

Lacuna Foraker Expedition 2011 (11/23)

Location: Mt McKinley/Denali National Park, Alaska, USA

Dates: May 1st to June 1st 2011

Aim: First Ascents of the unclimbed peaks in the Lacuna Glacier and on the South Face of Mt Foraker.

Author: Graham Zimmerman

Year: 2011

Abstract

Two climbers Graham Zimmerman and Mark Allen based themselves out of the Kahiltna Base camp in Mt McKinley/Denali National Park, Alaska, for a the month of May 2011. From base camp they skied 27km into the NorthWest fork of the Lacuna Glacier in turn being the first to explore this area. Over the course of 2 trips from Kahiltna they opened 3 new routes on an unclimbed peak.

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Introduction

The intention of this expedition was to explore the head of the Lacuna Glacier in the Central Alaska Range. In Latin, Lacuna means missing link, referring to the fact that while the glaciers lateral to the Lacuna have in the past seen attention (specifically, Mt Russel and the Fin in the Yetna and the extensive development in the Kahiltna) the Lacuna has been overlooked. The team believes this has been due to general inaccessibility due to complex broken glaciers and lack of knowledge.

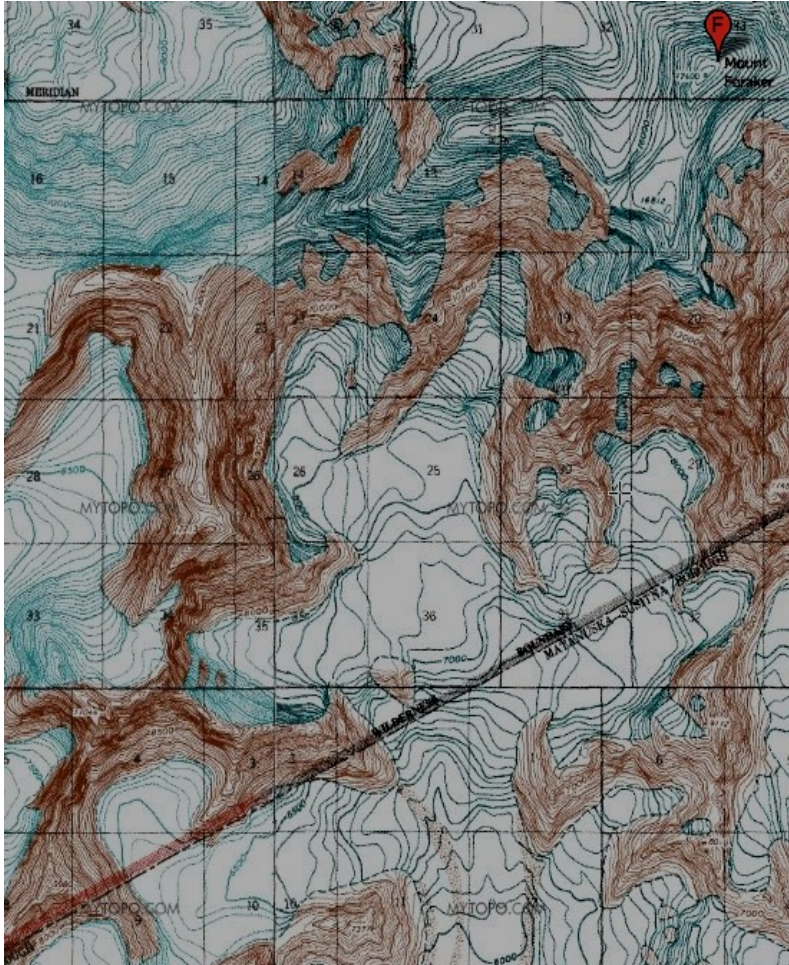


Figure 1 - Map depicting the area visited

Fokaker's south face dominates the head of the Lacuna and is the only feature in the area that has seen any attention. It holds the classic Infinite Spur and a selection of other very technical and commuting routes. Other than this there are a series of steep remote peaks that have never seen attention alpinists. It was the original goal of the Mark Allen and Graham Zimmerman to gain access to this area from the ground since planes cannot land in the vicinity of the upper Lacuna and to explore this area both in terms of the unclimbed peaks and to explore further potential on the South Face of Foraker.

This expedition took place over the month of May 2011.

