

## Vinson Massif – November 2008 by Robyn Garrison

While contemplating how to spend my 50th birthday this year, many of my friends, family and co-workers suggested a cruise, Caribbean vacation or someplace with sun and surf. Those choices weren't "big" enough for me. I wanted to do something memorable that few people take on. I have gone on several trips with International Mountain Guides in the past and was intrigued by Phil Ershler's stories about their Antarctic expedition to Vinson. To a person, everyone I spoke to who had been on the trip told me it was an experience unlike many other expeditions, primarily due to the remoteness, the harsh environment as well as the breathtaking beauty of Antarctica.

So I after making up my mind to go, the only thing left was to get my husband used to the idea of me going – oh and writing a big check!

An expedition to Vinson is in a totally different category than any other climbing trip I've taken. I've used IMG in the past for climbs of Kilimanjaro, Ecuador and Mexico volcano's as well as a Nepal trek and have found that on every trip, they were extremely professional, had great relationships with the local communities and provided many opportunities to learn new skills along the way. There was no question in my mind as to which guide service and guide that I would select. Phil is a great guide as well as a great friend.

So now to the trip – getting ready for this trip was a bit different than others that I've gone on. First of all, each piece of gear had to be carefully chosen. The temps often reach -40 and with the wind chill factor – frost bite is the big danger. We would also be carrying everything on this trip. No porters, yaks or trucks taking gear up to each camp. Everything is bulky – not necessarily heavy – lots of down. Of course that necessitated buying some new gear.

I left Seattle on November 17th along with Phil, Ben Kurdt (another IMG guide) and Chris Burrows. Between the 4 of us, we checked something like 15 large duffels with our personal gear as well as all the group gear and food for the trip. Our route took us through LA and Santiago on to Punta Arenas Chili which is on the southern tip of Chili. We met up with most of the team between flights in Santiago and the balance of the team in Punta on 11/18.



Our team was made up of two guides – Phil and Ben; Kent from Phoenix, Chad from San Francisco, Ken from Boston (my tent mate), Michel from Ottawa, Phillip and Justin from South Africa and Chris and myself from Seattle.

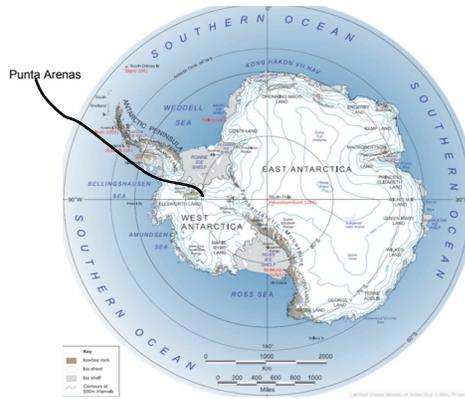


Back row: Ben Kurdt, PhillipLowe, Michel Plouffe, Chad Stegeman, Kent McClellan; Front row: Phil Ershler, Robyn Garrison, Chris Burrows, Ken Maclairin, Justin Williamson

The first day was filled with getting to know the team, picking up additional food supplies and getting an orientation briefing by Antarctic Logistics & Expeditions (ALE) who would be getting us to Antarctica and Vinson Base camp as well as providing logistics support for our team. ALE picked up our gear that afternoon so that it could be staged and ready for our flight over.



Now the only thing we had to do was wait for ALE to call and tell us the IL76 could fly. The runway at Patriot Hills, our first stop in Antarctica, is a blue ice runway that is always plagued with a stiff cross wind. ALE will only fly in if the winds are below 10 knots and they need a weather window of 8 – 10 hours. We were very lucky in that we were only delayed about 12 hours. The ride to Patriot Hills was amazingly smooth – considering we were flying in a Russian transport aircraft. The flight alone was an experience not too many westerners experience.



Once we landed at Patriot Hills – we carefully made our way across the blue ice (very slick) and after a few photo's and a nice warm (actually very cold) welcome from the ALE staff that stay on site during Antarctica's summer months, we headed over to the camp to have a quick bite and wait for our chance to fly out to Vinson Base.

