

Samuel Deen & Daniela Kroulíková. 7 Summits.

Our Aconcagua experience.



Looking through an endless kit list, three full pages of kit and equipment which would theoretically keep us alive attempting any mountain in the world of our choosing. Initially I thought this was overkill, 'how on earth am I going to pack and pay for all of this, I'm sure I won't be needing everything. It's going to be relatively warm, other than on the summit' How very wrong was I.

It was around one week before departure, we received products from our sponsors, this was such a relief and an exciting time. To have an outside organisation have that belief in us and share the same enthusiasm was like nothing I can relate to. This was profoundly due to my former military career, where it is expected to solely believe in your own abilities and if anything, numbs you of any enjoyment.

We now had everything on that endless list, we laid out each item meticulously on our bed and proceeded to tick away at each item, followed by a mandatory photograph it was now happening, we were going.

Aconcagua, for my personal mountaineering journey is essential. Essential for me to progress and to examine my limits, to keep tabs on how my body will react to high altitude and primarily to see if attempting all 7 summits would actually be possible. Everyone is different, everyone's body unknowingly has different limitations and this was the opportunity to see mine. The highest mountain in the Southern and Western Hemisphere just shy of 7000 metres.

I decided to start these adventures one year prior and every individual has their own reasons and goals for attempting summits. I suffered quietly for years with severe anxiety and depression, which overtime developed into PTSD. This came to a head in only July 2018 when I began to self destruct and ultimately tried to end my own life. Mental health is a complex issue and low self esteem comes hand in hand with this disorder. Aconcagua was my way out, these summits were not only a climb but also a battle of the mind.

We flew from Gatwick to Buenos Aires and caught a connecting flight to Mendoza which was surprisingly warmer than the cold capital. At the airport we were met at our surprise by a driver holding our names on a scraggy piece of paper. This was a relief as we had around six bags, four of which being around 25kg.

We arrived at the five star hotel that was complimentary from our expedition team Elite Himalayan Adventures run by former UK Special Forces Operative Nims Dai. We were taken in by the beauty of this Hotel and of course the immediate wine tasting which Mendoza is famous for. While we were finding our feet and dining on the finest steaks I've ever eaten, it was always in the back of my mind not to become too comfortable in this holiday type environment.



Mendoza

Pre expedition admin was the focus for the team, briefs, introductions and kit musters were taking place and routine paperwork. Over the next few days we were at the point where we just wanted to get started, in Mendoza the city we were staying in was exceptionally hot, around 30°C. We ransacked the local supermarket for last minute necessities and then prepared for our first group evening meal together. My first impressions of the group were great, a fantastic group of like minded people, I immediately took a liking to Sam, an American singer song writer living in Texas. This was unusual for me as I tend to be not so open to people I am unfamiliar with.

We had an early start everyone's expedition kit bags were in the lobby ready to be loaded on the transport. Civilian clothing such as jeans and other items that would be deemed useless on the mountain were left behind in the hotel. This saved space, though even still it was an immense struggle to close both bags I was taking. By this time it became apparent that we had lost one member of the team who had a change of heart, I guess the realities of the brief that was given the night before hit home.

We jumped in the mini bus and after some last minute kit shopping by some team members and more paperwork we were on our way, finally. It was around a four hour drive to our drop off point and the weather was beautiful. It slowly became more mountainous and through some winding roads we could see snow on peaks, naturally for all of us this was exciting. By this time word was getting back to us that there was a snow storm on the mountain and surrounding areas, it seemed unnatural as it was so warm. A picture on a phone was passed around to the group which showed tents completely caked in snow in what looked like a blizzard, the darkness and light of only a head torch added to the daunting effect. My pre conceived idea of the initial trek to base camp was long lost. I grasped onto a conversation I had with Nims earlier when I asked him how the climb would be, his short response of 'easy mate, it's just an uphill walk' I still laugh at my naivety.



The mobile phone picture of basecamp

We reached the destination where we would say goodbye to our duffle bags until we reached Aconcagua B.C, we separated our sleeping bags and any essential kit we would need for the next two plus days and packed them in our rucksacks which we would carry. The duffle bags were ready for the mules and it was there and then our adventure began.

The strange feeling like we were either being set up or just had very bad luck seemed to hang over the group, we were all dazzled by the weather, snow and slight winds engulfed us as soon as we left the mini bus. From the research, pictures and videos I looked through prior, I was accustomed to believing this should be a dry desert like walk. A slight shock to the system from leaving Mendoza just hours ago.



Daniela at the drop off point

We left as a group heading towards Confluencia, it was a nice slow pace, everyone was in a bit of a gaggle, just slowly chatting and taking in the scenery, it took around two hours to reach our destination and it was bitterly cold. As we only had half packed rucksacks it was difficult to stay in a warm state, one down jacket just didn't cut it.

Confluencia was busy vibrant and covered in deep snow, for people only walking to Aconcagua basecamp this was a place to regroup and move on in case of bad weather and most importantly an extra night to acclimatise at 2950m. We huddled around a plastic table drinking lemon tea and waiting for our evening meal which would be the first of many Corn Soup

Aconcagua Special. The group was advised to stay awake for as long as possible to aid in acclimatising.

Daniela was nursing a virus that she picked up in Mendoza, we knew this wasn't great and that she may have to stay behind in Confluencia as recovering at higher altitude will not be in her best interests. We were staying in a small tent like hut packed with five bunk beds, which didn't leave much room for personal admin, luckily we only had our day packs with us which gave us that little extra manoeuvring space.

Daniela: "I remember waking up just the night before the trek. All the steaks and tasty wine took it's price and I was sick. I'm unsure whether it was food poisoning or my body adjusting, I just knew I was in trouble. I could not sleep for the rest of the night, making the 5 hour bus journey a visit to hell and back, this was when I realised it was not just the food but most likely some kind of virus. After the first days short walk I felt exhausted and had absolutely no appetite. When we had dinner at the Confluencia camp, I had the infamous corn soup and a couple cloves of garlic in hot water. I was still unsure whether it was the corn soup or garlic, but I had the violent urge to vomit. By this time I had no energy, nothing. I started thinking that this was the end of my expedition. I was open to do and try anything to feel better, I was not even thinking about giving up, although I was neglecting to tell the others of my hardships, I didn't want to fit that mould of someone that complains."

We awoke for breakfast a little groggy but in good spirits, it was a stunning day and we knew then we had a clear window to make it to basecamp. We didn't want to stay in Confluencia at all, the thought was between us all that we could settle into basecamp and just get this done with maybe a few days to spare at the end. It looked like the storm had passed and we could be in for some good weather for the foreseeable.

Confluencia: Sea level oxygen blood rates. 99%.

Daniela: 67% and 108 bpm

Sam: 80% and 112 bpm

-28 degrees

I made sure I got a good breakfast and drank as much as I could, from my time in the Military little things like this became second nature and although at first glance may seem meaningless little preparations can make all the difference. Although very sunny, it was icy cold and the team

were all prepping their equipment and donning clothing for our trek to base camp. We were told it would take around seven plus hours. I noticed a few of our team wearing their down jackets as we were about to depart, I was always taught to 'start cold finish hot' meaning to not wear warm kit at the start of a march. I explained this and some layers were shed.