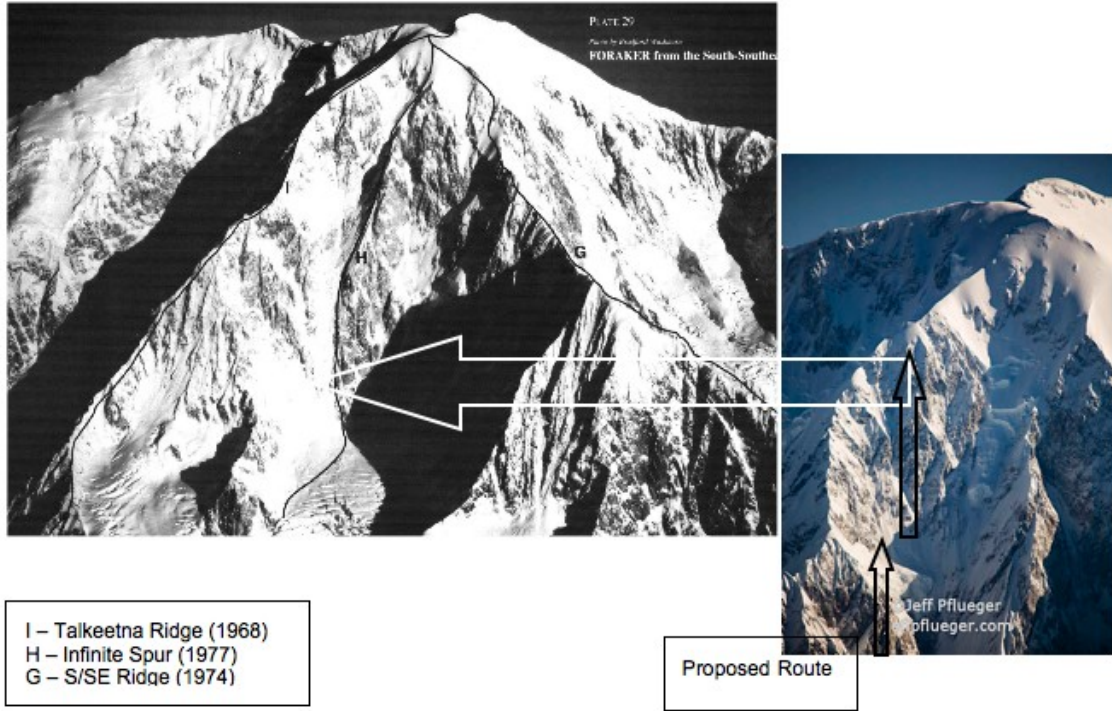


Fig 2 – The South Face of Mt Foraker, (photo credit, Bradford Washburn and Jeff Pflueger)



Figure 3 – Unclimbed Peaks at the head of the Lacuna (Photo Credit – Jeff Pflueger)

Expedition Members



Fig 3 – Graham Zimmerman (photo credit, Yewjin Tan)

Graham Zimmerman

- Age: 25
- Nationality: New Zealand/American,
- NZAC membership 1580, Overseas Section, Former Otago Section Committee Member,
- Also member of American Alpine Club
- Occupation: Emergency Medical Technician, Geophysics Surveyor, Athlete

From the FAs in the greater ranges to single day ascents of Grade VI Yosemite test pieces, as well as a wealth of steep ice in the Canadian Rockies and New Zealand (including a number of first ascents), Graham has amassed an impressive amount of experience incongruous with his years.

In 2010 Graham completed a successful expedition to Patagonia where despite some of the worst weather ever seen in the area he was successful in completing a first ascent on Los Gemelos ('The Slash' IV+ 5.10b A2, 1200ft) in Torres Del Paine N.P. In April he undertook an expedition to the Ruth Glacier of Alaska and completed the first ascent of "Vitalogy" (AK Grade 5, M6+, WI5, 5.9, A1, 4,600ft) on the SW Buttress of Mt Bradley.

For these accomplishments Graham received the 2010 Alpinist of the Year from the Canterbury Mountaineering Club (New Zealand).



Fig 4 – Mark Allen (Photo Credit, Graham Zimmerman)

Mark Allen

- Age: 31
- Nationality: American
- Occupation: IFMGA Certified Mountain Guide,

Mark is a full IFMGA Certified Mountain Guide, well versed in all types of alpine terrain. He has published many first ascents in the North Cascades ranging from snow and ice climbs to technical rock climbs. His climbing has taken him on trips and expeditions to Chamonix, Patagonia, Alaska, New Zealand, China, Nepal and Antarctica.

