

Social and Solo Mountaineering Abroad and on Denali (20310 feet), Churchill Peaks

Text and photos by Dan Koepke



Panorama of Camp 4 on Denali.

After skiing and hiking out, I rested beneath California's Mount Shasta (14162 feet) on May 26, 2018, listening its mystical melodies and messages. Spring breezes blew and warm sun shone through trees. Thomas (Tom) Lone FaceTimed just after climbing Mount Rainier (14411 feet) and we confirmed plans to drive together from Anchorage to Talkeetna May 31. Connecting via Rainier immediately infused our conversation with extra exuberance and enthusiasm.

Date with Destiny June 5, 2016

Attributing my fascination with mountaineering to my father's ascent of Mount Rainier in the 1980's when my family lived in Seattle, climbing Mount Rainier was an inherent, lifelong destiny. As my Dad became gravely ill around 2009, I began considering climbing it in his memory. Fortunately he recovered, so while developing my mountaineering skills, I aimed and prepared to climb Rainier as a living tribute honoring my father and my unique heritage.

I finally solo-summitted Mount Rainier 30 years after my Dad on a perfectly clear June 5, 2016. A novice buddy bailed around 12500 feet and, with no advance plans whatsoever to climb solo to the summit the day before when beginning to hike together from Paradise (5400 feet), I simply felt comfortable continuing alone on the Disappointment Cleaver's moderate route in ideal conditions. It all worked magically like the story you always dreamt coming true in the most sensational way imaginable – as if I was aligning with my destiny or creating my own reality. I took ownership of my individual existence, as some mountaineers have put it. *We always determine our own personal success by our goals and our capability to overcome obstacles in order to achieve our objectives.*

Contacting a journalist in my parents' hometown, I shared the story about what Rainier meant to my father and me to pitch a perfect Father's Day Tribute article. Then I flew straight to my ex-hometown of Bozeman, Montana, after being gone six-plus years, drove to Jackson, Wyoming, and solo-summitted the Middle Teton (12804 feet) June 8, only 72 hours after standing atop Rainier. I looked west to Idaho where I first saw the Tetons in 2001, and recognized much bigger challenges and summits were coming fast when looking north toward Montana and measuring a decade's progress since climbing Montana's tallest, Granite Peak (12799 feet) with a friend in 2006. I scouted proud Grand Teton (13770 feet) routes to solo next, but snow conditions were rotten, I started feeling sore, and I had a big weekend ahead of me. *Live to climb another day.*

Our family celebrated and shared Father's Day weekend together, perhaps for the last time ever, and we will always dearly remember that 2016 Father's Day – a heartwarming mountaineering story for anyone alive enough to read it and anytime I recall it, like while congratulating Tom after he successfully ascended Rainier about two years later.



*Grand Teton from
Middle Teton
(12804 feet)*



Sunrise from the summit of Pico de Orizaba.

Pico de Orizaba (18491 feet) Solo December 2016 before Denali 2017

Thomas Lone and I connected April 2018 via mutual friend Matty Knarston about both transportation for Denali 2018 and the idea of teaming up on a permit together for Mount Everest in 2019 via Tibet. I first met and proudly passed Kiwi marathoners and mountaineers Matty Knar and Van Loral on the steep, snowy volcanic cone above the icy Labyrinth en route to the summit of Pico de Orizaba (18491 feet), or Citlaltepētāl, for sunrise at the top of Mexico December 26, 2016. The next day the Kiwis and I crossed paths again on the bus to Puebla and shared excitement about Denali 2017. Matty Knar immediately climbed Aconcagua next, where he first met Tom.

After initially helping them with basic logistics, the Kiwis and I teamed up on the mountain as friends for Denali 2017 Expedition Alaskan International Ohana starting May 16, 2017. That 24-day expedition is another story I will weave in a future issue of *the Scree* about returning to Denali. Simply put, our fantastic Denali 2017 expedition incited my first considerations about returning to climb Denali on a solo permit.

Launching Denali Solo June 2018



Flying into Kahiltna International with a flattop lenticular atop Denali.

