to even get to the bottom of our line. This was a real shock as we had expected to be able to go and check it out early on and put a good track in and stash some kit. Other than the weather the main reason for this delay was the state of the glacier. From our base camp to the foot of our line was about 5 miles, with the last km being slow and dangerous, which took about three and a half hours with a good track in place and light bags, however without a track it was significantly longer. With it snowing so much we had to break trail more often than not to

begin with. However, the biggest problem was that there was a section of glacier spanning about a kilometre beneath the face which was extremely dangerous. Probably due to the dry winter, it was very poorly filled in and one section which we dubbed Teletubby Land involved crossing a dodgy crevasse, only just covered by two joining cornices every 20 metres for about 300 metres, which meant the lead and the second were always standing on something nasty. We swapped our superlight 130 skis for our fat powder planks so we could displace more weight.

Eventually, after establishing a smaller camp beneath the route, where we could stash some kit, we managed to get on the line. We started quite late (set alarm for 3 a.m., and crossed schrund at 6), so we could get more sleep but make the most of the huge days you get in Alaska. The schrund and initial 200 metre couloir went fast and we were pleased with the firmness of the snow and the rock quality. At the top of the couloir we followed a steep narrow goulotte at about scot 6ish, this section was brilliant sticky ice in the back of a narrow cleft at a sustained 85 and 90 degrees. It was just like being at home in Chamonix. We moved together up this until it eased in angle. As Jon brought me up to his belay I glanced up at the next 30 metres, it made me feel sick to look at. A 20 metre wall of 85 and 90 degree crud and powder, which was capped by an overhanging snow plug the size of a fiesta. "O well its Jon's block so his problem" I thought as I traversed to his belay and started to stack the ropes and sort gear, perhaps trying to disguise the deeper thought that this pitch could be a stopper, and that the steep narrow sides of the corner were unlikely to provide an alternative route.

Jon made steady but unstable progress up the first half of the plug, struggling to find much worthwhile gear as the rock walls were completely blank and there was no screwable ice no matter how deep he dug. After some time he managed to get near the bulging top section, at which point he put his arm straight through the snow to realise he was teetering up an eggshell of snow about a foot thick in places, with an airy cave behind. The only way to climb this snow was by aiding directly off a snow picket. I'm not a big fan of snow pickets as they're a faff to climb with and more often than not you don't even place them. Due to this and the extremely mixed nature of the line, we made the retrospectively poor decision to only take one on the route with us. After deeming it just too dangerous to climb, repeatedly aiding off the same picket with no decent gear until my belay Jon slowly reversed the pitch all the way down to me, tensioning off the picket then stabbing it in lower down quickly. He felt that he just could not afford to fall anywhere on the pitch, and that it was quite likely that he was going to! Also, the mushroom/plug above him was going to have to be passed, which on either side meant somehow spanning off it. I once had one a 20th of the size fall on me mid-move on a route in the alps, and that was from merely brushing it with my axe, this one must have weighed several tonnes and was probably going to need to be partially tunnelled through!!

Once at my belay Jon traversed out right from where he could get a good look up the next 7-800 meters of our route. He brought me across and the sight of the ground above was the most motivating thing I've ever seen. The gully was stepped with long vertical sections, chockstone-trickery, leaning ramps and amazing rock until it leaned out of sight, - it was by far the coolest thing I've ever seen. After so much time had been spent trying this pitch, the sun had by now come directly in to the lower part of the couloir and stuff from the right flank of the groove system was starting to fall (we had planned to be above this point by then). It was one of those mutually agreed moments, we both knew we had to bail fast. But we also

both knew that we'd be back, with one more snow picket and a huge rack so we could aid round the plug if needed.