In April 2010 he and Graham undertook an expedition to the Ruth Glacier of Alaska and completed the first ascent of "Vitalogy" (AK Grade 5, M6+, WI5, 5.9, A1, 4,600ft) on the SW Buttress of Mt Bradley.

Adventurous Activities

During their month on the glacier Graham Zimmerman and Mark Allen maintained a base camp at the Kahiltna Glacier from where they launched into the Lacuna glacier twice and onto the West Ridge of Mt Hunter.

Upon arrival they departed towards the Lacuna glacier on skis with sleds, the route took them over the passes described in Joe Puyear's SuperTopo guide to the Infinite Spur (Foraker South Face), at the base of the 2nd pass they set up an advanced base camp (due to being unable to haul sleds over the send pass which involved a 800ft 45 degree coulior). From here they continued to the NW fork of the Lacuna. This in total took 4 days due to a number of route finding challenges found en route which included avalanche slopes where significant collapses were experienced and a series of exceedingly complex icefalls.

Having finally gained access to the NW fork they attempted the first ascent of peak 12,214 via what became referred to as the Lunar Spur, after a series of beautiful mixed cruxes and 1,500ft of terrifying facet covered knife edged rock ridge climbing they were turned around on the upper ridge by bad weather and bottomless and unstable sugar snow. Deciding that the mountains were still very much in winter conditions they retreated back to Kahiltna base camp where they rested and prepared for the West Ridge of Mt Hunter.

Departing at night in order to make use of harder snow conditions Mark and Graham climbed through above the cruxes on the West Ridge. The following day they climbed to the summit plateau where they bivied intending to further acclimatize and prepare for either the S face of Foraker or the N buttress of Hunter. With weather coming in the next day they ran to the summit and back down the ridge descending below the "ice face" into the Ramen Coulior which put them easily back on the glacier just as white out conditions came in. After a number of hours wandering on the glacier they were forced to bivy again this time without food, unable to navigate around the ice falls that lays at the bottom of the glacier leading into the Kahiltna proper. In the morning they weather had cleared at they were able to find they're way through a series of steep rappels and onto easy walking back to they're skis.

A fantastic description of the West Ridge can be found in Joe Puyear's SuperTopo guide Alaska.

After a few more days of rest Graham and Mark decided to return to the Lacuna, this was due to a few factors. Firstly, it had been obvious upon observation that not only was the South Face of Foraker not yet in condition, but the proposed route was threatened by a serac, mitigation of which would have constituted climbing a very unasthetic and wandering line through a dangerous section of the face. Also a low pressure system was bearing down on the range meaning many days would need to be waited out until attempting any of the steeper terrain on Hunter. With this they used the poor weather to ski back into the Lacuna.

The approach this time took 2 days. An emphasis was placed on traveling at night so that snow conditions would be safer and faster, this also meant that they were resting during the heat of the day allowing for more comfortable rest in thin sleeping bags. On this trip a minimum of equipment was brought, consisting of half bags, a First Light tent and a Reactor stove. This made travel much faster and more comfortable.

The tent was set at the same position below peak 12,214 and after a day of rest the team departed in the evening to attempt the central buttress on the South Face with a bare minimum of kit including a stove and small amount of food.. The feature involved 9-10 technical pitches with physical and dangerous cruxes up to M6 A1 and sections of extremely unstable cornicing and 2 long simul-climbing pitches on more moderate mixed and snow terrain. This brought the team into an upper coulior that they followed via 50 degree snow for 1,000ft to the ridge line. At this point, it had begun snowing and it had become obvious that the black clouds in the sky were upon them so they began rappelling and down-climbing the line climbed on the last trip (The Lunar Spur). After 26 hours on the move they arrived back at the tent

After a day of rest Graham and Mark rationed their food so that they could make one last attempt. This time taking the coulior up the center of the South Face. They departed in the evening after the snow had time to become firm and they climbed very quickly up the coulior ascending the 3,500ft feature in 5 hours, intersecting the ridge and climbing the final 1,00ft to the summit in another hour. The weather was beautiful as was the view.

The descent was rather involved. Six time consuming diagonal rappels were made from the summit over spines in order to regain the established descent. At which point they started moving much faster. A 4 hour break was taken at the point where the descent dropped off the ridge into a coulior in order to stay out of the feature during the heat of the day. They reached camp 18 hours after starting. The push had been completed on 3 bars each.