Permitted on Denali before, the seven-day rule and my acclimatization in the Sierras enabled me to rally spontaneously for Denali 2018. Leaving Alaska early May 2018, I initially planned on continuing to the Cordillera Blanca in Peru via California, but poor weather around Huaraz convinced me to play longer in California's sunny Sierra Nevada. Attempting Denali solo crystallized more and more while skiing Lassen Peak (10457 feet) and Mount Shasta, and I

cherished Shasta's lucid message: *Do not let fear of failure limit opportunities to grow and succeed.*

Embracing the chance to climb Denali with a solo permit, I climbed sunny North Tahoe granite again with legendary pal Jim Sweeney and refreshed my soul's midnight lightning overnight in Yosemite's Camp 4 before flying back to Anchorage, driving Tom and his partner to Talkeetna, and landing on the Kahiltna Glacier on June 1, 2018.

Standard crevasse danger motivated us to team up as friends for three on a rope from base camp (7200 feet) to Camp 1 (7800 feet) and then intermittently as high as Camp 4 (14200 feet). I had experience climbing and skiing unroped above Camp 4 toward the summit and was comfortable skiing back to Camp 1, where I would socialize and hope to tie in with another group on their way back to base camp when crevasses would be gaping most. Definitely not a true "solo" summit to purists, but more than contrived bragging rights, I simply care about enjoying the experience, reaching the summit, and making it home safe and sound.

Both my acclimatization and conditions felt great the next day hiking a load from Camp 1 to Camp 3 (11000 feet), and I enjoyed casually skiing 3,000-plus feet back to Camp 1 in 10 minutes or so. Two-way radios proved priceless because, so excited to fist-pound and fly skiing down the mountain from Camp 3, I forgot my backpack with my skins! Fortunately Tom grabbed my backpack after I caught him on the radio while snacking. *Helpful people gotta ask for a little help in return every now and then.*

Denali's upper West Rib from Camp 4.



The day after we hiked back up to Camp 3, we ascended to Camp 4 with loaded sleds, but without skis, and quickly returned to Camp 3. The next day I loaded my 105-liter pack, left the sled at Camp 3, and hiked solo above Squirrel Hill before skinning to Camp 4 again from there – where people were returning after skiing perfect powder from the summit. The stoke was real, alive, and well.

Soon I was sharing food and shooting the breeze with new Mexican friends, Carlos Petersen and Max Alvarez, even before amigo Daniel Araiza could introduce us when he returned from Camp 3 where he and I had reunited earlier while he convalesced and recovered from upper respiratory crud. Over and over I still hear Daniel say, “*Ocho horas, guey*. Eight hours, bro.” Max had just summited Denali (20310 feet) via the West Buttress from 14000 feet in eight hours round trip – impressive – and now they were prepping for the Cassin Ridge. In January 2019 Max summited Cerro Aconcagua (22841 feet) from Plaza de Mulas (14340 feet) in less than six hours – keep your eyes on this young phenom.



Aconcagua photo from Camp 2 (18370 feet)

Cerro Aconcagua (22841 feet) Solo "360 Route" January 2018

Daniel Araiza, my *tocayo*, or twin, via our first name, and I met at Aconcagua's Camp 2 (18370 feet) on January 6, 2018.

I had just bailed on the idea of climbing the "Polish Glacier Direct" solo after looking from beneath it at 19000-plus feet and finding a section of nearly vertical glacier ice at the bottleneck, which up to 17000 feet looked like steep snow. Too much exposure and altitude with hybrid crampons and ice tools motivated me to just aim for the summit via the "360 Route" by meeting the "Normal Route" from the west at Colera Camp (19685 feet). *Must be able to make some conservative decisions.*

"*Como va?! How's it going, Danny?!?*", the Mexicans sincerely asked, shouting across camp when we awoke with about six to eight inches of fresh snow. I sat up, shaking the snow off as I peeked out of my -30-degree Fahrenheit synthetic sleeping bag in a bivy sack, and with a wild, yet rested, grin replied, "*Otro dia en paraíso!* Another day in paradise!"