Once again we played the waiting game. A forecast we got from NOAA at one point said high pressure for a whole week! We probably saw an afternoon of blue sky in this time. However, eventually we managed to get in to position with a day of good weather to give the line another shot. So once again we found ourselves at the foot of the snow mushroom pitch, this time with a second picket and a Jon that wanted revenge. He felt sure that with a second picket he could make it through the top mushroom, even if it was still inadequately protected. About 2 metres past his previous highpoint things went wrong. I heard a scream and looked up to see Jon hurtling through the air sideways, I watched and felt gear rip one piece after another. My heart was in my mouth at the thought of him coming on to the belay, as although there was one good nut, the blocks between which my wires were were definitely only frozen in place. He thumped heavily on to his back against the less steep part of the gully beneath the mushroom and was held by a screw and screamer. He hit the gully so hard that even though he fell probably 20 metres/60-70 feet, (he's being modest when he says 50feet!!) not a single stitch of the screamer split.

After lying still for a minute or two to make sure his back was ok, Jon untangled himself from the slings, wires, rope, and axes in which he was entwined and returned to my belay. Although he'd obviously hurt his lower back a fair amount (giving him real problems a month later and he now prefers a hard floor to a mattress!) we thought we may as well try to aid up a splitter crack to our right. I took the lead and rock climbed with no gloves for a few metres, until I lost all feeling, when I dry tooled a few moves then sat on some gear to look at the next section over the lip. Unfortunately there was no next section! The wall was completely blank. By this point we were getting quite fucked off, the next few hundred metres looked so amazing and so doable! As the sun once again came round, some stuff started to fall from the right flank and sounded like bombs landing around us. It was time to go. Without needing to say much to each other, we set up an anchor and headed down.

We were gutted, but at the same time pleased that the decision had been made for us. Jon's back was to cause him trouble throughout the rest of the trip. At first we thought we might try it one more time with some kind of ski pole anchor buried in the back of the cave, but the weather decided that for us. When we thought we'd had our snow quota for the month, once again it snowed for pretty much a week solid.

Paul Roderick flew us over to Denali base camp on the Kahiltna glacier in a brief weather window. We wanted to climb the Moonflower Buttress of Mount Hunter. The Moonflower is perhaps the definitive big mixed test piece of the world, even though it received its first ascent (over many days and with a fair bit of aid) in 1983. Although it can't compete with routes on the south face of Denali for sheer size, it is one of the more sustained technical routes in Alaska and is usually climbed in two or three days. We really wanted to single push the route, which we knew would mean climbing for well over thirty hours and would mean less chance of actually finishing to the summit (the majority of the ascents this route has received have only been to the top of the difficulties, and there have been very few single push ascents, Marko Prezelj in 2002 being the first). However single pushing is what really interests me, and with 24 hour daylight, God made Alaska for single-pushing.

We were really worried about our fitness after so much inactivity. When in Chamonix, me and Jon pretty much climb every single day, big faces, ice cragging, dry tooling, ski touring the whole time, and even on bad weather days we try to do 800 to 1000 metres of height