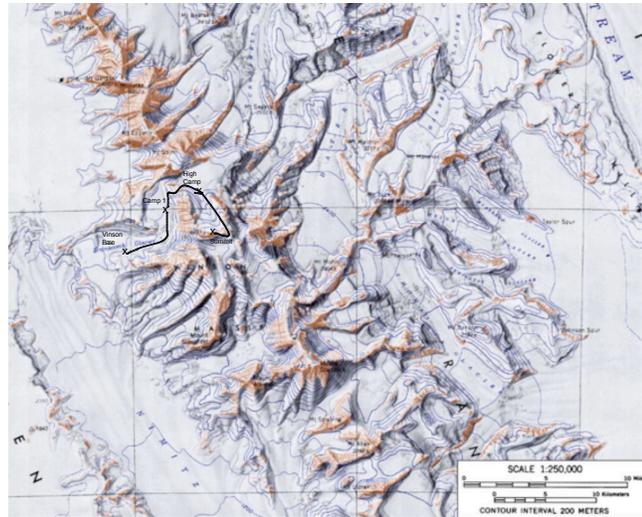


The next part of our journey was on twin otters fitted with ski's. Our group of 10 plus gear would require two planes to get us all to base camp. One of the good things about going with a guide service that runs several Antarctica programs every year is that we got to fly to base camp on the first two trips. So we didn't need to wait long at Patriot Hills. The flight to Vinson Base Camp in the Ellsworth Mountains was pretty cool – it's hard to describe the terrain – everything is white with little bits of grays and black as far as you can see. We had clear skies and no winds so the flight was great. The mountains just sort of popped up from the very flat glaciers.

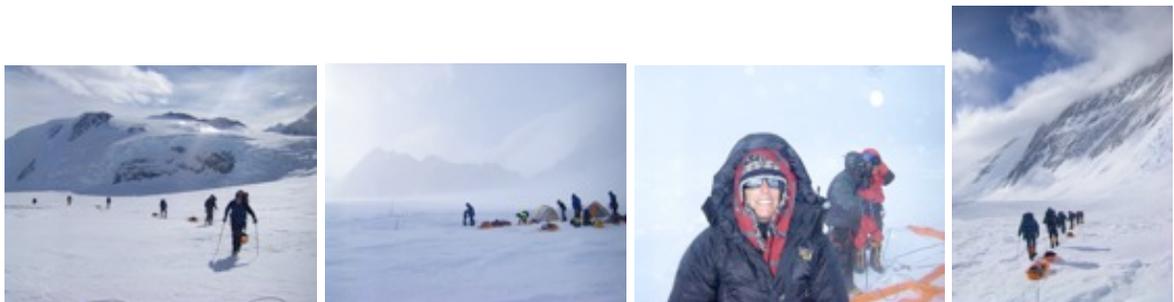


When the otter left us at Vinson Base – a few things hit me – first – just how isolated we were, how beautiful it was, it was really cold and “oh my gosh” am I really going to spend the next two weeks with these 9 guys – with really no privacy to speak of. Oh – and I won't be seeing a sunset for the next couple of weeks either – which really raises havoc with your circadian rhythm. I certainly won't forget what I did to celebrate 50 years!!!

Of course – once on the ground – we got right to work. Phil and Chris had gone out on the first plane so they had already gotten the tent platforms carved out of the snow and ice and had started getting tents set up. We worked to get all the tents up and then started working on our bathroom and Posh. If you've never seen one - a Posh is basically our cooking and “socializing” tent. Phil puts up a pretty sweet Posh. The first job is to cut out a hole about 4 feet deep and then erect a mega-mid tent over it (single pole tent). To have a first class posh – you need to cut out a cooking counter and some benches. Ours needed to be big enough for 10 of us to fit in. This would be the first of 3 camps we would set up. But – by the time we got to high camp – our Posh was not quite of the caliber of the lower camps.