Sleeping beneath the stars and going tentless meant carrying less weight and avoiding both damage to my tent and persistent, disturbing noise. Leaving my tent earlier at Plaza Argentina (13400 feet) seemed so reasonable after carrying a load to Camp 1 (16400 feet) and scouting above 17000 feet. I continued utilizing melatonin as a high-altitude homeostatic agent particularly for quality sleep, and I felt fantastic in my heavy, huge sleeping bag comfortable like a fat aunt's cozy, loving bear hug. [*Scientific evidence includes remarkable results from a research study at Denali's Camp 4 in 2013 conducted by Dr. Christopher Jung in the Department of Biological Sciences at the University of Alaska Anchorage.*]

Wet snow fell in the afternoon January 8, 2018, at Colera Camp as I bided my time cooking and stretching. I planned to crash early and soon employ my gear, which remained in my waterproof backpack. Felt like an Alaskan spring evening at altitude. Plotting my strategy for a summit bid in the morning, mountaineers began appearing while descending toward camp. For the past few days up high, Aconcagua's mornings were clear with clouds moving in and eventually bringing precipitation in the afternoon with *el blanco viento*, the whiteout "white wind." As a solo climber I keenly perceived how disoriented and scattered everyone was due to the low visibility and their fatigue.

I recognized one or two Americans descending that I had met the day before we started at different trailheads because they were climbing the "Normal Route." I melted more snow for hot water, then greeted and congratulated them for ascending to Aconcagua's summit and making it back safely! I assisted one out of his crampons and boots so he could crawl into the tent and his sleeping bag before trying to help the other guys a bit, too, then leaving them to crash. Because every teammate in this Fantastic Four summited, I should, too.

After discussing the weather in Spanish with a passer-by, next thing I know he leads me to the rangers for an update. They had just returned from afternoon patrol closer to the summit and seemed frustrated. Then somehow they learned I was not using a tent and immediately began threatening to escort me down the mountain if I did not find one to share. I explained as clearly as I could in Spanish that I was comfortable using the bivy sack, this was no emergency, and they could carry on without worry: I was from Alaska, and intentionally left my tent at Plaza Argentina. Suddenly I had three minutes to find a tent or the rangers would seize my permit!

I humbly asked the Fantastic Four if I could crash with them explaining the urgency due to the rangers' threat. Compassionate Brandon Calhoun and Shane Duffy were so wiped out after summing they said it would not matter much in their Trango-3 tent. Rangers confirmed plans asking me to radio tomorrow about my

ascent and safety. This ordeal really shook me up mentally and emotionally; yet physiologically that night at 19685 feet, I felt amazing.

Climbing solo slowly compared to Max Alvarez, but rapidly compared to most others on routes, only 3,000 feet of climbing to Aconcagua's 22841-foot summit seemed straightforward, particularly because on Orizaba in December 2016 I had climbed 4,400 feet at altitude, feeling much less acclimated. Using past climbs as standard examples like this, I planned to use the same tactics I had for Rainier in June 2016 and Mexico's Pico de Orizaba in December 2016: let all the big, slow groups clear out of camp first while I rest in peace before exploding out of the gates, passing the big slow groups en route, and trying to enjoy the summit as solo as possible before the circus arrived. Strategizing about how other teams impact climbing the mountain proves helpful in the modern age of crowded summits and dangerous bottlenecks on classic routes. Very rarely are climbs only a matter of a team and a mountain, and in 2013 Ueli Steck and Simone Moro provided another relevant case-in-point on Everest regarding their dangerous interactions with Sherpas while trying to climb independently.

Hearing the guided groups gather at 2.30 a.m., I snuck out of the tent at 4 a.m. to begin preparing. Crystal clear and frigid, stars twinkled as I layered up my boots over down liners and prepared to don overboots and start. Now my fingers and feet were too cold from exposing them and preparing everything away from my sleeping bag I would have used had I slept outside instead of in the tent. I was way too cold to focus and needed to get back in my sleeping bag and warm up to avoid frostbite, especially since I had hours to rest before sunrise.

