

We placed our base camp in the middle of the glacier at about 5,200', and during the brief weather windows we were afforded good views as far as the distant Kichatna Spires, Mt. Dall, and Mt. Russell.

We initially had good weather and bagged a couple of nice peaks via snow couloirs and ridges. (None of the peaks in the area have established names.) Due west of our base camp we climbed a northeast couloir of Peak 6,500' (located at UTM 5 539110E 6948891N). South of base camp, at the very head of the southern lobe of the Surprise Glacier, we climbed the west ridge of Peak 6,000', passing a small rock tower along the way that looked very much like a chorten—hence “Chorten Peak” (UTM 5 539618E 6946748N).

Then the weather took a turn for the worse. Very high winds (inverted tent and broken poles), sleet, rain, and snow plagued us for the balance of our trip. During a brief respite from the bad weather, we attempted Peak 6,302' via its east ridge (from the pass at UTM 5 540827E 6947835N) but were thwarted by horrendously loose rock. This peak is south of the impressive west face of what we were calling the “Little Eiger” (Peak 7,200').

Then we ran out of beer. In 17 days we had five days of fair weather, and, needless to say, our mood was subdued. This area seemed good for solitude, ski touring, and easy peak bagging, with difficult ascent possibilities in colder temperatures. (We found unconsolidated snow and crumbly rock.) In searching AAJs and the libraries at AMH and the Talkeetna Ranger Station, and in speaking with several long-time Alaska Range climbers, including Roger Robinson and Brian Okonek, I didn't learn of anyone who'd previously been in this area.

Missing our original pickup date of June 6, we finally flew out on the 11th, in blustery weather, with many thanks to the persistent efforts of McKinley Air.

BRIAN CABE, AAC

KICHATNA SPIRES

The Citadel, east buttress. The mythical Cathedral Spires of the remote, rarely frequented Kichatna Mountains were our destination. Pictures of granite spires forcing their way through bellowing cloud had sparked our imagination. Unfortunately, journals also suggested the worst weather in Alaska. Could it be worse than a wet Llanberis winter's day? Not a chance! Worse than Scotland in winter? Surely not! Stu McAleese and I had to go.

The Kichatna Spires spike the horizon as Cerro Torre and the Towers of Paine do in Patagonia. Although less than 9,000' in elevation and encompassing only 20 square miles, they have a reputation beyond their size. Ninety miles from Talkeetna, they were among the last Alaskan mountains to be explored. Aerial photos had been taken by Austin Post and published in Summit magazine by someone perhaps trying to mislead other climbers, as the Reisenstein of British Columbia. Eventually, in 1965, New Yorker Al DeMaria resolved the enigma and visited the area with friends.

Clumping into a Talkeetna cafe, we made for the bar. We sat next to two climbers obviously just back from the hill. Thierry, the tallest, greeted us with a strong French accent. We noted his bandaged hands; most of his fingers were frostbitten. Alaskan climbing obviously had potential for unpleasantness.

We had been advised to take as much as we wanted on the plane, that weight was no problem, but arriving at the Talkeetna airport, we noted that the supercharged Cessna resembled

little more than a flying kite. Weight, or lack of it, was crucial to flying at altitude and landing on the glaciers. Our eight boxes of food, bucket, frying pan, four haulbags, three rucksacks, boom box, three camera bags, extra-large family tray of Doritos, cooler full of meat and cheese, did look a little over the top. Our personal allowance was 125 pounds; we had over 1,000 pounds. We repacked, ate and drank as much as possible, stoked up the barbeque grill, and threw an impromptu party for everybody stranded at the airstrip.

Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxi, or TAT, pulled back on his controls as we hurtled down the runway. Paul seemed as keen as we were to fly into the Kichatnas, for him a change from the frequent flights into Denali. The weather was perfect; Alaska was suffering from a heat wave. We had crystal-clear views as we traveled west, parallel to the main range, over 90 miles of frozen swamp. We saw that walking out was not a possibility. If we didn't drown crossing the rivers, bears and mosquitoes would surely devour us. The scale of the place hit us, mountain after mountain, and we would be the only folk climbing west of the main range.

The Spires grew closer. Paul cranked down the skids to land. I couldn't get all the peaks in my camera's viewfinder. We hooted and pointed at peaks we had seen in books. Paul threw the plane over hard, and we could almost touch the East Pillar of Triple Middle Peak, one of the best lines in the world, first climbed alpine style by Embick and crew. Finally we swept through the col between Gurney and Kichatna Spire, with the biggest face in the range—over 1,000m of pink granite. The long, slender Shadows Glacier, which was to be our home for the next four and a half weeks, opened out in front of us. Paul took a tight spin to check out the landing, Stu and I became quiet, and Paul skillfully dropped onto the snow—a landing so smooth that Stu and I realized we'd put down only when Paul told us. Paul faced the plane back down the glacier and cut the engine. We fell out from the cramped plane; even Paul seemed impressed with the place. The kit was dropped onto the snow, a quick farewell, and Paul was off. Only when the plane was out of sight did our remoteness hit us. Just the two of us in the whole of the Kichatnas. There was nothing to do but turn on the boom box. Nobody was going to tell us to turn it down.