Base camp is located at around 8000 feet on the Branscome Glacier. Our plan was to head up to camp 1 the next day. Camp 1 is situated at about 9500 ft. We would carry a load up then descend back to base camp. Then – depending on how we all felt as well as the weather – we would move our camp up the following day. The next day started out great – pretty easy slope – although it was a new experience for me to pull a sled with an average weighted pack. The terrain wasn't too bad although the plastic sleds had a tendency to get stuck on ice chunks. Phil and Ben set a really good pace that we were all able to maintain and it was a great day. UNTIL – we came around a corner and right into a really strong wind. It's amazing how much colder it gets when the wind blows. We hustled to make the last bit to camp 1 and cached our gear and quickly headed down – trying to keep our now empty sleds from going airborne and flying into us.



We had to wait an extra day at base camp before moving our camp up due to the winds that persisted through the next day – this would be our first of several “active rest” days. I think it was really Phil's idea to keep us all occupied when there wasn't a whole lot to do. Active rest is pretty basic – cut blocks and build walls. Fortunately, we didn't have to wait too long before we were able to move up to camp 1 and start all over again building our camp.



The day after our move to camp 1 we did a carry up to high camp which is at around 13000 ft. A new route was put in last year to avoid an ascent up a head wall. Instead – the new route was up a pretty steep ice slope using a fixed line. Overall, there was about 4000 ft of fixed rope to ascend to get to the top – and then about another hour or so above that to get to the location of high camp. We had the chance to practice our duck walking and side stepping as well as climbing on a fixed line. I was on a rope led by Phil along with Phillip and Justin. After a pretty exhausting climb we made it to the top of the fixed lines and were hit again by a fierce wind. Our team was a ways behind the rest at this time – so the others got to high camp, dropped their loads and met us about half way between the top of the fixed lines and high camp. We cached our loads there and headed back down.



The next couple of days we stayed at camp 1 waiting for a good weather window to move up to high camp. We wanted to have a good day to make the move (none of us wanted to try to set up a camp in the winds) and then hopefully another good day for our summit bid. We spent the time in active rest again – and by the time we finally moved – we had pretty solid camp laid in. The next IMG group would just be able to move in without any work!



ALE provided daily weather reports with forecasts for the next couple of days – But I really think that even with those forecasts – it still comes down to having a feel for the mountain and gut instinct to pick your time to go up – an luck! We finally made our move up to high camp and had a pretty good day. At this point – we added two additional members to our team. There was another guide with a single client (his other two clients had turned back early) so our team agreed to add them to our group. A third guide should help make our team stronger. Our new team mates were Tom Milne – a guide from Seattle and his client Lori.

We got to high camp late in the afternoon and set up another camp. We had dinner and waited for the weather forecast for the next day. The forecast wasn't great – but it did sound like the winds shouldn't be too bad – so our plan was to get up as soon as the sun came out from behind the mountain and make our summit attempt.

The next day started pretty good – the terrain wasn't too steep – just a really long slog to the base of the last part of the summit push.



But the winds started to pick up along the way – we still thought we had a pretty good shot to get up, however – it continued to deteriorate as we got to the steeper part. We made it to about 500 vertical feet below the summit and it just got too hazardous for a party of our size with varying degrees of experience in climbing on steep ice. Phil made the call to turn us around and abandon our summit attempt. With a lot of disappointment – we headed back down – not sure if we would get a second chance.

The forecast for the next day was about the same – although the winds were expected to improve later in the day. Our plan was to get up late, have a restful morning and then head out around 3 or so to try to hit the summit at the lowest wind times. It would mean that we would need to descend in the shadows which would be colder – but would probably be our only shot at it. We only had enough food up high for another day.

But then – what a difference a day makes – I got up around 8:30 the next morning after hearing Phil up starting the water – and look up at the higher slopes – there wasn't even a hint of any breeze up high – so plans changed! We all got ready as quickly as we could and headed back up. Justin decided to stay in camp as he was pretty beat from the previous day and had a bit of frost nip on his nose. It was really a great day. No wind, the sun was out and hot. I spent most of the day with the top of my down suit pulled down and quickly shed all but one base layer. I climbed in light ski gloves and my ball cap.



By the time we got to the ridge leading to the summit – we all agreed that we were glad we didn't try it the day before. It wasn't technically difficult – but there was some exposure and we would have likely have been at serious risk for frost bite.