Confluencia

For the first three hours, the trek was pleasant, I was slightly out of breath and sweaty mainly due to my backpack and the uphill pace. We crossed bridges, streams and passed the mules carrying the much needed supplies to basecamp. Many early photographs were taken as we were in awe of the valley we were sweeping through. Sloped snow covered mountains with the echoes of falling rocks left a majestic feel to the place.

As we passed the open wide valley floor the wind started to pick up, it was a relentless blast of constant wind unwilling to let up but just enough to be bearable. As we sat down to eat our pre packed lunch finding shelter from the wind wasn't possible on this open expanse of land. There were times when the wind stopped for a few seconds and the sun hit my back which left my whole core feeling warm for that brief moment.



After a welcomed lunch and a good sit down we left again in single file, for another four hours we trekked uphill, the terrain varied at times from rocky and steep, to a curving windy path. Over these four hours the weather was slowly turning, the sky darkening and that persistent wind strengthening. The group were less communicative, heads down plodding on. At this time it was becoming harder to keep my mind engaged and the nagging negative thoughts slowly started to become more inherent. It was time to bring out my secret weapon, music. For the next two hours I was in my own world, my own protective bubble, disconnected from anyone or anything including the weather. A part of me felt like I was cheating, cheating the experience, but to be honest I didn't care, I was happy although fatigued, enjoying the experience and grateful. A group that was seen in the far distance was rapidly coming into focus, we were either going at a quick pace or they were going excruciatingly slow, I believe it was a combination of the two

That bubble wore off eventually as the terrain became increasingly steeper and the weather got even worse. We were caught in a blizzard and visibility was limited. It was about eight hours in and Nims briefed us up on the estimated time we should arrive and pointed out where Ac.B.C was. A lone flag at the top of a what seemed vertical mountain was the direction we were headed. Scanning the mountain we were unsure whether there was a route up without sheer climbing, There was, and the group zig zagged up, crouched over postures seen throughout. The climb was difficult as we were fatigued, heavy breathing was a faint sound with the howling wind, it was the last push so the pain I was feeling was to be promptly sent to the back of my mind. Nine hours in we reached the flag, cold wet and pretty miserable.

We saw the glow of yellow tents of basecamp dotted out on an extended up hill verge. The cold seemed to hit me all at once, it must have been the exertion and the calories my body was lacking, it was a shock to the system and my mind was not yet accustomed to this yet.



I walked most of the way in my shirt, a face mask and baseball cap, that's my preference as the hot sweaty feeling diverts my mind elsewhere and I feel more comfortable being cold rather than too hot. Saying that toward the end I had no other option but to wear a wind proof shell jacket, just to take that biting wind off my body, this was a lifesaver.

From reaching the bottom of basecamp (4400m) it took us another thirty minutes to reach our tents, how was it possible that we had the highest tents in camp I thought, it was never ending, after residing my mind to have finished the trek, another thirty minutes didn't go down well. It could have been an enjoyable testing trek, the weather goes to show that relatively manageable treks can turn things into extreme situations.

The blizzard was now in full swing, our duffle bags that were brought by the mules earlier were outside buried in the soft freshly laid snow, digging them out with blue numb hands and dragging them into our accommodation, which was identical to our Confluencia tent like hut but with 6 bunks. 12 people with 2-3 large bags each administrating themselves in that small space was difficult, shivers from everyone was now our most played repeated soundtrack. It was extremely cold, I was cold right to the core.

We sat around our new mess tent which was twice as large as the last one, we had hot water, ham and cheese, it was an amazing feeling to be out of the elements and now sipping on a hot drink. I had a few layers on but my feet were wet and cold, it was becoming difficult to warm up, it just wasn't happening. We got the go ahead to change into our summit suits, it was a respite I wasn't going to turn down and if our expedition leader is doing it, I sure was. I've been cold and wet countless times in my lifetime and there's no better feeling in the world than slowly warming up.



I'm not going to lie it was bliss putting on that suit, sitting there drinking our hot lemon tea, a thought and feeling that will stay with me.

Over the next two days we did more group admin, medical clearances and checks, lots of time was spent double checking our crampons were fitted correctly. I had an extremely tight fitted crampon pair as my summit boots were considerably large. Daniela was struggling with her body, and the altitude, mainly due to the virus she was carrying from day one. Her appetite and energy was lacking, food and hot drinks were her priority now as much as she hated every sip and bite. We had some rest time for acclimatising and recovery before we ventured out on our first climb of the mountain, up to camp one.

Basecamp looked like a work in progress, relatively new, the skeletons of tents being put up in flattened out areas around our own, the basecamp staff kicking paths and erecting small walls to connect the labyrinth of the temporary climbing village together. It was a few weeks into the climbing season and word came back that only 5 people have summited so far, but at this point we were in good time and confident we had enough of it to catch good weather for our acclimatisation climbs and summit attempt.

Sleeping at night initially proved difficult for me, I invested in the best sleeping bag on the market so warmth wasn't the issue. A mixture of annoyances and meaningless struggles played out like clockwork. I was now cold turkey from anti depressants which I was incredibly anxious about, I packed melatonin a natural pill to help with the side effect of the withdrawal symptoms, one of which being insomnia. This helped. Sleeping with a mask over the mouth proved a challenge, extreme cold air into the lungs over an extended period of time can cause all sorts of health problems, coughs, throat infections to name a few and I was developing a cough because of my inability to keep on top of this. It's uncomfortable it's wet, horrible, the moisture then freezes. Taking refuge inside the bag is comfortable until the the notion of breathing normally becomes desperate. It took a few days of finding suitable arrangements to then sleeping quite soundly with the addition of my melatonin.



We awoke around 0645hrs for breakfast at 7, the breakfast we became used to was a small thick strip of bacon about the size of a pack of chewing gum and scrambled eggs in a tiny oval pot, it was in fact incredibly tasty. Again I took on enough food and drink to fuel my body for the days climb.

Camp 1 was our destination and it was estimated we would take just over five hours to reach it, we wouldn't be staying the night there just lunch and to take in the higher air. 'Climb high, sleep low' was the quote of the day. I could see in Daniela's demeanour that she wasn't 100% but she was perkier and showed more colour in her cheeks than before, she's a tough cookie and although she refused to rest even more I was happy and confident that the climb would be beneficial for her in the long run.

Daniela: "I still wasn't strong and these two days of being sick with a raised temperature didn't help my condition. This was a long day and the weather wasn't the best, but it was a good opportunity to face my hardships dead on. I knew I was getting better ever so slightly as I suddenly started eating an increased amount of food, whilst helping eat Sams packed lunch, at least it didn't get wasted! It was the first time since the expedition started that any chance of departing early because of my health wasn't a possibility. There was no way I was going to give up on my own, but clarity and sensibility will always outweigh pride."

Mingma our guide is a mountaineering genius, K2 and 6 Everest summits under his belt and Nepalese Sherpa of year, he helping me with my crampons, they were still extremely tricky to get on but with some magic they were on, I practiced over and over until it was second nature, a struggle every time but they were good to go. Mingma always had a smile on his face, a small cheeky guy that you wouldn't think of at first glance would be capable of the achievements he has accomplished, a legend and a gentleman in every way.



