

Aconcagua, Argentina

December, 2013

This year was all about planning, preparing and fundraising for a trip of a lifetime: climbing Aconcagua to benefit Big City Mountaineers! I've been back a few days and still processing the amazing experience. Before I left I was asked why? Why climb mountains, especially big mountains where I have to defend off cold and can't shower for weeks? I pondered this question a lot on my trip, not because I ever questioned being there, even when it was freaking cold and I had to dig deep to push on. I did not, for a moment, wish I wasn't there doing exactly what I was doing - grant it, I did wish for a few amenities to suddenly appear... such as puffy pants and my pillows (climbing is neck breaking work). But trying to articulate the "why" is something I am still trying to do in a way that makes sense to others (non-mountain climbing others). Even as I write about my experience, I find joy in explaining the hardship of it all, because I already feel the "why" I do this- it's a given in my heart. So as you read further (only if you want painstaking detail of my climb), I hope I was able to capture a bit of the "why" so you too can feel how amazing it is to reach the highest point in the Western Hemisphere, Aconcagua at 22,841 ft.

The Characters:

I have always met amazing people on mountains. Maybe it's the crowd that Big City Mountaineers attracts, or I'm lucky or there is something about extreme cold weather, no showers, and just trying to breath deeply enough to not get a headache that brings out the best in people (yup, we all chose to do this as our vacation). This trip was no exception, I simply adore the people I shared this experience with and feel honored to have personal insight into who they are - big thanks to Ed, Brandon and Nathan for being a wonderful cast of characters on this trip.

As for our guides, they were beyond awesome and I am in awe - I will follow Kurt Wedberg (SierraMountaineering.com) and April Mayhew anywhere (ok, almost anywhere... they are WAY more gifted climbers than I and I'm not totally crazy).

The Climb:

I arrived in Mendoza exhausted but as soon as I was greeted at the airport with a HUGE smile from Kurt, I knew I was in good hands. Soon the rest of our team arrived and we spent the next couple of days working out logistics such as permits, grocery shopping and sorting/fixing gear. Finally on December 2nd after a sleepless night, we were off to start our climb by driving to the trailhead, Los Penitentes at 8,366 feet. We then hiked 5 hours to Pampa de Lenas at 9,514 ft. on a warm windy day, which included several river crossings (one of which Kurt insisted he needed to carry me on his back - unsolicited - I think he was slightly showing off, but I didn't care - my boots stayed dry). As we arrived at camp we determined tent buddies and I thought I was smart in finding a non-snorer (Nathan) but little did I know how things change at elevation and that we all become obnoxious breathers as we gasp for air throughout the night. It was the first of many sleepless nights, but this one was due to the herd of mules that got loose and were running through camp - it apparently was no easy feat to round them all up and I'm just glad they didn't trample our tent in the process!

On Day 2 we hiked to Casa de Piedra at 10,630 ft. and met more wind, but it wasn't too bad until we got to camp. Right after capturing our first glimpse of Aconcagua in the distance and we all had our picture opportunity, the wind storms picked up with an enthusiastic vengeance which made putting up the tents comical as rocks, dirt, manure (you name it) swirled around our heads. We finally got the tents up and the wind subsided a bit, so we took the opportunity to wash in the puddle stream. Then escaped the wind to our blistering tents until the nights feast of meat, meat, and oh yeah... more meat was ready. Argentineans like their meat, so I joined the team and ate up (and greatly appreciate April for also grilling eggplant).

On the third day of hiking we finally arrived at Base Camp: Plaza Argentina at 13,747 ft. with more wind, but this time it was cold (are you sensing a wind theme?). This place has by far the best star viewing I've EVER experienced. I saw a gorgeous display each time I had to drag myself out of my cozy sleeping womb to relieve myself several times in the night (TMI - but a reality as you force yourself to drink A LOT in order to stay healthy as you ascend the mountain).

The next several days we took acclimatization hikes and carried loads to Camp 1 (hike high and sleep low is the motto for acclimatization). In between our "job" was to hydrate, eat and play cards - ok, the cards were just simply fun. We learned a new African card game, which included rules like the dealer gets to change the rules at anytime - to say the least Kurt won a lot of games until these newbies caught on. Wind got up to 50-60 mph... the theme continues.