Eventually Brandon quizzically asked if I was ever gonna go for it, and I bolted out of the sleeping bag and tent again at 7 a.m. with the Mexicans barely in sight. I caught them at the top of the Canaleta by the cave (21300 feet), and after asking Daniel, he recognized my pace and let me lead from there. Slower South Americans asked us where we were from in Spanish as we passed, and after the Mexicans replied I added enthusiastically, "*Alaska y Mexico! Hermanos del Norte! Brothers of the North (America)!*" This non-technical, but steep, snowy terrain where crampons were essential did not seem to be the mundane, cruiser "trek" I dreaded when hearing about the "Normal Route."

Suddenly a client's crampon popped off ahead and the guide and the client sat blocking the established trail while the guide unsuccessfully fumbled with the crampon the client did not even try to re-attach himself. At an awkward, steep position in the snow at 22600 feet, they were not making any progress whatsoever with a large group waiting and growing. I veered off trail and found myself stemming up loose, rotten, mixed terrain using my ice axe's

pick and loose rock handholds while praying my crampons would not pop off, too, and a few big moves got me back on the trail with no one between me and the summit. I snapped incredible pictures of the Mexicans as they hugged and celebrated making it to the summit. Daniel and I hugged and congratulated each other, and everyone was psyched.

I waived a pink "I love you" buff from the summit honoring my dying Aunt JoAnne and friend's wife, LJ, battling cancer. This solo, yet social, climb celebrated everyone's life and health, including my father's and my own, and meant so much to carry that love up there and send my support to family and friends around the world afterward. LJ eventually beat that cancer, and I modestly gifted her the pink buff as a memento from her successful battle.

Visibility was already bad by 1 p.m., and I did not want to get stuck descending behind big groups. (A European died on the ridge a couple days later getting pinned late high in the whiteout after ascending late.) The two French guys who broke trail to the summit headed down and we began descending together, but I started feeling my achy knees fast and their trekking poles helped them blow me away. The wind blew footprints away quickly beneath the Canaleta, but the whiteout, while growing, was not too bad. A Nepali greeted me with tea at Camp Colera as I realized maybe I should not bivvy there, remembering the Rangers.

I continued enjoying descending west down the "Normal Route," planning to camp soon – until I was quite fatigued after climbing 3,000 feet, descending 3,000 feet, and descending another 2,000 feet from Colera without eating. I stopped by the rangers to let them know I was okay en route to Plaza de Mulas, and they generously offered to guide me in the whiteout for the last 3,000 feet. Not a matter of an emergency, they essentially chased me after I declined their initial invitation! We selfied and one even offered me his trekking poles, which I regretted not accepting as I limped into Plaza de Mulas with severe lateral knee pain from covering over 11,000 feet in less than 12 hours. Soon I ran into the Fantastic Four; they invited me for a social \$40 spaghetti dinner, and I ravenously finished what they did not eat on their plates. I sighed and smiled falling asleep beneath the stars after a big, long day at the top of the Americas and the Western Hemisphere.

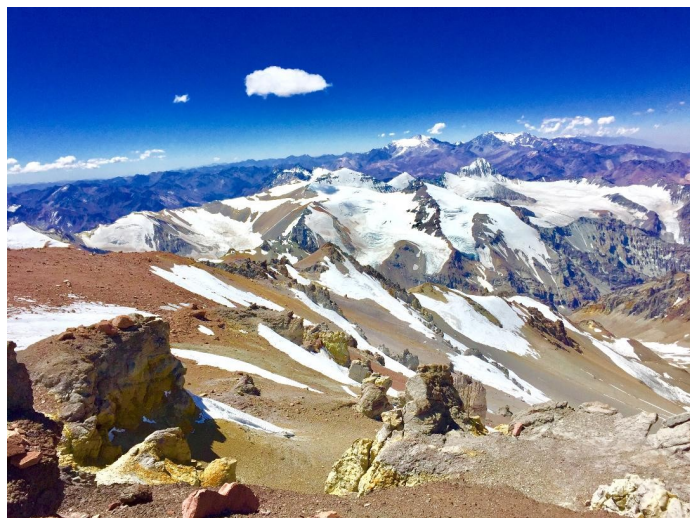
I wanted to hike out as soon as possible to rest and eat; in hindsight, the more prudent decision may have been not painfully hiking all 18 miles out the day after 11,000-plus-foot vertical above an altitude of 14000 feet. I must have looked rather rough and ragged: only a couple miles from the trailhead a sweet French young woman, Krystina Marcoux, touched my heart so deeply approaching and offering her family's extra water and snacks – I will always be grateful for her caring kindness and never forget that. Then in polite Argentinian form, like sugary icing on the cake