We gathered at the foot of the mountain at the edge of our camp, final kit checks done. At this time it was incredibly sunny, I wore just a shirt, a snood to cover my face, glasses and hat, any remaining skin on show was caked with high protection sun block. This was a chance to wear our summit boots for the first time, to get used to their snags and fix anything that becomes uncomfortable before the summit push. There were members of the group still wearing warm clothing but again that was down to personal preference.

As well as acclimatising, these climbs up to higher camps are a good chance to test kit, and adjust gear according to your body and preference, this prior planning leaves a climber in good stead for the summit day as mistakes then can cost you dearly.

It was steep from the get go, added with the altitude and day-sacks I was sweating and breathing heavy, it wasn't a lung burner so to speak just a breathless feeling. I was situated at the back of the pack which leaves bigger gaps to fill and difficult to get into a rhythm with the stopping and starting. About 4 hours in the group as a whole was tired and still adapting to the gains in elevation, Sam my new adopted friend from Texas was struggling with his footwear, his boots weren't designed for this severity of cold weather and his feet were becoming dangerously numb, I could see in his eyes that he was struggling with this and a little fearful. Sam was shown to swing his feet back and forth to push blood into his extremities, whilst eating our lunch Sam decided that he wouldn't be able to reach camp one and the sensible option would be to return back down to basecamp. Sam left eagerly and the now shrinking group pushed on through the icy snow covered rocky ground up to camp one.

As we steadily made our way up the glossy covered snow towards the monumental cliffs where camp one laid the wind picked up as if on cue. It was time to put on a wind proof jacket at my own discouragement. The wind was cutting through the sweat which was laden from the backpack and beginning to pick up shivers right down my spine. The last stretch to camp one was tiresome, it's also a mind game, I know in my head we've almost reached the destination, which in turn ravages my body from energy. It's tricking your mind into believing you are much further than it anticipates. Mind deception and trickery are the keys to being a great athlete and it is not easy, but this was a real reminder of what I needed to pursue.



We touched camp one which stands at around 5000m, a tent previously pitched by our expedition guides was already there, there was also one other tent there which was occupied by 3 other people that were already on progression for their own climbs.

Light chit chat commenced between us all, we drank and nibbled as we took in the stunning surroundings of this incredible landscape. Looking down at the specs of orange and yellow of the microscopic tents of basecamp left a small sense of achievement but also strengthened the magnitude of the expedition, realising we were still almost 2000 metres away from the summit.

Camp 1:

Daniela: 83% and 89bpm

Sam: 79% and 96bpm

We were briefed this was only an acclimatisation climb, camp one and back to basecamp in the same day. Climb high sleep low. Looking up a steep glistening surface camp two wasn't visible but advised it was just over the horizon. The moving dots that resembled ants were barely noticeable as we scanned the vast area, the three man team we met earlier had already made that ascent to camp 2.

After a few hours we made our way back down the mountain, a shorter more direct route was taken, I initially led the group down at the request of Nims as he demonstrated the correct and safe way to descend. I've had trouble with my knees for a few years now, which is primarily due to military service. I am perfectly fine ascending but descending is painful and slow, so as you can imagine I was attempting to dismay any pain and descended at a quicker rate. The terrain varied from snow 1-3 feet deep to just rock, although the snow was solid in parts and frozen, this had the potential to become a very long slide.



I had my trekking poles attached around my wrists and they were extended to around 4ft, it was then that my crampons hit some rock that led onto some ice and within a split second I was sliding and sliding fast! I could hear a laugh from Daniela as we both thoroughly enjoy teasing one another. Initially I was kicking my crampons into the ice trying to stop the momentum but no matter how hard I tried they weren't catching the ice. I slid on to my side and front trying again to dig in, because my poles were attached to my wrists they were useless, rookie mistake. I was approaching a rocky outcrop, I hit it and hit hard. Immediately I put my hand up letting everyone know I was okay, I checked myself for lacerations and was concerned I ruined my trousers (and soiled them), luckily I had nothing just a few small scratches, I was incredibly luckily after sliding around 80ft.

Daniela: "Me and Sam are extremely competitive with each other, pushing each other for better results in everything we do, this is one thing that I love in him the most, it's a sense of caring and understanding that comes from deep within. In the mountains, you have to put in everything, all of you, it's all or nothing, 100% of your effort and concentration. When Sam slipped on the ice I obviously started laughing as the immediate situation was light hearted. Then that moment from the funny little situation changed to sheer panic in a second. Sam was out of control, sliding on the ice so quickly, it seemed there was no way for him to stop."

Slightly embarrassed I carried on, replaying the moment over and over in my head, knowing exactly what I should have done, but it happened and ended in mere seconds. From then on in I never attached the pole loops around my wrists. I did however relish the moment with Daniela as she knew she misjudged the situation at first and I played on this guilt to my amusement.

Arriving back at basecamp was a welcomed feeling, we were at that stage now where it began to feel comfortable, not so much a home away from home but it was an atmosphere of calmness and familiarity.

We knew the script by now and what was required of the team for successful acclimatising. Next was a night at camp one then to touch camp two and return to basecamp. My thoughts and feelings of this at the time was to just get it done, obviously a summit push straight from the off stopping for a night here and there would save so much time and potentially effort, but this is unattainable, dangerous and risky at best. To prepare your body for this rise in altitude is essential as any climber worth their salt would know, and by adjusting at your body's own pace to the lack of oxygen made exerting yourself up a hill a little less exhausting and precisely more attainable.

Basecamp :

Daniela: 63% and 115

Sam: 73% and 110bpm

The next two days were spent relaxing in basecamp, passing the time proved easy, keeping warm sat still in a tent proved slightly difficult. It was still bitterly cold with a piercing shining sun, the wind would pick up occasionally at a frantic speed and then disappear back into itself.



