

## Antarctica 2004 - by mike schiller

On November 24, Bob Lowry and I left Pittsburgh and traveled to Antarctica in an attempt to climb the highest point on that continent, Mt. Vinson. The Vinson Massif stands 16,067 feet above sea level. It is not a particularly difficult or technical mountain to climb, but it is difficult to get to and it is very cold.

Here's Bob and I at the Pittsburgh airport on the morning of our departure. We had been training together for the last six months, carrying heavy packs up the 780 steps, 36 flights at the University of Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning. We're ready to go.



We flew Pittsburgh to Miami to Santiago where we met the rest of our team. This photo shows Bob, me, Dan and Paul having breakfast in the Santiago airport.



From Santiago, we flew via Puerto Montt to Punta Arenas in the southern tip of Chile. From there we would fly to Antarctica on a chartered plane run by the one outfitter that flies folks into the interior of the continent. We had to wait four days in Punta Arenas for the weather to be good enough in Antarctica to fly the plane.

So, as we waited, we spent time getting to know each other and the town of Punta Arenas. Here's Phil Ershler, our lead guide and mountaineering legend. Both Phil and his wife, Sue, have climbed the Seven Summits. Phil is 53 and is one of the partners at International Mountain Guides, which was the official guide service for this expedition.



There were 7 clients and 3 guides on this adventure. Here's the crew at dinner in Punta Arenas. From left to right, you can see Dennis, Dan, me, Bob, Jon, Mike and Lindsay. Not seen are Paul, Alistair and Phil.



Dennis, 52, retired contractor living in the Florida Keys.  
Dan, 53, retired vice-chairman at MMC, living in Phoenix, AZ  
Bob, 38, VP at PNC Financial in Pittsburgh.  
Jon, 38, real-estate development in the UK.  
Alistair, 40, OB/GYN doctor in the UK.  
Paul, 45, actor and screenwriter in Santa Monica  
Me, 44, run a small non-profit in Pittsburgh, PA  
Mike H., 28, Assistant guide and 8<sup>th</sup> grade science teacher in Denver public schools  
Lindsay, 22, assistant guide, recently graduated from Dartmouth and guide for IMG  
Phil, 53, professional mountain guide living near Seattle and partner in IMG.

While waiting we took some walks out along the Straits of Magellan.



We spent a lot of time sitting around the hotel and in restaurants telling jokes and stories. Phil was the master storyteller, given his many experiences. He ran a terrific trip, managing our expectations appropriately at every step along the way.



We also got caught up on our sleep and our reading. I read *The DaVinci Code* while waiting in Punta Arenas.



We eventually got the chance to fly to Antarctica after 4 days of waiting. We flew on an old Russian cargo plane called an Aleutian. The pilots were young, ex-fighter pilots for the Russian air force, part of the “new breed of Russian pilots” we were told. I think that was a good thing.



The interior of the Aleutian was not built for comfort. Bench seats along the sides, gear and jet fuel stacked in the middle, no heat, no windows, one port-a-john stuck in the closet up front, no sound protection (so no conversation since you could not hear anything over the roar of the engines), all the signs written in Cyrillic, and no pretty flight attendants to bring us cocktails and sandwiches.



The flight over takes 5 hours. We land in Patriot Hills on a sheet of ice, and take our first steps on the continent of Antarctica.



From Patriot Hills we load all our gear and our selves into these twin engine Otters (ten people per plane) and fly another hour to the base of Mount Vinson.



At base camp, you can see the summit in the far distance. In the near distance are these huge ice falls, which we will avoid



This is Bob on the crapper at base camp. There was a nice view of the mountains from here.



The ice averages 5,000 feet thick here. Since it only snows 2 cm per year on average, it takes a very long time to create a glacier 5,000 feet thick.

Now, we'll start our climb from base camp (7,000 feet above sea level). The temperature is about 15 degrees F.

We carried full packs and pulled a sled of group gear up to Camp 1. One day we carried stuff up and cached it, then walked back down. The next day we moved the entire camp up to where we left the cache. We were roped together to protect against falling into crevasses. The summit is in the far distance in the center.



At rest breaks we ate cheese, jerky, chocolate, nuts. It was quite sunny many days. Of course, the sun never actually set – it just circled the sky in a counterclockwise direction and remained about half way up from the horizon.