gain on skis. Over the last month we'd climbed for two days, and hadn't been pumped for over 5 weeks. To try and gauge our current fitness we did some beasting on mountains around the Kahiltna glacier. Firstly the east ridge of Mount Francis, which we managed in a couple of hours from its base, and then Kahiltna Queen's south west face, which is a bit like climbing the Couturier on the Aguille Verte, (to the summit ridge due to spooky snow). A few days later, we decided we'd had enough of listening to weather forecasts, and even though it was forecasted to snow sometime in the next 24 hours we got on the moonflower. Its hard to explain just how amazing the climbing is on this route. Sustained and on your arms pretty much the whole way, pitch after pitch of dream-like mixed climbing. We were going super light. No sleeping bags, apart from our climbing kit just a duvet jacket a jet boil and a very very small bothy bag we could get our upper bodies in to. We made fast progress, over the "prow", which is the technical crux of the route in four and a half hours. Continuing at a similar speed we negotiated tamara's traverse and the Mcnerthey dagger without any problem and up on to the first icefield. The icefield is about 150 metres long and at its top the hard climbing resumes. Two pitches, the second being quite tricky, are climbed underneath the "Mascioli Mushroom". This snow mushroom is huge, we're talking largish caravan sized, and a few years ago part of it fell off killing Steve Mascioli who was belaying his partner. Just as I was leading the first of the two pitches the sun came on to the mushroom, providing me with ample motivation to get up the harder pitch and out of the way!! This leads to "The Shaft" which is the other crux of the route, consisting of 3 sustained ice pitches. All three are vertical for all but a few body lengths, which are overhanging. The first pitch wasn't properly formed and I was forced to aid up the left wall then bairhandedly mantle a chockstone, my biceps were both cramping badly at this point, and after a gum drying rock move I looked down to see blood over the rock and ice, my hands were quite shredded but I couldn't feel them so hadn't realised. The last pitch is overhanging for the longest and on this one my arms gave up. In all it felt like climbing three WI6's after each other, but I don't think it can have been as WI6 can be fucking hard. But I certainly climbed 6's this winter which were easier than that last pitch. I guess it all comes down to the style. If you climb it the normal way, you reach these pitches relatively fresh after the bivi on the first icefield, but single pushing you're already about 19 pitches up and in our case 14 hours down the line. Above the shaft we agreed to stop for a couple hours or more. When climbing in this style you have to stop to melt snow, if you're to achieve anything like 7 litres every 24 hours, which in theory is the minimum intake. After deciding against a slight scoop in the snow to our right due to the snow mushroom above it, we dug out a ledge a foot wide above and left. (about an hour later we were startled by a large bang and said snow mushroom collapsed and obliterated where we would have been sleeping.....) Perching on this ledge we melted snow and ate some much needed food. It was about mid minus 20's so with no sleeping bag we were pleased for our foot warmers in our boots, however I still got very worried about my toes- the feeling didn't return properly for a few days afterwards. When we sensed we'd been there long enough, it was mutually agreed that we had to make a decision as to keep on or head down. Although this break was planned, we both felt that the going down issue had to be broached. My toes were definitely an important factor for me, as well as the huge black clouds that were shrouding Denali- we couldn't afford to sit out anything. We would also be lying not to say we were pretty spent, the month of inactivity had just destroyed our fitness, and for this we felt quite sorry. After a calculative discussion, we decided on down. It was weird, I'd wanted to climb this route more than any other ever since

reading about it when I was 15, and in theory we'd been climbing great, 16 hours up to this point was a good time, past the hard climbing and both cruxes. Above us there were a handful of still interesting but apparently not too bad pitches before the long snow-plod to the summit. As so often in this type of climbing, it was the judgements that were dictating success or failure.

We rapped the face in 21 long abseils and some down climbing/traversing. The bagels tasted good at basecamp.

We felt it was time to go home, things were hotting up and I wanted to feel the texture of the sandstone boulders at home under my finger tips. We spent a further few days in Alaska, due to a complication with our flights. This was actually quite nice, as we saw other bits of Alaska, caught fish and I got charged at by a moose!

Now I'm at my parent's home in St. Bees in west Cumbria, its a sunny evening and I'm about to go bouldering.

Weather; normal?

As stated in the above account, the weather made it pretty hard to be productive and at times stay positive. There were a couple of periods when we were tent bound for about a week at a time. On top of this there were also two three day periods of weather which made things impossible. Up where we were in the amphitheatre, we had a handful (5?) blue sky days in the first 4 weeks of the trip. To make things even more annoying these weren't consecutive, but on their own, in between periods of terrible weather. Being a south east facing groove, our objective on 11300 was simply too dangerous to get on without giving it at least one good day to shed its snow. This meant that the odd day of good weather here and there was useless and might as well have been snowing!

During this period we kept asking our selves "is this normal?" with it being our first time in Alaska we did begin to wonder whether this was normal and whether we were actually being a bit wet about the whole thing. Regardless of this, we knew it was simply too dangerous to set foot on the face when there was a couple of feet falling in 24 hours. After talking to some Alaskan guides we were assured that this was quite extraordinary weather, some of the rangers thought it felt a bit like the repetitive cycle of lows more associated with February and March, but much more sustained.