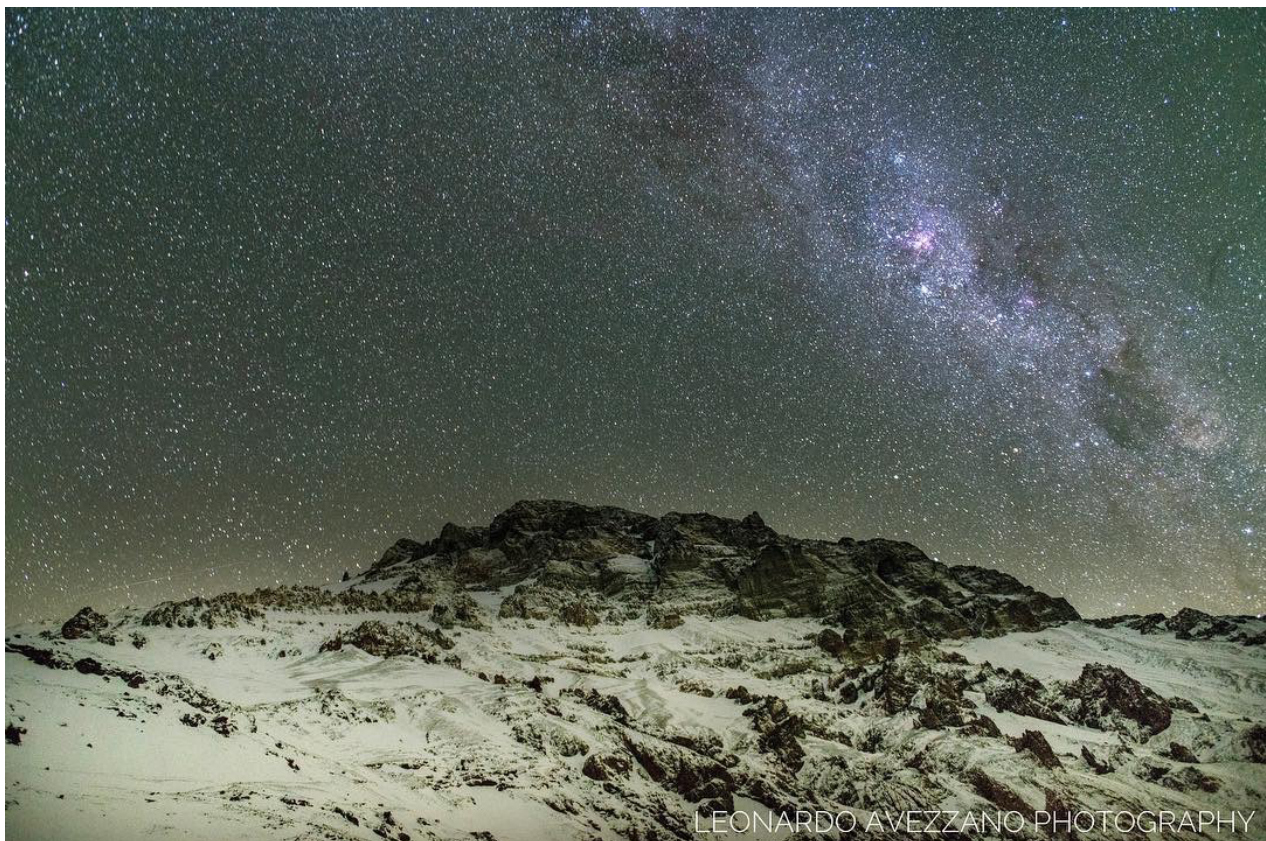
We played cards, listened to music, chatted and rested, the real excitement came at meal time, it was a varied mix of anything you could imagine, three courses, the corn soup was a guarantee though. Whilst the hot sauce was passed around and used like it was going out of fashion.

Daniela: "There is one thing that is so clear to me that I laugh every time I think about it. Basecamp is a great place, comfortable with good food and even toilets, where you can sit down and close in a big creaking iron box. The thing is as there is huge hole in the bottom of said toilets, the big infamous gale force winds hit hard as the location of this much needed amenity was precariously perched on a small hill, this combination brings real adventure to use them. I remember being on the toilet and trying to throw the toilet paper into it. As there is a huge wind circulation it creates a toilet tornado, I'll let you imagine what fear consumed its occupants in these cold iron coffins."

One morning I staggered to the duty toilet that was left for our area of basecamp, the other decided to fall over in the wind earlier in the week, if someone was inside it whilst it fell I'm unsure, I shamelessly hoped there was. I knocked on the door to make sure that it was empty, no reply. So I entered, only to my horror witness a middle aged German woman mid relief. I was paralysed and mortified as this was no usual squatting position. The millisecond of eye contact was enough to send shivers down my spine, I immediately vacated the area as quickly as I could slightly breaking into a run and a sweat. I heard the door open, I didn't look back as I

knew she wanted blood, I disappeared into the shadows never to be seen again, although I was always looking over my shoulder the rest of my time at basecamp.

Night time came around quite fast and as soon as the sun went down it was excruciatingly cold, and the rush to complete a personalised night time routine was underway. Taking on board lots of water was essential and this led to relieving ones self quite often. I did however try and rid myself of any unwanted water beforehand, but on cue every night I was awoken by a busting need to empty my bladder. Once I gathered the courage to leave the warm cocoon which I developed in the hours previously, I dashed outside to the designated 'piss stone' and what I saw was breathtaking. Every star in the nights sky was dazzling, it was a spectacle and what seemed a show of force by our very own universe. The mountains were overpoweringly dark and what seemed, lurking. It was a feeling of insignificance, and vulnerability, whilst an astounding sight I did feel like I was being watched, hunted by the mountain herself, it was an uneasy awkward slightly frightening feeling that I have never experienced. It was there and then my respect for her grew.



Morning came and the usual foggy hazy feeling persisted with what seemed everyone, whether that was the apprehension of our first night on the mountain or just the lack of coffee. We were soon underway and as previously tested, we expected 5-6 hours to reach camp 1, taking in the beauty and the thin air whilst trying to keep every inch of skin away from those furnace like sun rays became a habit. Although factor 50 was applied and face masks and hats were used the whole team suffered some sort of burn, noses and lips were badly hit throughout, whilst my

ears were blistered and peeling extraordinarily. Moisturiser and sun block was now my new best friend.

We reached camp 1 in good time, out of breath and sweating we sat down to recover and regroup ourselves, as usual the wind was intermittent. We were instructed to put up our tents and shown exactly how it should be done on any camp and on any mountain.

There's a particular way things are done to ensure equipment isn't lost and the tent doesn't blow away, we then gathered as many rocks and stones that would fit around the base of the tent, again this extra effort was rewarded by the rest we would have once completed. It didn't take too long and we were soon on our sleeping bags in a warm tent heated by the sun.

Socks off and poking out of the tent, it was that warm I had to walk around outside just to cool down. Me and Daniela shared with an Australian guy called Fraser, I liked Fraser, always got a laugh from the group but wasn't too loud, a good combination. Fraser was relatively experienced and in very good health prior to coming on the expedition, although now he had developed a nasty cough, this cough was persistent and loud, with a hint of Australian.



Fraser drifted off into a sleep which then left us with a blissful silence and although tired I decided not to sleep and enjoy the view out of the open tent. Clouds, snow, distant mountain peaks and bare feet was my view and it was quite literally breathtaking, added with the lack of oxygen of course. As I sat there taking in my surroundings, I couldn't help but feel fortunate to be in the here and now.

It was difficult to administrate yourself in a tent the size of a peanut but good communication between the three of us and understanding made it much more manageable. Crampons and boots were taken off outside the tent and kept there just to be sure that they did not rip it. In high winds even a slight tear would rip the tent apart which could and does cost lives. Boot liners were kept with us inside the sleeping bag as well as anything else you don't want to freeze overnight.

I developed a hard headache completely out of the blue, as much as I tried to drink and take my mind off this constant unforgiving pounding in my head it wouldn't shift. Earlier Daniela had the same issues and received some 'magic pills' from Amy a Canadian writer who was on the expedition with her boyfriend Chris. They had a tent to themselves and at the time me and Daniela were looking forward to some cuddles and chats in our own company, I can imagine Amy and Chris lavished the opportunity at this much needed personal space.

Whilst we had a cougher and a snorer sharing with us it was a time where time did not pass slowly, after all this was an adventure and we were live in our own dreams and story. The sun went down and we nestled comfortably in our sleeping bags.

It was a cold night and awaking in the morning we found the tent to be lined with coating of ice, this unsuspecting glaze would lie in wait for the slightest touch for it to release a shower of snow upon everything and everyone inside, it seemed to have an unlimited supply and avoiding this icy predator proved difficult in such a small space with three shivering cold bodies trying to organise themselves.



