

The British St Elias Range
Expedition

2013

Final Report

Introduction

Having climbed a significant new route on the West Face of Mount Alverstone in 2005 and the first alpine-style ascent of the SW Ridge of Good Neighbour Peak (Mount Vancouver's southern summit) in 2009, Paul Schweizer and I were keen to return to the Wrangell St Elias Ranges on the Alaskan-Yukon border. This vast, remote, heavily glaciated, mountain wilderness is ideal for exploratory, lightweight alpine-style mountaineering and still has many un-climbed challenges – one being the North Spur of Mount Saint Elais (5010m). This vast ridge, with a 3000m vertical height gain had seen a couple of previous half-hearted attempts, but offers a compelling mountaineering objective (see map and photo). Ski planes are required to access the glaciers at the foot of these mountains and having flown into the range previously from Kluane Lake in the Yukon and Haines in Alaska, both reached from the Yukon capital of Whitehorse. In 2013 we opted for a different approach from the west at a road head named Chitina reached from Anchorage. The spring climbing season works best around Paul's academic commitments. We booked some international flights to Anchorage in Alaska, registered with the Kluane National Park authorities in Canada and we were on our way.

Having agreed by phone as to what technical climbing equipment, stoves etc were required, a simple plan was devised. Paul and Simon would meet at Edinburgh airport, travel to Anchorage in Alaska, purchase the remaining supplies and make their way into the mountains. To climb the route we need to be dropped off by ski-plane on the Columbus Glacier to the north of the peak, nominally in the Yukon. The closest bush pilots were the Alaskan operator – Ultima Thule Outfitters, headed by Paul Claus who we chose to fly in with.

Summary of Events

15/4/13 Paul Schweizer and Simon Yates fly from Edinburgh to Anchorage in Alaska via Amsterdam and Mineapolis

16/4/13 Arrived in Anchorage and after some sleep spent the day shopping for food and supplies. This was accomplished very easily as the main supermarket Carrs and the REI store were within a block of each other.

17/4/13 We planed to leave, but it was not possible as conditions were too windy in the mountains to fly into them. We were promised the following day would be better.

18/4/13 The weather had improved in the mountains and at 8am we were transferred by road from the hotel in Anchorage to the airstrip at Chitina (approx 4 hours), then flown into the Ultima Thule Lodge, where Paul and I were ferried individually by Super Cub to a spot on the Columbus Glacier below St Elias's North Spur. After we had both arrived on the glacier we immediately set up base camp.

19/4/13 We quickly realised that our camp was going to receive very little sunshine and as it was bitterly cold we decided to spend the day moving it to a spot further to the west which received significantly more rays.

20/4/13 We spent what was forecast to be the last day of good weather making a reconnaissance up the glacier to look at our preferred line of descent from the route.

21/4/13 A storm moved in during the night and continued through the day confining us to the camp

22/4/13 Further day of storm in camp
23/4/13 Further day of storm in camp
24/4/13 Further day of storm in camp
25/4/13 The storm finally cleared and we took the decision to abandon our attempt on the mountain and return to the UK, but the outfitters were unable to fly us out that day
26/4/13 Thankfully we were able to fly out together by Super Cub by late morning, transfer to a larger plane at the Lodge and then fly to the airstrip at Chitina, where a transfer by road took us back to Anchorage.
27/4/13 We changed our flights to return to the UK, but the soonest available departed on the 30th April
28/4/13 In Anchorage.
29/4/13 In Anchorage.
30/4/13 Transferred to the airport and began a series of flights back to the UK via Seattle and Amsterdam.
1/5/13 Paul and Simon arrive back in Edinburgh and return to their respective homes.

The Expedition

We left the UK On Monday 15th of April from Edinburgh airport and completed a long series of international flights before eventually arriving early on the 16th in Anchorage – Alaska. A pre-booked shuttle bus took us to the Ramada Hotel downtown and we went to sleep exhausted from the travel and the 11 hour time difference. After a short night of sleep we went shopping and quickly procured our groceries, hill food, fuel and gas by visiting just two stores – Carrs and REI – which were just a block apart, a short taxi drive from the hotel.

A planned departure on the 17th came to nothing, as when we telephoned the Ultima Thule lodge conditions were too windy for mountain flying. We were advised to wait in town. As we did so, the cold temperatures (-10 centigrade at night) and abundance of lying snow indicated that Alaska was suffering from a late spring like we were at home. The following day conditions had improved and we were transferred by car to a dirt airstrip near the town of Chitina (approx 4 hours) and flown by Cessna (approx one hour) to the Ultima Thule Lodge – nerve-centre of Ultima Thule Outfitters and home of the extended Claus family. It was a beautiful spot far from any road and remarkably, serviced completely by the fleet of light aircraft the Claus family run. We were then relayed in two separate Super Cub flights to a spot on the Columbus Glacier directly below St Elias's North Spur (see map). We set up the camp and as the sun went off us the temperature began to plummet. That night we both had difficulty lighting MSR stoves as the liquid fuel refused to vaporise and hence would not ignite.

It was late the following morning before the sun hit the tents and we could move again. Although the forecast was good for the coming two days it was obvious our chosen route would take at least 7 and so we thought time would be best spent moving the camp across the glacier to the west to catch longer hours of daylight. This we did and it took most of the day. The following day (20th) we took a reconnaissance further up the Columbus Glacier to check-out a potential descent route, which was good exercise and gave us an idea of distances (vast).

The predicated storm came in that night, which confined us to the camp and most of the time, our respective tents for 4 whole days. This was very depressing as we were on a tight time-schedule and it was not allowing the temperature to rise. We had already realised by this stage that it was too cold to attempt our route. We needed good weather and a magical rise in temperature. When the storm cleared on the 25th we soon came to the realisation that it was not to be and decided to abandon our attempt. Unfortunately, the outfitters were unable to fly us out that day.

On Friday 26th April we were transferred in one Super Cub flight to the Lodge, a Cessna flight to Chitina and truck to Anchorage. The following day we advised the Kluane National Park, who we had registered with before flying to the mountains that we had left them and brought forward our flights home. Some enforced sightseeing in Anchorage then occurred as we were not able to commence the flights back to Europe until the 30th. We arrived back in Edinburgh on Wednesday 3rd May.

This was a disappointing and expensive trip to a mountain region that had been kind to us on two previous visits. However, the conditions we had experienced at those times were very different despite being a similar time of year. There had been prolonged good weather throughout late March and April making for good snow conditions and much warmer temperatures. These conditions were not present on this occasion and any attempt on the route would have been foolhardy while we were there (no prolonged good weather – Baltic temperatures). Our chosen route remains one of the largest un-climbed lines in North America. I guess we will have to go back.

Budget

Expenditure		Income	
Flights International	£1872	MEF Grant	£2400
Changing return date	£230	AC Climbing Fund Grant	£400
Excess baggage	£150	MC of S Grant	£400
Bush flights/ transfers	£1600	Personal Contributions	£2242
Anchorage accomm	£665		
Mountain food	£300		
Supplies	£150		
Kluane Park Permit	£65		
Meals in Anchorage	£320		
Insurance – AAC subs	£90		
TOTAL	£5442	TOTAL	£5442

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METRIC/MÉTRIQUE