As well as there being a lot of precipitation in the time we spent in the Ruth, it was also extremely mild. The poor weather and cloud cover seemed to be doing a good job of insulating the lower altitudes. Not once in Alaska did I feel like I wanted my -20 sleeping bag, and opted to use my -5 one the whole time. People I've spoken to who have been in April previous years have slept in two -20 bags to stay warm enough!

It is also worth mentioning that for January, February and March there was almost no precipitation at all. In Mark Westman's words, one of the driest winters in living memory. This had a huge affect on the glacier immediately beneath the East face of 11300. As explained above, it took me and Jon three goes to navigate our way through it. After marking it out with Bamboo, the track we deemed safe meandered so badly to avoid crevasses, the distance to go 100 yards was probably nearer 200. Not once even after many passages did we dare go unroped. When I spoke to two friends who crossed exactly the same place last April, they said they didn't even think to put a rope on once, the glacier was completely filled.

In Mid may, when we were on the Kahiltna glacier the weather improved. Jon and I felt we were at last doing what we came to Alaska for, and climbed 2 and $\frac{3}{4}$ routes in ten days. We were interested to find that some people on their 4th and 5th Alaskan seasons who had just been flown out, were moaning about the weather in this time. For us, after experiencing April, this was beautiful weather!!

To summarise, I think it was a very bad year. What with the drought experienced in Jan-March, then the huge precipitation from then on. The fact that it coincided with the El Nino could be coincidence, or could have been instrumental. Who Knows?

Base camp Equipment

Our base camp was centred around a Marmot Asgard 3p tent. We found the tent to be a perfect size for the two of us. In the long periods of bad weather the tent was big enough to stop us from irritating each other, but not so big that it was cold and airy. We also had a small two man tent that we used to store food and gear. This meant that we could keep our "living" tent tidy, organised and un-cluttered.

Most of our cooking was done outside, both to maximise our time spent out of the tent, and to stop the tent vestibule getting messy. We had been told that an igloo was the way to go regarding cooking, and we had planned to construct a snow hole/igloo with a tarp, but in the end we found cooking in the large vestibule of the Asgard to be fine. All our cooking was done on an MSR XGK stove. The stove performed excellently and was put through its paces to melt 10-15 litres of water every day. In the 5 weeks we spent on the glacier we used 7 Gallons of Coleman white gas (26 litres). This was supplied by TAT at a good price, and they even flew an additional one out for us when we got low.

Our mp4 player was vital for keeping spirits high. With this we could listen to music, watch films and even store topos. We also had a good pair of portable speakers which were invaluable.

Before going to Alaska Jon had invested in a large, completely waterproof solar panel. Its dimensions were about 100cm by 50cm, but it folded in to a pouch about A4 sized. This meant we could rapidly charge camera batteries, mp4 batteries and AA's without even leaving the tent, as the panel would sit on the roof of the tent even if it was snowing.

Logistics, Flights etc.

We flew to Anchorage in a round-about way from London with KLM. This route stopped off at Amsterdam and Minneapolis and took a total of 23 hours on the way back, and a little less on the way. This was quite a tormented journey which delivered us at the other end severely jet-lagged. However, it was the cheapest available option. If you can get a flight which stops in Seattle it is apparently a much smoother journey. KLM were perfectly reasonable to fly with, getting all 6 of our bags on to the three connecting flights no problem. They have the usual 1 free hold bag of 23kg, and then charge exponentially for anything additional on that. We spent about £400 both ways to get our ski's onboard in a ski bag and had an extra hold bag each. Although expensive, we would rather do this than hire skis at the other end.

In Anchorage we stayed at the Earth B+B. This is a comfortable, hospitable place in walking distance of the centre of town. From here we based ourselves to complete all the shopping at REI and AMH which are located within 200 yards of each other just out of town from the B+B. Also located in this same 200 yards is a satellite phone hire shop, which runs a smooth service.