On Day 7 we were to move to Camp 1 - we were ready to move as all of us were tired of making the same trek up and down. We woke to a thick covering of snow, which is apparently odd for Base Camp. I had a sleepless night so I was secretly hoping for a "snow day" to rest. We had been hiking for 6 days in a row and I was starting to feel it. But I heard we were still on plan, so I muscled

myself out of bed for coffee and breakfast. We packed up the wet tent, put on layers and started our final trek to Camp 1. We are all dreading the skree on the final hill just before Camp 1 with our heavy packs, so we were bracing ourselves for a slog. It was ok to start, my hands finally warmed, but then we got stuck behind a slow group...then one of our teammates were having problems so we had to stop in a place we were fully exposed to the wind, burr. When we started up again, the storm was getting stronger and I couldn't see out of my sunglasses at all, but if I took them off the wind would burn my eyes - uggghhh. So I tried hiking "blind" which meant my footing wasn't solid (our cold weather stuff, such as goggles and heavy gloves was cached at Camp 1- no one expected a snow storm). Finally Kurt stopped to get weather conditions at Camp 1 from a guide coming down. I was able to grab Kurt's goggles so I could see again and also heard the Camp 1 conditions were "very unpleasant" due to wind (coming from a guide this is sort of big news – they are all so casual about what I would consider very bad weather). We went a bit further but as the weather proceeded to get more miserable Kurt told us to stop and expressed that he felt we should go back (this had to be bad for us to turn around). April (who started before us for Camp 1 to claim tent spots) had to be informed, so Kurt asked if we had enough warm layers to sit tight in the storm for the next hour so he could run ahead to tell April and return to us. We all had down jackets, but we really had no idea what we were answering yes to, we had no idea how cold we were going to get.

We spent the next 70 minutes trying to stay warm in the storm. We first started by huddling together and cuddling (I was lucky to be in the middle as the only girl) but one by one, the guys got up to move around and I was left huddled in a ball with a Thermarest around me as a barrier. We were all cursing that we didn't have our winter layers with us - cached at Camp 1. As we endured, I was reminded how much coldness is such a mental battle (not to start shivering or lose your spirits), even when the wind is slicing your face off (or so it feels). After about 45 minutes, an Angle (a guide who turned his team around and was passing by) came by to check on us and ask if we had a cup. He didn't speak English and the guys were confused why he was asking for a cup, but I jumped up out of my cocoon to get my cup out of my pack and he filled it with liquid gold - sweet hot tea. We all shared the warmth that filled our souls with tropical vacation - what an amazing gift!

Finally Kurt came and we headed down the mountain (we made propositions to just camp where we were or cache tents - but Kurt made the right choice in having us bring everything back to Base Camp). Many groups ended up turning around, the winds at Camp 1 were just too high and poor April ended up staying the night there in the storm alone (good thing she had everything she needed, including her cold weather gear). When we arrived Base Camp, we put up tents (again) and warmed up with hot tea and snacks. We decided it would be best to take a rest day the following day.

Rest Day at Base Camp totally raised our Spirits! We found a makeshift "shower" at the rangers' station that consisted of a heated bucket of water in a shelter that was heated with a gas camp stove - it was the BEST \$20 shower ever! The rest of the day consisted of watching the Enron documentary on Nathan's iPad mini (huddled together in the dining tent), eating a huge steak lunch (yup, still in Argentina), playing cards and I finished my book. Fabulous rest day that gave us exactly what each of us needed to move forward the next day!

Yay - we finally moved to Camp 1 at 16,500 ft. with our 5th time hiking the trail being the charm! The weather was fantastic and we all felt strong. Once we arrived Camp 1 it was all about staying warm and drinking a lot – this is even more important as we move higher. It's not easy to force liters of cold water down, but we manage to do it. I'm learning how much patience mountaineering takes as well as warm layers – I never feel I have enough layers on, although I couldn't possibly move my arms if I put them all on (makes me think of the movie Christmas Story).