After a night of sleep and some mashed potatoes they departed for the 27km ski back to base camp with only 2 packets of oatmeal each. This ski took them 13 hours to complete. Once in Kahiltna Basecamp they spent a day gorging on food before flying back to Talkeetna and civilization.

With the summiting of peak 12,214 Graham and Mark made the first ascent, coining it 'Voyager Peak' and in turn linked up the other attempts.

Administration and Logistics

Destination Area

Graham and Mark flew into the Kahiltina Base Camp and proceeded to spend the next month exploring the Lacuna glacier system that sits at the South Face of Mt Foraker. Accessing this area involved over 25km of glacier travel over very complex alpine terrain.

Research materials and Information Sources'

Research was completed through numerous sources. Jonathan Waterman's book *High Alaska*, provides excellent information on the routes climbed on Denali, Foraker and Hunter as well as a plethora of Bradford Washburn's amazing photographs of the range. Joe Puryear's *SuperTopo Alaska* provides ample in depth beta on the climbing in the most popular areas and gives excellent descriptions for the classic routes (including the West Ridge of Hunter).

Beyond this the American Alpine Journal and Alpinist Magazine were researched heavily.

In this range local knowledge is paramount and extensive consultation was made with many folks most notably, Mark Westman, Colin Haley and the National Park Climbing Rangers.

Through these venues the team feels that they constructed a very accurate database on what had been completed in the areas visited during the trip.

Training

In order to prepare for the expedition the team members adhered to a rigorous training regime which involved aggressive circuit and cardiovascular training. This was complimentary to huge amounts of time spent climbing in Yosemite, Utah, Montana and the North Cascades, all in the United States.

Permission and Permits

The team was registered with the National Park Service. For Foraker and Denali a permit must be acquired, the application for this permit must be submitted 60 days before attempting the mountain and costs 200\$. It needs to be noted that the price of this permit is in the process of being raised for future seasons.

Finances

Below can be found the per person budget for the expedition and a total budget for all three climbers, all amounts are in USD.

Travel	SEA-ANK w/ AK air = \$500.00 ANK- Talkeetna shuttle with EBB = \$140.00 Talkeetna-Kahiltina w/ TAT = \$650.00
Food and Stores	\$700.00
Insurance	\$200.00
Climbing Permits	\$200.00
Other and Contingency	\$1,000.00
Total per person	\$3,390.00
TOTAL FOR EXPEDITION (2 people)	\$6,780.00

Insurance

Climbing insurance was provided through 'Global Rescue'.

Travel Transport and Freighting

- The team flew from Seattle to Anchorage via commercial airlines.
- The Earth Bed and Breakfast offers a shuttle from Anchorage to Talkeetna.
- Talkeetna Air Taxis is the best air service out of Talkeetna into the Alaska range.
- Mark and Graham highly recommend both Earth B&B and TAT.

Food and Accommodation

Food – purchased in Anchorage at Costco (membership needed) and Fred Meyers.

Lodging – In Anchorage the team stayed with the Earth Bed and Breakfast, highly recommended. Talkeetna Air Taxis has a bunkhouse in Talkeetna which is free for folks flying into the range with them.

Communications

A satellite phone was carried at all times, we felt this very necessary due to the remoteness of the objectives and the commitment of the approaches involved.

The team was based in Kahiltina Base camp which has a station manned by National Park Service personnel. The rangers were kept up to date with the teams plans. It was found that they were very receptive and attentive regarding this information for which Graham and Mark were most thankful.

Risks and hazards

During the expedition over 150 kilometers of glacier travel were completed in complex glacial systems. Hazard mitigation was a constant regarding crevasses, exposure to seracs and avalanches as well as weather. All of this travel was completed with no crevasses falls or close calls.

The routes chosen were done so for aesthetics, climb-ability, challenge and most importantly limitation of exposure to objective hazards. Once again the team was very successful with this and no close calls or injuries were sustained.

Medical Arrangements

Graham is a United States Nationally Registered Emergency Medical Technician trained in both urban and wilderness medicine. He carried an extensive medical kit with him so that he would have been able to deal with the multitude of possible problems that could have arisen during the expedition. Mark is a Wilderness First Responder and Outdoor Emergency Care Professional (Ski Patrol), trained to deal with emergencies in the back country. On account of their training, prearranged insurance, and knowledge of where the local emergency facilities were located, it was felt that the team was very well prepared to deal with an emergency situation had it arisen (with their team or another in the area).