Once again the wind was relentless and strong, we knew the detail for an 8am breakfast, whilst we were half inside our sleeping bags waiting to hear the first rustle of the group, Nims came inside the tent and advised us that the winds were too strong and we'd wait out in the comfort and safety of our ten. Nims came round once more and delivered us each a hot piping boil in the bag breakfast and water for a hot drink. Having breakfast in bed on a mountain side whilst the wind is howling gave me a secure cosy feeling, like hearing rain on the window pain on a nighttime as you lay in bed, there was a chilled feeling.

I knew we would be up and leaving soon so I was relishing the time I had in my bag, a few hours passed and the wind was still strong but dying off slightly, we had the nod to get up and get ready for our push to camp 2. It was cold, it was so cold, the wind was biting, by leaving my bag so suddenly added to the shock. I soon switched my mind and my thoughts to game mode, I was no longer cold but focused and ready to go.

Looking up to the horizon, we were briefed that camp 2 lay at the other side, which was correct but so could Buenos Aries for all I knew. I didn't want to get into my head that this was a relatively short and easy climb, it should take around 5 hours depending on the pace of the group. We were a strong group of climbers, I got the feeling that there was a sense of pride between the group and each one of us wanted to show just what we were made of, this was more apparent between the females, Daniela and Amy, not with each other but the rest of the group, both working extremely hard.

On operations in Afghanistan, whilst on patrol being aware of your surroundings was essential, head up, ears pricked up, rotating on your position, seeking out any danger, which came in a variety of forms. This was exhausting, in 50 degree heat laden with excruciating weight, climbing up to camp 2 made me reminisce of this time and I realised I could theoretically switch off, turning off the mind and switching on auto pilot made the next few hours go relatively quick, whilst keeping an eye out for avalanches and falling rock.



Helmand province Afghanistan

One or two of the group were struggling, the higher air, the sweat, the cold, the wind and the steep incline were taking its toll, that and the two false horizons we reached which moved our final destination further and further. After around 5 hours we could see tents, no real congregation just the odd couple scattered far and wide apart. It was the very beginning of the season and no real establishment was fully ready. It seemed to be a repeat of our arrival into basecamp and we walked up an incline for another 30 minutes until we found a suitable place to ditch stores and equipment. This equipment would be waiting for us on our return for our summit push. Again we waited and relaxed out in the open for a few hours, it was sunny and cold but the wind had died down, patches of blue ice littered the landscape with rocky outcrops that made for an other worldly feel.



The time passed and we were making our way down the mountain back to basecamp, it was then I knew I had to take it easy, my knees were beginning to feel the pressure of the downhill walking. Side steps were easier to achieve with minimal pain but all in all a slower process, I notified Nims and came down at my own pace. The route back is always much faster as the routes aren't dog legged and more direct. Arriving back into basecamp was a good welcoming feeling, although a shower wouldn't go amiss and a change of underwear that didn't resemble cardboard and cleanish clothes brought a sense of comfort.

We awaited a brief in the evening after a much welcomed hot meal, corn soup brimmers with hot sauce, ravioli with a small desert was on the menu. I say menu it's more like Russian roulette with what we'd be served to eat, luckily I'm not a fussy eater and would divulge in anything edible.

We were waiting for a clear weather window now for a summit attempt, we assumed we'd have one or two days which went down well with me, I was in no rush to get back up there, although saying that I just wanted to get this done and dusted.

Climbing is a passion of mine, but I don't enjoy it so to speak, conflicting I know, it's painful, exhausting testing, difficult and dangerous, it is also exhilarating, which gives a sense of achievement that outweighs the hardships and pain, this is the reason I climb.

The days passed and the routine of resting and doing absolutely nothing began to become mundane. There was an abandoned wooden hotel that we could see through the ice valleys and perched neatly at the top of a distant mountain. We decided to explore.



From the outset one of our team was struggling with the shock of the environment, Franco a Mexican climber was another likeable character, friendly and helpful he was liked throughout, but his body and mind struggled adapting to the cold, and at this moment it became clear that attempting a summit wouldn't be achievable for him. Franco lived in his down jacket, even whilst sweating extraordinarily it would remain tightly attached to his body, the fear of the cold was a big part of his experience. It was a mutual decision for Franco to leave the group at the

next opportunity. The team was dwindling away slowly but I believe this was the correct decision and admire Franco and the expedition leaders for realising this. Well played.

The boredom persisted and so did the wind, we woke up for breakfast and the wind was strong, it was a battle to open and close the door for the tent where we all would congregate and eat. Our tent had Perspex flexi windows at either end, Nims would sit at the high end of the long table as if on a throne, that would be his area where he'd address us also. The wind would pick up sometimes and it could be quite frightening to anyone not used to this violent change of circumstances. At a moment the wind picked up, and it picked up hard, whilst Nims was stood talking to a few of the group a lone tent surrounded by debris came flying right towards the window, I could see this flying tent with only one route and we were right in the path. It happened so fast that I had no time to process what was happening and to warn him, it smashed into the tent gashing it wide open.

It was exciting this adverse weather but that was short lived when the wind disappeared as fast as it came, and the aftermath was evident, the tent with wings had blown at least 2km into a half frozen lake down in the valley, no doubt it would be filled with the occupants possessions, frantic workers and climbers were running by, chasing equipment and trying to minimise the damage. We helped as much as we could but it was evident that it would be impossible to locate everything that wasn't bouldered down. This weather persisted and we knew we'd be grounded for sometime. If it was this crazy at basecamp then a summit attempt would be suicidal.

Another day had passed and I was in my bag, my sleeping was okay, occasionally waking with the wind feeling like we were all going to end up in the frozen lake or catch the jet stream and end up in Brazil. I awoke in the morning for the usual routine still laid in my bag, it was a clear sunny day, calm as I had ever seen it, it took a moment to realise that we had no door attached to our tent, it was blown off with last nights dramatics, but on the other hand, the weather was great and I had a feeling we'd be making a summit push. After 5 days I was itching to get out on the mountain and I was stinking. I exhausted every aspect of clean clothes and turned inside out each sock and pair of boxers multiple times. There was no laundry service and self cleaning was out of the question, unless you enjoyed wearing frozen clothes.

It was the morning of our final climb up to mountain, we had little room to manoeuvre in reference to spare days, it was now or never. In my mind I wasn't doing this again, and I wasn't coming back to Argentina. So fingers crossed I hoped and prayed the mountain would allow us to climb, circumstances can change in a heartbeat and we were way early in the season, this was a difficult challenging time to climb and it was in favour that we wouldn't summit, but we would give it our best shot.

We knew the script by now and we were well briefed in what was expected. We shot up to camp one very fast and in relative ease compared to our first visit. Don't get me wrong, the steep incline was cheeky. We passed groups which were no doubt on their first rotations struggling with the high air and moving with a snail like motion as though it was a slog.

Our group was strong and quick, we knew this from the start of the expedition by passing numerous groups on the way to basecamp and on rotations. It gave us a sense of pride, a sense of achievement and satisfaction, and most importantly a boost in morale.

I was mostly placed at the back of the group, weaker smaller climbers would usually take up space at the front and stronger climbers to the back. We were all strong. This gave me a few problems, I couldn't get in my own rhythm with the stopping and starting, and the respite was reduced significantly. It was no big deal, I had a little moan to myself as I was becoming quite irritated which made me feel worse to be honest, it was a sense of not being in control. But it was a team effort and I plodded on.