We got to the summit of Vinson, 16,067 ft around 8:30PM on December 1st. This was our 12th day on the ice. The weather was absolutely perfect – no breeze at all and the bluest skies I’ve ever seen. I was near tears when I stood on the summit and felt such a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie with this group of men that helped me get there. (including my husband and kids who have supported me in all my travels)



We were able to spend about an hour on the summit – taking pictures and basically just enjoying our accomplishment. The views were stunning and we were so isolated. We finally decided that we better start back down – not because we were cold or tired – but we knew that by the time we got back to camp – we would be in the shadows. We quickly made our way back down and started shedding layers again as our elevation dropped. Our rope team did make the mistake of pulling the top of our down suits down again just before we entered the shadows. It is so amazing just how much colder it gets without the direct sunlight. We couldn’t get to camp fast enough!



We got back to camp around midnight and were very happy that Justin had hot water ready for us. After a quick dinner – we all crashed pretty quickly. It had been a couple of pretty physically draining days, and the next day – we would be packing up everything and heading all the way back down to Vinson Base Camp.

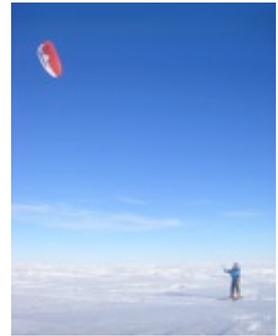
We had an early start down – We were all dreading the 4000 ft of fixed line and the heavy packs that we would be carrying would make it pretty taxing. By the time we got to camp 1 and packed up everything we had left there onto sleds and made our way back down to Vinson Base – it was pretty late in the afternoon.



We were all hoping that ALE would be able to bring in the Otters right away so we could get back to Patriot Hills – but the visibility wasn't great when we got back down to Vinson Base. So we set up our tents again and had some dinner. Phil had stashed a couple of boxes of wine to celebrate our success – so that was a great way to end our climb. We didn't expect the Otters to come and pick us up until the next day – so we all headed to bed – only to be woken about an hour later because the weather cleared and the otters were on their way. We said goodbye to Ben who was going to remain at Vinson Base for the next IMG team that would be coming in on the ALE flight we would be going out on. (That group ended up being delayed on the ice about two extra weeks due to the weather). Our quick return home was looking promising.

But that was not to be – we got back to Patriot Hills – only to find that the forecast was not promising – there wasn't just a big enough window of low winds to get the IL76 in – We ended up waiting for 5 days at Patriot Hills until the winds died down enough to get the flight in. So what do you do when you're stuck in a tent for 5 days. Play lots of hearts and eat of course. We did share our tent with a trio of Canadian arctic explorers; Richard Weber, Ray Zahab and Kevin Vallely; who were about to set out to break the record of skiing and running/walking from the edge of Antarctica to the south pole in less than 38 days. They were doing this as a fund raiser for a youth organization in Canada. Preparing for this type of adventure is at whole other level and it was fascinating to see how they packed and the type of food they would be eating.





We were all ready to head home when the IL76 was finally cleared to land.



We were back in Punta Arenas by about 3 in the morning on Saturday December 6th after 16 days on the ice. Even though we were delayed in Patriot Hills for an extra 5 days – we were able to get home only a couple of days later than planned. After lukewarm showers (something was wrong with the water heaters in the hotel) and a celebration lunch – most of us caught the earliest flights out of Chile back home. I arrived home around noon on Monday and was back at work by 2 in the afternoon. But I took home great memories, a tremendous sense of accomplishment and a new group of friends - A terrific team that came together had helped each other along the way. The experience was great and as usual – Phil put together a great expedition. I truly value his friendship and professionalism and couldn't think of anyone else that I would trust to lead me on this adventure. Throughout my life - I've worked for and around many leaders in my personal and professional life - and Phil absolutely possesses the leadership traits that are needed to pull a very diverse team together and give us the confidence to achieve very difficult goals.

Overall - the adventure totally met my expectations. I had a great time, laughed a lot, stretched myself physically and mentally and learned some new things. (such as just how quickly everything freezes at 30 below, the funnel doesn't work as well when it's frozen and different techniques to drown out the snoring of 9 guys and still get some sleep) Thanks to Phil and IMG for a great birthday present!