The medical kit carried included runs of antibiotics, heavy pain killers and altitude drugs.

Environmental and Social Impact Assessment

Graham and Mark strictly followed a 'Leave No Trace' policy both while in town and in the mountains. This involved ensuring all human waste and garbage was packed out or disposed of properly while in the beautiful mountains of Alaska.

Diary/log

While in the range the team sent out a series of dispatches via satellite phone, these posts are listed below and describe the trip in detail.

May 13th 2011

We wanted to give you a call real quick and give you our one week update on our expedition 2011 on the Kahiltna Glacier. First of all when we first got here we dug in our camp at the Kahiltna landing strip and immediately set out on a six day trip to the rarely or never visited West Fork of the Lacuna Glacier. This entailed over twenty miles of glacier travel and it took us four days to recon the route out from the base of the peak which we intended to climb. We put ourselves below the unclimbed South face of a unnamed numbered peak on the Lacuna Glacier system and made it up 2,500 feet of a new route and were turned around due to bad snow conditions and an impending storm. So we ended up descending after one and a half days on route and ended up returning to our camp. We used the remaining time for the 20 mile of glacier travel back to base camp. It was pretty much an odyssey into extremely remote Alaska Range terrain into a zone that neither of us had ever seen with the naked eye and possibly hadn't been visited by a human being. So it was a pretty wild adventure. Everything is going well, right now we're focusing on acclimatization. We're going to spend the next four days climbing the West ridge of Mt. Hunter, with the intent of climbing most of the route tomorrow, and bivying as high as we can to spend as much time as can above 10,000ft to start acclimatizing for bigger objects. Hope all is going well at home and wish you guys luck, and wish us luck on our next adventure up the West ridge of Hunter.

May 18th 2011

On the morning of the 12th Mark and I left Kahiltna Base Camp for the West Ridge of Mt. Hunter. This route is a super aesthetic feature that gains about 8,000 feet of elevation in 3 miles. It is an absolute classic of the Range and is included in the revered *Fifty Classic Climbs of North America*. Without a doubt, it lives up to its reputation. The night of the 12th found us halfway up the route just above the crux, a mixed section. We had climbed up miles of beautiful corniced ridge through a series of steep rock towers. We were joined at the bivy by our buddies and local Alaskans, Clint and Boon. We spend the evening hootin' and holerin' between our tents and to Kahiltna Base camp over the radio. The next morning saw us moving on to the ice face, four pitches of traversing steep ice on the side of the knife edge ridge. Above this, we rallied up the broadening ridge to the summit plateau where we found the one of the most spectacular bivys either one of us had ever experienced. A wave of ice and snow inside a crevasse allowed us the escape the developing winds and spin drift while watching the purples and pinks of alpenglow wash over Mt Foraker. The next morning it was obvious that our weather window was coming to an end so we ran to the summit, avoiding the summit ridge cornice via a natural Chutes and Ladders tube. On the summit, we were graced with gorgeous views of the AK range around us including Denali, Foraker, Huntington and peaks of the Ruth, where we spent time last season. We then proceeded to race back down to the Ramen Couloir just below the ice face and down-climbed that feature. As we reached the glacier, we were encompassed in pea soup. With zero visibility we attempted to navigate our way around the heinous ice fall that we knew was somewhere out there in the fog in front of us. But after a few hours of fruitless wandering we bivied once more and finished our food. The next morning dawned clear and we found our way to the other side of the ice fall and by the afternoon we were back in the comforts of base camp. Now a storm is bearing down on the Range and we are resting -perfect timing. The West Ridge allowed us the gain a period of acclimatization and knowledge of the conditions up high in the mountains. When our bodies are ready and the weather is clear, we will begin to attack the steeper terrain this range has to offer and we're psyched about it. Best wishes to everyone at home. We will check in again soon.

April 1st 2011

After 4 rest days and a several feet of new snow our focus and thoughts of climbing the North Buttress of Hunter via the Moon Flower had been derailed. Rather we used the days the mountains needed to shed, to return to the Lacuna project. With high pressure predicted we hoped this would be perfect timing for an ascent and it was.