of my summit, when I checked out at the rangers' office they shared tea and cookies, generously refilling both my cup and plate. Krystina reappeared and we shared contact information; we remain friends to this day and look forward to climbing together in the Alps soon. I pursue international mountaineering objectives for these precious cultural experiences, as well, because I simply love discovering different lands and people through exploring the mountains around the world.

Catching the very first bus back to Mendoza that evening, I asked the bus driver for the best restaurant open so late and with good steak: Don Marino's. It was all I could do to keep myself inside the bus as we passed small *empanada* stands and convenience stores, and I salivated thinking about the celebratory feast in store at Don Marino's. I had to work for a cab at the bus station and finally pulled up to the Promised Land of Don Marino's at 12.40 a.m. Entering the front door it felt like a swanky Italian restaurant with bottles of wine lining the walls.

I was greeted with the unfortunate news that the kitchen was closed! I enthusiastically explained that I had just climbed their beautiful country's tallest mountain – the highest outside the Himalaya – and had come immediately (without showering for two weeks) to Don Marino's because it was recommended to me as the best restaurant with steak in all of Mendoza *open* at this time of night. I realized perhaps expressing my disappointment in such an animated way might cross the line if I pushed much more for some chow. I sighed and apologized for my timing.

The owner instructed me to take a seat. He generously poured me a glass of wine and brought me a plate of roasted beef, apologizing that it was not cooked completely fresh for me. I tried but he would not accept any cash, even as he worked on balancing the day's books. Cherishing the blend of grapes and protein on my palate, I raised my glass and proclaimed a cheers to their wonderful country. With a few more bites, I repeated the cheers



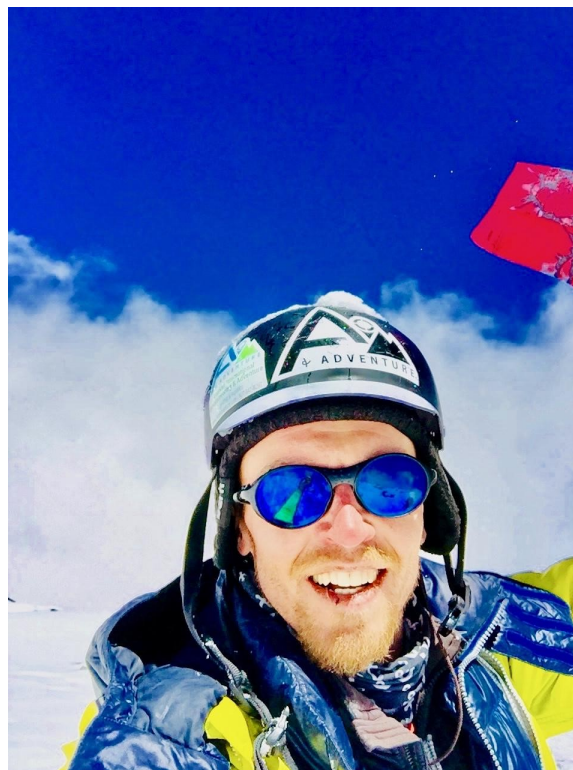
Andes as seen from 19000 feet on Aconcagua.

to the land which provides such treasures like this delicious beef, grapes, and mountains. With a clean plate, I finished my glass with a cheers thanking these and all Argentinian people for their generosity and hospitality before bidding them adieu. *Hasta pronto.*

Read about Koepke's return to Denali in a future issue of the Scree.



A selfie of Dan Koepke at 17000 feet on Aconcagua.



Dan Koepke on the summit of Aconcagua with a little pink buff.