Base quickly took shape. The tent was pitched and snow walls built. Everywhere you looked you were inspired. Once Stu had unpacked his vast wardrobe, we put on snowshoes and set off for a recce. Our initial plan was to climb to the col between Shadows Glacier and Sunshine Glacier, then attempt objectives on various peaks. But lots of snow and unseasonably warm conditions had made the col a risk game. We reckoned that we needed to cross the col at least eight times into the lion's jaws. Seracs threatened the approach, and a steep final snow slope sported crown walls where avalanches regularly peeled off, day and in the Land of Midnight Sun-night. Plus, snow at our low altitude didn't want to freeze at any time. Any gully was suicide, and snow was like wading in porridge, so for us it had to be rock.

We decided to attempt a new line on either the east face of Kichatna Spire or the east face of The Citadel. We first plumped for Kichatna and dragged our equipment to the base. We forayed onto the face, but a band of very loose rock repelled us. We returned to steak and chips at the Hotel Shadows and dug out the bins. The best chunk of rock in the valley lay opposite—the east buttress of The Citadel, which had been climbed in 1976 but sported many fantastic-looking lines. An obvious direct was asking to be climbed.

Early next morning we finished the Danish pastries and loaded the haul bags. Off we plodded and postholed up steep snow to the wall. We came to the steepest slope just as the 4 a.m. sun hit it. We decided to bail and return when things had cooled off. It was too chancy to risk getting avalanched with the prospect of a four-week wait with a broken leg. Leaving our

huge loads, we slid down the slope. From the bottom we turned to admire our tracks, only to see an avalanche sweep down, covering our tracks and catapulting one haul bag to the bottom of the slope.

Next day we were back earlier, and, with the snow harder, made the base of the wall in good time. After some faffing around we got to grips with the rock, which was clean granite with the occasional loose block. Negotiating these was terrifying for both leader and belayer. The weather was fine, hot in the sun though instantly a fridge once the shade came around. On our first day we climbed 100m. Each pitch slightly overhung, as did most of the wall. Climbing was mostly aid, with occasional free climbing thrown in for our sanity. The granite was coarse, tearing skin and shredding ropes. On that first day our only lead line was cut to the core in three places. Its sheath was soon more duct tape than nylon, more silver than blue.

For two more days we continued fixing 250m of rope and sliding back to the base. Each evening we waited till the snow in our approach gully had firmed up before we dared descend it. Each day, as the temperature increased, so did the number of avalanches, making the daily journey definitely stressful. We celebrated arriving back at the base with such delights as steak and chips.

We finally moved our kit 160m up the wall to a flat six-foot-square ledge. On one wall we hung the portaledge; on the other hung a 20'-high flake. We could not see how this shield of granite was hanging in there. We contemplated reattaching it to the wall but instead tried to ignore it. As wall bivies go it was not bad, and we hung out listening to our short-wave radio. Our favorite channel was Retro Anchorage, which played music from the '80s. Name That Tune was a popular game; being slightly older, I won a bit more often.

The climbing was still steep but now included bands of loose rock. Some days we climbed only 50m because of the difficulty and the terrifying rock. The leader would climb on an 11mm and trail a zip line. The second jumared. The weather stayed perfect, but we could see change in the distance. We fixed all our rope and decided to go for the top the next day, climbing as fast and for as long as we could.

We woke early to discover that the weather had changed. It started to snow lightly and was obviously going to get worse. We waited but then decided to go for it. Jumaring back up was terrifying, with the ropes' many duct-tape-covered cuts. It was a relief to reach an anchor. Above the fixed ropes the angle eased, and we climbed quickly for a number of pitches. Snow was now falling fast; visibility was poor. Finally we squeezed through a chimney to stand on a precarious pinnacle. We had reached the top of the wall. The ridge dropped sharply beyond and then wandered up to the summit. Things were going to crap out big time, so we called it a day. Pleased to be where we were, we took the compulsory photos and fled down our climb.

The weather turned to pouring rain. We collected our equipment and abseiled to the glacier. After dragging our haul bags and ourselves back to base camp, we slept for many hours. In the morning it was again snowing, and snowed for 14 more days.

On the 15th day Paul flew over at 10 in the evening, as I was reading my book for the third time. In seconds the plane had landed, and we were packing bags. It was great to see another person after four and a half weeks by ourselves. The flight out gave a different view from the flight in: the 90 miles of snow had melted; rivers replaced ice. At 11:45 we touched down at Talkeetna International, by midnight we made the bar, the England match had just started, and the party had just begun.