We returned to the NW fork of the Lacuna glacier after confirming with the park that our trips there were the first visits to the area. Two days of glacier travel and retracing our tracks put us back at our previous Advanced Base Camp, below the south face of the unclimbed Peak 12,214.

Returning to the peak a second time and having a previous attempt (see post one) gave us integral knowledge of the south face and a quicker route down with a previously installed descent. This encouraged us to change strategies and take a much more aggressive approach by not taking any bivi equipment and committing to a single push. Our sights became set on a central buttress right ov knife ridge climbing to the summit cap.

On May 23rd at 8:30pm we left our tent and skis at 7500ft on the NW fork of the Lacuna for the summit of unclimbed peak 12,214. The climbing on the lower buttress was several pitches of excellent steep mixed climbing with M6 cruxes on good rock and but faceted snow. The ridge narrowed to a technical gendarme laden and rather narrow

ridge with unstable and precariously balanced snow mushrooms . The exposure, position and good rock provided some epic climbing. It took us 12 hours to reach the couloir and finish the main buttress cruxes. Unforecasted clouds began to build and covered up the sun not allowing us to res and dry out during a brew up as planned and instead we had to push on. We reached the summit ridge and then caught a glimpse of the dark grey clouds on Foraker next door and began to descend. We connected with our high point from the first attempt and began a familiar descent down the SE buttress (the first attempt route). 26hours round trip.

After waking in the tent Graham and I calculated the remaining food and decide to go for one last attempt. Due to remaining energy, time, and resources we focused on the most direct line via a central couloir that trails into the upper snow headwall climbing nearly a plum line to the summit; the most obvious weakness. We had to commit to using our "return" food for the ascent (still only a couple of bars) leaving only 4 oatmeal packets for the 25km ski back to Kahiltna Base Camp. We nervously rested in perfect weather and watched the first hot day start the spring shed cycle, making massive avalanches come off the peak. We rested and got stoked to fire.

On May 26th at 10:30pm we headed up the Central Couloir. We found perfect neve and ice and blasted the face averaging 20-25ft/min and 1200ft/hr We reached the old high point on the summit ridge in less that 5 hours and summited in 3 simul-climbing pitches; 5hrs:45min at 4:15am opening the new line *To the Center* (4500ft AK4 AI2, Cornices). The descent was a long and blue collar involving technical down climbing and rappelling on the SE ridge to the SE buttress decent. We arrived at the old bivi on the SE Buttress and waited 4 hours for the snow to cool and descended back to our camp arriving at 7:15pm totaling 20:15 hours return.

This ascent felt good and validated all of our previous attempts and incomplete lines with a summit line that connected our two previous high points. This established three lines now that can be climbed to the summit.

We coined the peak Voyager Peak. Named after the satellite that launched in 1977 by NASA which is pushing further and further into outer space sending back information about deep space and carrying a payload of information about earth in case anyone else picks it up. This reflects the fact that while in the NW fork of the Lacuna we felt as though we might as well be on the moon.

Voyager Peak Route List:



Voyager Peak (12,214ft), route lines marked, descent marked in yellow (photo by Graham Zimmerman)

May 9th 2011:

Southeast Buttress/Ridge "Lunar Spur" 2500ft AK4 M5, AI 2, Cornices (Green)

May 23rd 2011:

South Face Central Buttress "Nebula Arête" 3500ft AK 5, M6, AI2, A1, Cornices (Blue)

May 26th 2011:

South Face Central Couloir "To the Center" 4500ft AK 4, AI2, Cornices (Red)

We pushed the 25km ski back to Kahiltna Base Camp in 13 hours running on fumes and returned to congrats and smiles from the park staff and friends keeping tabs on our project. This was the most adventurous Alaskan odyssey

that either of us had been on and our persistence to succeed rewarded us with a beautiful summit of a remote unclimbed peak in Alaska's great range. We thank everyone for the support and we hope you will join us next year for our nomadic wanderings in to the vertical world we are choosing to roam

Conclusions

With this expedition Graham and Mark made the first exploration of the Northwest fork of the Lacuna Glacier in Mt McKinley/Denali National Park in Alaska. Their perseverance and willingness to ration food allowed them to make the first ascent of 'Voyager Peak' (12,241ft).

It is thought that the long approach to this area has in the past kept potential suitors at bay.

They considered it an extremely successful expedition both in terms of the exploration and first ascents but also in terms of their own personal progression.