Our third arrival at camp one, we had lunch there and replenished our internal water supplies, and emptied them. Then the final push of the day to camp 2, the sun was beating down and I was determined not to add to my blistered ears and nose, this proved challenging in itself. Amongst the group some were struggling more than others, I gave some personal advice which fell on deaf ears and I offered to carry the rucksack of one climber which I was reluctant to do as this can be perceived as arrogance, it can also lead to cracks in one's mind as to the capability of themselves and I was reluctant to ask, they denied my request gratefully. I found it difficult to pass on any expertise I learnt from my career in the Royal Marines, I saw us all as equals and didn't want to give off the impression of a know it all which made me overly



reserved.

At this point I was feeling strong and confident but I knew this could change and so could the weather. We rolled into camp 2 (5570 metres) at the end of a long strenuous day, it of course was the first time we made it straight to camp 2 in one single day.

A few days previous we had a climber join us who had climbed Everest only a few months before, Narbin had joined us quite late, he was allowed to continue with us without sufficient acclimatising, mainly due to his experience and the fact he had just come off a neighbouring mountain. It's difficult to get to understand and know how to react and speak to an individual in such a short space of time, as mentioned, I am reserved when it comes to meeting new people, it takes me a prolonged amount of time to open up and converse with someone as if they were a close friend. Saying that I always try to be polite and helpful at any opportunity.

We dug out the stash of tents and equipment we buried the week previous and were split into groups. Me and Daniela had Narbin with us and we were tasked to set up our own tents, exhausted hungry and cold, as we all were, I was working hard to get the tent up and so was Daniela. She was struggling more than usual, I think the extended hours took their toll. As I was looking around everyone was working hard to get set up and settled, except Narbin, I was pretty furious but gently walked over to him as he was perched resting and requested that he helped us put up the tent. Not the ideal first conversation I wanted with an experienced climber but some things and demeanours have to be rectified, especially at the relative safety at lower camp.

Bickering broke out between a few members and guide, there was some confrontation and a vibe that I distanced myself from, that soon straightened out just as quickly as it started. Tensions and stresses were high and this just showed how emotions can change in a heartbeat.

Myself and Daniela used the little strength we had to locate large and small volcanic rocks to ground our tent to the mountain, intricately we jigsawed boulders and in comparison like pebbles around the loose sheeting at the bottom of the tent. By that time Nims came and briefed us on the night time details, mainly breakfast and evening meal timings, and have you know it, me and Daniela would have the tent to ourselves, the extra room for manoeuvre and gear I knew would be invaluable especially on a summit attempt. 'Proffers on'

The weather again was not on our side, the usual horrendous winds stalked us on every ledge, and on every inch of this mountain, she wasn't happy and liked very much to flex her muscles. After all it was with her permission that we would be granted access. The reports came back and the reality was that we wouldn't be going anywhere for at least a day or two, although there was hope that there could be a clearing imminent. We had two options, climb to camp 3 (5920 metres), spend the night there before the summit attempt or have the extra day and push straight from camp 2.

Both had their advantages and disadvantages, but it was clear and decided we were going to push for the summit straight from camp 2. We split into two groups, the first group would leave at 1am, this group was for the slightly slower climbers, whilst the second group would catch up

and leave an hour later at 2am just after camp 3. Myself and Daniela were in the second group leaving later.

Around 0130hrs on our third day at camp 2 I awoke, keen and my mind in game mode for the last time, it reminded me of the times I was on operations in Afghanistan, just before a patrol our multiple would prepare their own personal kit, no one would say a word, lost in their own thoughts and our own engagements, but focused, driven, prepared. It was D-day today, and for us, finally, we were going .

The weather was remarkably calm, eerily quiet, I can compare it to Captain Smith of the HMS Titanic on the evening of 14th April 1912, who comments 'for I have never seen such a flat calm'. At this point we were in our summit suits for the real deal, we had no rucksacks just a harness a flask with cup and our own personal effects. Whilst me and Daniela were congregating checking each other's kit over it was at that point that my trekking pole snapped, for what reason I do not know, it was pretty useless now and I was threaders. I've never used trekking poles before, I didn't see the need and I always enjoyed the freedom of having my hands free. Ascending and descending with poles takes so much stress from the knees, the back and makes it just that little bit more bearable, it helps the mind wander in ways also, aesthetically pleasing no, but on a summit attempt, crucial.

It was just after 2am and the group departed in single file, there was not a breadth of wind, the moonlight and stars glared off the snow leaving a majestic light fall across the base of camp two. I dislike the feeling of becoming overheated and sweaty, it makes me agitated and with the summit suit cradling my body the best I could do was to unzip every area possible, arm region, chest, waist, I was longing for a cool down within minutes of leaving.

As we zig zagged slowly making our way through the rocky path that was pre determined by Nims, the terrain began to rapidly change, it was steeper, and climbing up onto precarious rock ledges became more apparent . The immediate area from my mounted head torch was the focus of my mind, each step only determined by the light provided by 3 AAA batteries. Then just like that the weather turned.



It was deceptively dark, the moonlight was no more, the sparkling stars now a distant memory, it was becoming difficult to stand, let alone climb in the wind, the necessity of having one and a half poles began to play on my mind, even in this predicament I was coping reasonably well.

It was around 6 hours in and we hadn't reached camp 3 yet, the wind began to pick up some light sleet which gave an extraordinary wind chill, real climbing became a necessity as scrambling up rock faces with crampons became not just a physical task but a mental one also. It was blowing a gale and it was never ending. We gathered under a large vertical cliff face to escape what we could of the full force of the wind. I managed to take my mitten off whilst being overly cautious that it may be lost in an instant. One mistake like a lost glove can be the difference between a summit and a no summit, being realistic mistakes like these take on a snowball effect and can potentially be life threatening.

I stumbled to find my flask in my large suit pocket, melting snow in an environment saves on excess weight and the space of carrying the extra water, I poured my boiling hot flask liquids into the cup whilst the majority took with the wind, water was skimming from my cup as I desperately tried to drink whilst just wanting to rest. I took on as much water as the weather would let me and within a minute or two we were climbing again.

We arrived at camp 3 not too soon after a brief rest of a few minutes, now engulfed with the weather and we were gone again. Since our silent beginning and through camp 3 and beyond I didn't see a soul, not a glimmer of torchlight, I guess the weather was a turning point for any expedition. It began to become slightly lighter with the passing hours and daytime was soon upon us, I can only describe it as a vivid dark grey, miserable and dark, the visibility was minimal and the squint of the eyes through snow goggles made the area feel ghostly.

Our group was attempting to make contact with the first group, to arrange a meet up, this slowed the pace and eventually led us to congregate in a gulley, it was the first time we laid eyes on other climbers that day. Stretched out along what seemed a natural bench like rock we awaited instructions to meet with the other half of our team. I glanced over to the expedition that must have left camp 3 a few hours before and couldn't help but notice the helplessness and a defeated demeanour in a few of them, there's a phrase in the Marines we call the fetal wrap



We had to encounter wind speed of 90 kmph +

position, meaning one goes into a state of being back in the womb succumbing to the environments. Wearing down jackets and equipment not suitable for these conditions I could sense their discomfort and pain. Whilst exhausted from the camp 2 trek myself, battling the weather and lack of oxygen I was lavishing the warmth and comfort of secluding myself in my summit suit and recuperating.