We travelled from Anchorage to Talkeetna with Denali Overland. This was expensive on the way as we were on our own so paid full rates, but on the return it was a very cheap and extremely friendly service.

Once in Talkeetna we were in the very efficient and capable hands of TAT. TAT accommodated us in their bunkhouse and kept us informed as to when we could be flown out. The girls at the reception were extremely friendly and helpful throughout the trip, when we would ring up for weather updates and when Jon was having technological problems. TAT seem to have mastered the art of glacier flights and it would seem bend over backwards to help you as long as you're flying with them.

TAT - <http://www.talkeetnaair.com/about-us/team-tat>

Denali overland - <http://www.denalioverland.com/about.html>

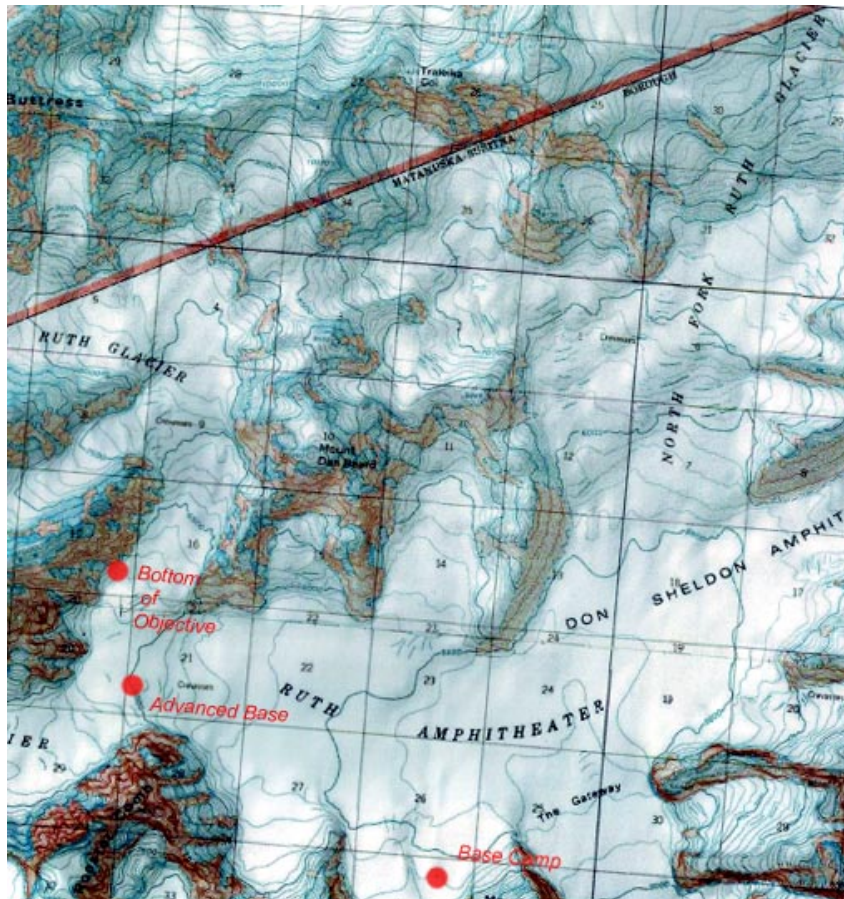
Earth B+B - <http://www.earthbb.com/aboutUs.htm>

Sponsors

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Also thanks to PHD, Jon Bracey and Gavin Pike.
And Kenton Cool and Gareth Hughes for references.

To see many photo's from throughout the trip go to - <http://www.alpineexposures.com/pages/alaska-2010>

Map of the Amphitheatre



Finances (to nearest £10)

Income- Alpine Club-£500

MEF-£800

BMC-£1000

Total- £2300

Expenditure: (collective)

Flights, including extra baggage- £1800

Glacier flights- £1050

Food- £600

Equipment (mainly camp stuff from REI)- £500

Other (B+B, car hire, expenses whilst in Anchorage etc.)- £400

Total-£4350