When we were in camp, we spent a lot of time in the “Posh tent”, aka the kitchen tent. There was more room to move around and we could all fit at one time. Here’s Jon, Dennis, Paul, Alistair and Bob.



We built walls of ice bricks to protect our tents from the wind. It takes about 3 hours to make camp – carve a platform, erect the tents and build the ice wall.



This is Camp 1 at 10,000 feet above sea level.

This is the crapper at Camp 1. Cold on the buns but not so bad actually.



Climbing to Camp 2, there is a very steep headwall. Here Mike H and his rope team make their way up the headwall. It's about 10 degrees F with light breeze.



Two Australian researchers were climbing next to us. This gives a good impression of the angle of the slope.





Some days got darn frosty out on the mountain. Ice especially likes to stick to whiskers.



At the end of a hard day and back in the tent, Bob's feet are steaming. All this moisture can condense on the inside of the tent, then freeze, and then when you bump the tent it snows on you inside the tent.



After our carry to Camp 2, we ended up waiting four days due to bad weather. It's harder to spend time at camp than in Punta Arenas. We slept a lot (12 hours a day!), ate, read, played cards, practiced our knots, drank hot drinks and told a lot of bad jokes. It was good for acclimatizing, but got pretty old at the end of four days.

Dan, Dennis and Bob hanging out in the Posh Tent at Camp 1.



Dan and Bob playing hearts in the Posh tent.



One day, it got sunny and almost warm. Temperature was about 20 degrees F and in the sun it felt much warmer. A few folks thought they would air things out while they had the chance.

I read a novel by T.C. Boyle called *World's End*. Appropriate title, don't you think?



In the near distance, you can see the weather fronts that kept us from climbing higher. The cold air would rush down the mountain and hit the warmer air below making these dramatic cloud formations.



Some great images of weather fronts - I have never seen such formations before.



The coldest temperature we saw was -22 degrees F in the tent one night. That was pretty cold. I stayed warm sleeping in 2 pairs of polypro long underwear, a fleece vest, down booties, a neck gaiter and fleece hat. We also saw -15 degrees F multiple times throughout the trip.

Alistair, Jon and Paul lounging in the Posh tent.



Finally, the weather clears and we are ready to climb to Camp 2.



Climbing the headwall to Camp 2 again. That is Sue's Pyramid in the background.



Camp 2 is at 13,000 feet above sea level.

It's a long trek to the summit – roughly 7 or 8 miles one way and another 3,000 feet of vertical.



We had some cloudy, breezy weather on the route to the summit. The clouds settled in on us long enough to make us take the longer route around the back side of the mountain.



This is Mike H arriving at the top of the steepest part of the summit climb. At this point it was -15 degrees F with light breeze. We were taking three breaths for every step forward.



This is the summit ridge. Lots of up and down over rock piles and outcroppings, some scrambling with steep drop-offs on both sides.



All ten of us made the summit. Mt Vinson, 16,067 feet above sea level, highest point on Antarctica.



Bob and I at the summit. There is a small canister here containing a journal. We all signed our names to the register. Look for our names if you are ever there.



Lindsay and I at the summit.



It took eight hours to climb to the summit and three hours to descend. We spent about 30 minutes on the summit. Below is the view of Camp 2 during our descent. Back to hot drinks and supper and a warm sleeping bag.



I may have been a bit tired as I ate dinner at 11:00 PM that night.



The next day we descended all the way down to base camp. This is the descent down the headwall from Camp 2.





We hauled out everything we brought with us, including all the poop. It all goes back to South America for disposal.

We had some fabulous views on the way down.



Paul checks out the excellent views during a rest stop on the descent. It took about six hours to descend from Camp 2 to base camp.



I enjoyed every single person on the team. A great crew to spend two weeks in close quarters together. At base camp: Left to right – Alistair, Jon, Phil, Mike H, Dennis, Paul, Lindsay, Bob, Dan, Mike S.



We were able to fly out to Patriot Hills and then to Punta Arenas all in the same long day and night. There were some amazing views of Antarctica from the Otter.



Huge cliffs as seen from the Otter.



After getting cleaned up, Bob and I went for a couple of beers. Gosh, they tasted good.



We all went to dinner that night. Steak was on the menu. Those Pisco Sours were strong. I may have had too much to drink.



The next day we left Punta Arenas for home. Happy, satisfied, accomplished, relaxed, fulfilled. An awesome adventure. Wow.



I am still giving thanks to the gods for all their assistance for a safe and successful journey.