Time passed by and this was an extended break of some sort, I could feel the tension in the air by Nims and the urgency in his voice, he was concerned about some members in the group, Daniela being one of them. This was the second time I've seen Nims in an authoritative slightly aggressive manor, identical to the mannerisms of a Corporal leading a section. A few hollow threats were passed down to send her and Fraser back down the mountain with a guide, I'm unsure why as the group was in a reasonably tight formation coming up the mountain so far, maybe the pain and exhaustion showed more profusely on their faces than others.

Daniela: "If you're climbing and you're in demanding conditions as this, down to – 40 degrees, snowstorm, dark, steep, mountainous terrain, then it is difficult and dangerous to stop, even for a snack. Easy to explain but hard to adapt to. As I am used to be consuming often and my summit suit was full of energy gels, nuts, bars and bonbons, I was annoyed to have all these necessities whilst starving at the same time. I started to struggle intensely, one moment I presume around 6 am, I started being slightly dizzy. There was no space for complaints or requests, but as Nims is overly experienced, he told me I may have to go down as we haven't even reached half of the way to summit yet! I still don't know how it was possible, but it gave me so much energy that I stopped all those negative thoughts in my head and used this anger for the positive, I was determined to do this. For another 5 hours I felt strong and sure of myself, It is battle with your mind that effects your efforts and this is called mental endurance."

We were perched just above camp 3 and I was exhausted already, the disadvantage of leaving from camp 2 was playing havoc on my mind and enthusiasm, whilst grateful for the extended rest even though directly in the elements I knew we had a long way to go.

The team of 8 or so that were waiting beside us walked back down towards camp 3, as they passed hiding away from the wind in a scrunched up hump, they engaged in brief conversation, whilst struggling to talk over the whistling wind 'You look cosy in your suit there' one said, the rest wished us good luck as they disappeared into the fog like haze back down the mountain.

Then just like that we were moving again, the visibility was that bleak at this point there were no horizons to focus on it was just a simple case of follow the leader, follow the leader into a freezing wind tunnel in this case. Around an hour passed and the sky began to clear the ground beneath faded of snow and the route we followed was rocky and uneven with every step.

I had issues with my right crampon since we left camp 2, the problem being that it was slightly too small for my summit boot, from all the rotations we had up and down the mountain it stayed completely secure, until now, until it really mattered, it began to fail me. Twice it came off which was quickly amended by Mingma our absolute legend of a guide. It always left me in a rush to catch the group up.

It came off again and I was becoming irritated by the uncertainty, initially I tried to reapply the crampon after removing my clumsy warm mittens, instantly my hands lost movement in the cold and my thumbs were useless. Then, like clockwork Mingma appears to my delight to ease my rising tensions, the group was making their way up without me and becoming more and more distant, I knew the extra effort it was going to take to catch them up was going to hurt. My hands now snug in my toasty mittens as I watched Mingma pull out a knife and meticulously fix the joint in my crampon, he looked at my large summit boot and said 'can I cut into your boot' I agreed. With a small Leatherman he super humanly fixed and reattached this failing vital piece of equipment and sent me on my way, I was remarkably grateful.



Mingma fixing my crampon

The group were some way away and I could only just make them out, I then set off with Mingma in tow, once again I had to switch on, or switch off so to speak, there's some instances where my mind switches off from my body and the pain I'm experiencing, I relish the exhaustion if it has a reward at the end of it, or any simple reward I can fathom in my mind. The air was even thinner than before and I was breathing heavily, struggling to get the oxygen into my muscles I pushed hard and fast. I caught them up in around 25 minutes and it took it out of me.

Daniela: "Sam told me later on that he had a problem with his crampons and separated from our group for about half an hour. I had no idea as when you're climbing in such bad weather, you have so much to do, battling with your own mind, its thoughts and every effort, this battle is with yourself, hardly ever having time to think about others around you. It sounds maybe selfish, maybe weird, of course you would help others and of course you are still there, together, helping and supporting each other, but in the now what prioritises first in the mind is self preservation."

A few more hours passed and I could feel my body was depleted, struggling to take on fluid from my dwindling supply of hot water, whilst preserving the limited sugary snacks I was longing onto, my body felt lifeless. At this point the group were in an Aconcagua mountain snake formation, attached by the harness to the climber in front and rear. The frustration that persisted by this seeped into every crevice of my mind. Being mindful of the climber in front for they are not to drag you up by being too slow whilst hoping the climber behind isn't being too slow for which you are dragging them up, all in all trying to keep the bouncing rope from becoming tangled in your crampons, around and up your legs.

The grey atmosphere persisted with that biting frozen wind cutting its way through exposed flesh, at this point a hard immobile glaze of ice formed over my ski goggles. Every effort I made to remove it was perilous, I eventually removed the goggles and scrubbed away at the ice now forming on the inside as well as the outside, this was an ongoing battle and my visibility was limited to around 20%, I couldn't wait to get off this rope.

A quick water stop was well received, I was next to a climber called Leonardo. Leonardo an experienced climber and adventurer was a true Italian explorer, and a well rounded athlete at that. I liked him immensely for his attitude and friendly approach. I glanced over at his frozen suit and noticed his iced over eyelashes, it was testament to just how harsh the weather had been so far, we laughed and made light of the pain we were in.



The weather had begun to clear up at this point and the view I neglected to notice was now laid out in front of me, vast mountain ranges as far as the eye could see surrounded by low lying cloud, we were high, higher than any surrounding peak and yet we couldn't see the summit. I had no idea how long or how far we had left. By this time I was still at the rear of the group, after catching them up following my crampon episode, this was now my position and it was taking it out of me further. The snake was now free of the rope but the group was stretched farther than before, the weather was clear now and the pace was slow due to the increasing increment, exhaustion and high air. Whilst the leaders were resting and recuperating it took around 10 minutes for the last man to catch up and close the gaps, as soon as I arrived the front would leave, which would leave no time for my own recovery and no time to catch what little breath I could grasp. The gaps were widening between each climber and the space from front to back was widening further, I could feel myself becoming irritated and hard done by, a mental state I tried so hard to shift.

Our minimal breaks were no more than five minutes, my body was craving sustenance, huge calories and a long drink, Daniela wasn't the focus of Nims following the threat of return, it seemed to have given her a kick up the arse, not just her but to the whole group, realising that a summit wasn't guaranteed and you weren't going to be dragged up at your own pace, you'd follow the group or you'd go back down. Fraser was now slowly shifting his way towards me at the back, and by the time we reached the front of the group that were just leaving after their short stop, he was slowing rapidly, but to his credit he was not stopping. Slowly but surely he would put one step in front of the other and just crack on. The bursts of energy needed to be at the back of the group were just not in him at that point and he drifted back further and further with the Mingma legend in tow once again.

No summit was seen still, no end was in sight as we reached an overhanging cliff ledge around 30 metres high, it was secluded, out of the elements and it was heaven. I was the last to reach in, about 10 minutes behind the group, the weather was perfect, no wind, clear, sunny and absolutely beautiful. To my personal effects I brought a bottle of coke as a little pick me up treat, I had been chipping away at this bottle with Daniela for the few stops we had but still had half left. This was placed securely and snugly in my main pocket of my summit suit, surround by



goose down and the warmth of my body, I pulled it out only to find it frozen, like a Coca Cola iced slush puppy, I was amazed.