The next day we carried a load to Camp 2 (Helicopter Camp) at 17,979 ft. which was a bit of a slog and my neck started to really act up due to carrying packs and looking down- but I discovered Kurt's hidden talent of digging his thumbs into knots – ouchy but it does the trick! The best part of each day is at the end when we know we accomplished what we needed to that day and all that's left to do is share warm drinks and stories together.

On Day 11 we moved to Camp 2 – as we move up the mountain it's certainly getting colder and the wind is always a concern. But we were lucky with the sun showing its glorious face for a bit of a visit as the wind subsided – it was a treat to feel the warmth. The next couple of days we repeated the routine with a load carry to Camp 3 (Cholera Camp, 19,586 ft.) and moving the following day. Camp 3 is by far the prettiest camp with unique rocks and formations. We, of course, stayed at the highest section of the high camp so we also had the best view. That night we discovered another of Kurt's guide service amenities – he found his chocolates for turn down service. Typically we just get a morning and nightly visit to our tent so he could take our pulse and get our blood/oxygen readings, but it was a sweet bonus with truffle chocolates after - Yummy! A few personal records at Camp 3 include this being the highest elevation (until I summit) and I think the worse I've ever smelled – but I don't really want to ask my tent mate how bad it is (He doesn't smell so good either.... but layers help).

Day 14 - Summit Day!

Woke at 4AM after actually getting some sleep. We hit the trail by 5:35AM after Kurt brought us coffee and breakfast to our tent so

we could stay warm. Felt weird to be totally dressed laying in our bags almost getting hot. When he said “go” we all quickly got our boots on, took off our jackets and started walking in the dark. I had a hard time catching my breath and finding a rhythm at first, but it all worked out. We took some breaks, froze and kept going – my toes got very cold but fortunately they didn’t go completely numb. As we approached the top it was tough to breath, I was about to ask for a break (something I haven’t needed to do, usually Kurt times them very well) thinking we were coming close to the fake summit and I would need the rest for the final push... when I got to the top, I noticed the cross... “Holy smokes, is this the top?” I asked, which Kurt confirmed, “This is the summit!” Unbelievable! We are here! Summiting meant something very different and emotional for each of us - we all took turns hugging and crying and hugging some more – then it was picture time. We arrived at 1:05 PM.

We took tons of pictures, ate a bit then it was time to head down. I was about to bonk and it came fast - I fell/slid (which felt better than walking), felt dizzy, hard to focus, and really wanted the crampons off my feet..... not fun. I had a jolly rancher and tried to pull it together, then a Gu and I started to feel like a person again. I was disappointed I bonked and couldn’t control it - I know better! We finally made it down (we were all struggling a bit) and when we got to camp we all just laid on the ground and didn't move for a long time letting the snow fall on us. It made me chuckle on the inside (too tired to laugh out loud), we must have looked like quite a funny sight – back to camp at 4:53 PM.

The following day we had a very slow morning – Kurt and April served coffee to us in our tents and just let us lay around. It snowed several inches the night before and the day was gorgeous and clear, it was such a beautiful morning. The weather was being good to us and we had summited the highest point in the Western Hemisphere the day before (we were still processing what we accomplished)! We finally packed up to hiked to Plaza de Mules at 13,976 ft - the final base camp. We were all quietly dreading the 2-day walk out - we were just worn out. At our first break we were told that Ed had secretly arranged for 2 helicopters to take us out of Base Camp so we don't have to do the final flat, long rocky hike out the following day - WHOO HOOO, thanks to Ed we'll get showers and sleep in a real bed at Los Penitentes that very night!

We hiked out in record time 3.5 hours (should be a 5 hour hike but we had an extra spring in our step) and hung out eating and drinking until the helicopter came. The heli gave us an awesome 15 minute ride full of views of green mountainsides, I had forgotten we hadn’t seen green since our first day. It was a welcome refreshing view. The shower, dinner and bed at Los Penitentes felt unbelievable! Everything feels new and fresh – and so good!

At the end of the trip we checked out Mendoza for a few days and indulged in amazing food and wine before all of us headed our own way back home. It was sad to leave everyone, but I’m so thankful for having the opportunity to share such an awesome experience with such amazingly people with hearts of gold.