Fraser was now some fair distance away, slowly making his way up the mountain with Victor, another guide that later would win my respect and admiration by the tales and heartaches that he faced on Everest just months before. Unfortunately word came up to us that Fraser would be making his way back down, this was a huge blow to us all and a big wake up call.

The groups first extended break since we left in the early hours of the morning and it was already the afternoon, making the most of the calm conditions I didn't want to move, I could have easily laid there soaking up the atmosphere in my suit for hours, days even. I could now see it was seriously steep, by this time I had clear sight, clear hearing which was a first. I made the most of the situation and brought out the morale, it was time and it was much needed. Plugging in my headphones produced in me a buzz, a burst of adrenaline that I lacked from camp 3, I was in another world again and I was taken away from this shell I was carrying up a never ending mountain.

Two hours into this new found sense of enjoying the moment quite quickly vanished and the breathlessness and utter fatigue kicked in once more and it was here to stay. I was at the back of the group once more and I began to become furious at waiting on others to catch their breath whilst I slogged it at the back. I'd give myself a short ten second burst to close the gaps which would leave me gasping for any air that I could fill into my lungs, I just needed a break I needed to go at a pace that wasn't doubled in the same energy that was being expended at the front. This was at the forefront of my mind and this negative thinking was a cancer on my motivation, but for my own personal goals and beliefs, I didn't want to place anyone else in the situation I found myself in, it was a team effort and I believed I was taking one for the team.



With only half a walking pole left and the feeling of having no oxygen in my blood and no air my lungs, I staggered on, occasionally looking up to see the progress, still I could see no summit. Then around 75 metres in front I could see Nims waving at us all, I looked once, twice, three times, why is he waving at us I thought, you could immediately tell it wasn't a negative wave, but a vibe of happiness. He's on the summit, no he can't be, yes he is, that's the summit! A Flat rocky ledge, beneath him were large rocks to scramble up through, these last dozen metres and we were there! I looked up at the rest of the group and a few were sitting down not moving, I wondered why, in my head it felt like it was only myself who was on the edge of complete exhaustion, but it seemed everyone was incapacitated in some way or another. I gathered my strength. I began to move in short explosive bursts, this left me gasping for air and unable to move until I had the sufficient oxygen my body was craving.



I sat staring upwards at the group intensely for around 10 minutes and realised I was just going to push hard, it wasn't possible to pass those on the path made so I scrambled around them clanking the metal of my crampons on the exposed rock surface, it was like navigating through a mountain version of crazy golf. I looked up once more and Narbin was struggling, hunched over unable to move and struggling for breath, the group was immobilised, I needed to keep moving before I ceased up myself, I began to cough up thick phlegm with dots of blood in myself, I was pushing hard and this wasn't a good sign, but it was almost over.

Daniela: "From what Nims told us, Narbin was a great "Unreal" climber, so we all knew he was okay for the climb even without the same acclimatisation, I witnessed Narbin, just about 300

metres from the top bending at the knees and being sick. Once again proof that you should never underestimate any mountain no matter how experienced you are.”

At this moment I was possessed, I'm not an emotional person in the slightest but I began to feel this pressure and release build up inside me, what the hell was this, what's going on I thought, gasping but determined I grit my teeth as tears were rolling down my face pooling and freezing in my ski mask. Hands and feet pulling myself up towards the bright blue sky a hand came out to me and pulled me up to me feet, it was Nims ' well done brother' he said.

I was on the summit, I was elated but one thing was missing, Daniela, I must have passed her in that frenzied episode I had just moments earlier. I eagerly awaited her arrival waiting patiently, so proud that she overcame her hardships just after camp 3 and she pushed on regardless. She made it. She clambered up the last ledge dazed, staggering and clearly overjoyed. We hugged, held each other and took in the moment as much as we could. What a feeling, for the weeks of cold, pain suffering, hunger and confusion, it was all worth it for this moment.



Daniela: “I could try to explain how I felt when I reached the summit after weeks battling with all the demanding conditions. It makes you uncontrollably emotional. Not because I’m a woman, no, but because of the strain, the physical and mental stresses the mountain is forcing upon you”

Around 25 minutes went by and it was time to make our way down the mountain, within moments of arriving on the summit the weather changed, the cloud came in hard, the wind picked up and it began to snow. So that was it, we followed in suit the Aconcagua human snake down towards camp 2. I was warm in my suit to an extent, my mind was preoccupied with the thirst that was developing into an obsession.

I was wearing a shirt under my suit which was exposed as I didn't want to overheat, this was now drenched and the strange thing was I didn't even notice the moisture or the discomfort. The walk down was taking it out of me one chip at a time, soon there'll be nothing left to chip away I thought. Now sporting half a broken pole, this wasn't enough to take the pressure off my already creaking knees, the pain was piercing at times, as if a screw was lodged directly in between my patella.

Hours passed and it dragged on and on, with no sight of camp, the snow at times was waist deep, digging myself out whilst sinking further down used up every ounce of strength I was trying to preserve. Eventually I caught a glimpse of camp two, then at around 2100 hours, 19 hours after we set off on our summit attempt I arrived back, 20 hours, dehydrated, depleted, and exhausted. I was still warm at this point in my suit, I began to administrate myself and search frantically for a water bottle I left precisely for this moment, it was heaven.



Daniela: "The way down was not easy to say the least, We were caught in another storm and our masks were frozen. I was extremely dehydrated and there was little water left so I descended with Mingma. I was placed on the end of a safety rope, it was unforgettable the descent and an unforgettable experience"

Almost immediately, even with warm fresh clothes on I began to shiver and became uncontrollably cold, I slipped in my bag and quite happily drifted off to sleep. I woke up a few

hours later, again incredibly thirsty, by this time it was the early hours and every one of the team was asleep. I didn't want to wake any of them, that wouldn't be fair and I'm quite sure I'd be severely unwelcome. I grabbed a heavy jacket and slipped on my sole-less empty summit boots, it was a clear night again, quiet eerie and still. I stuffed my issued water bottle to the brim with snow and snuck back into my tent and bag. I was suffocatingly thirsty, every 30 seconds I opened the bottle hoping that it had melted enough to satisfy my need to drink, it didn't.

One droplet at a time dropped out onto my parched tongue, this process persisted for around an hour until I drifted off to sleep once more.

I woke up in the morning with Daniela, both of us feeling dire, a severe hungover look and feel was plastered over both of our faces, she asked me if I had anything to drink, I opened my bottle which had been cooking in my bag the past few hours to find it half full with delicious water, I passed her it to drink and told her to finish it, she looked like she needed it more than me.

The days that passed and weeks to follow I began to become incredibly poorly, almost immediately after leaving the mountain via helicopter I was becoming violently sick, car sickness persisted me for weeks and vertigo was with me everywhere. After a reluctant visit to A&E the doctors assumed it was Acute Mountain Sickness, then after the realisation of going cold turkey from anti depressants and anti anxiety drugs it became apparent that I was having severe withdrawal symptoms which were masked by the climb itself.

Thanks to the expedition, my amazing team and super human girlfriend I managed to become drug free, and now set on a life of adventure and positivity. The mind is a powerful tool, use it correctly and quite literally the sky is the limit, no human being is ever limited.

