The Life of a Teton Guide

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SINCE AMERICAN climbers have always been inclined towards the "lead-it-yourself" school of mountaineering, professional guides have never acquired the vogue in this country that they have in Europe. In fact, their numbers are so small that many mountaineers are totally unaware that there actually *are* guides in the United States. When it is discovered that regular guide service is maintained at Mount Rainier and in the Tetons, the usual reaction ranges somewhere between, "Why the lucky dogs! Climbing all summer AND getting paid for it. What do you have to do to rate a break like that?" and some sort of opposite view such as, "Oh, the simple tools! How can they *stand* dragging tourists up the same old milk run year after year?" From the perspective of seven seasons spent guiding with the Petzoldt-Exum School of American Mountaineering in Grand Teton National Park, I will attempt to sketch some answers to questions such as these. What qualifications do you need to become a Teton Guide—and what are the peculiar pleasures and rewards which are associated with the job?

In the first place, far more important to the guide than either bulging muscles or steely-nerved "fifth-class-led-fourth" rock-climbing ability, is the simple quality of patience. Of course, all climbers must have a certain amount of patience. The average climber's patience is tried by a fussy leader who cannot find just the right hand-hold on an "easy third" or by a clogged Primus just before the rice is done. But the stress on a guide's patience starts with the gathering of the party (family photos at the foot of the trail) and never slackens until the last client is delivered safely to the parking lot (shall we say by 4 A.M.—and piggy-back?).

As an example, consider the approach to the high camp. Up the same trail day after day until every switch-back, tree, and boulder is etched indelibly in your memory. The same choking dust, the same smell of horses, and the same eager questions envelop you trip after trip. "How high are we now?" (Any wild guess satisfies this one.) "How far to lunch?" (Standard reply is *always,* "Oh, about two hours.") The pace, of course, is never anything but the "Guides' Pace" which is roughly equivalent to the

pace adopted when approaching the South Col on Everest without oxygen. Although its ability to bring even the weakest party happily into camp has long been demonstrated, this pace leaves you open to severe attacks of sheer boredom as your boots carry you mechanically up the broad track. Speech is kept to a minimum since it is clear that the party will have better use for their wind as you near the 10 to 11,000-foot mark.

Various methods have been tried by the guides to help stretch their patience over the interminable approaches to the Lower Saddle camp. Some have tried practicing their blockflutes as they slouch along the trail, but this does seem a bit ostentatious. Others catch up on mending their socks, while occasionally a good book is resorted to in an effort to wile away the lagging hours. (An appropriate title might be the paperback in the Anchor series . . . Kirkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and *Sickness Unto Death.*)

The patient somnolence of the approach is shattered abruptly as the ritual of the high camp is initiated. First the sacrificial feast is prepared on the altar of the flaming two-burner Coleman. This meal may correctly be labelled "sacrificial" on either of two counts: 1. physically speaking it requires considerable sacrifice on the part of the average party-member just to hoist the standard can of Campbell's soup the required 5000 vertical feet to high camp, and, 2. psycho-internally speaking it requires an even higher degree of sacrifice for the average non-mountaineer to face the prospect of digesting the final meal itself—six cans of Campbell's soup, assorted—or, even worse, four cans plus two packages of some dehydrated soup substitute. As inconspicuously as possible the guide opens all containers and empties them into the large cooking pot along with any extra cans of corned beef hash, chili con carne, raviolis, or asparagus tips which might be lying handy. And now comes one of the greatest challenges of the guiding profession, *i.e.* to successfully pre-condition the members of the party to a positive mind-set towards the contents of the bubbling cauldron. After a carefully conducted build-up oriented scientifically, dietetically, esthetically, and especially enthusiastically—the guide performs a few mystic passes over the pot and sweeps off the cover to present to the eager party . . . Lower Saddle Skardu. In only a few cases have there been definite signs of mutiny at this crucial moment, and in these cases the cause of dissatisfaction usually turned out to be the presence of either Black Bean, Ox-Tail, or Mock Turtle, any one of which would admittedly provide ample cause.

With supper out of the way (either internally or otherwise), the next job is to secure the party for the night. In the old days this used to be accomplished quite literally by simply stuffing them into bags and covering the bundles with a great tarp which was then rocked down around the edges.

Thus secured, the members were virtually incapable of movement until freed by the guide next morning. This method, of course, prevented the timid from sneaking off for the valley during the night, but it also constituted what was very nearly a form of "cruel and unusual punishment." In recent years the situation has been alleviated by the employment of a large eight-man tent (known to have accommodated 15 upon occasions) which provides a snug shelter for the collection of sleeping bags maintained by the guide service.

Since most of these bags are of the mummy type, a special technique must be used to successfully insert the inexperienced client. The expert application of a series of pokes, prods, and punches usually suffices, but in cases complicated by over-weight one must sometimes resort to the use of the Little Gem Sleeping Bag Injector—a cleverly contrived instrument looking rather like a large shoe horn. Once all zippers are successfully zipped to the chin, the effects of high-altitude thirst inevitably make their appearance. The last duty of the guide before turning in himself, then, is to crawl along the row of mummied forms, funneling a dipper of water into each parched opening. Now, with the pot scrubbed, the soup cans rinsed out, and with a pot of water on the stove ready for a cocoa breakfast, he is ready to avail himself of some well-earned sack time—barring the occurrence of some midnight emergency. One memorable night I was jerked back rudely from the edge of sleep by a gurgling cry from a client who had succeeded in tucking his wad of White Star chewing tobacco into one cheek long enough to whisper, "Guide, oh guide!! Where do I spit?!" Ah well—and some people sneer at the climber's hat as being merely decorative.

In addition to the patience and peculiar camping skills mentioned above, the guide must also, of course, have a certain degree of climbing ability. Since the ordinary climbs which are guided are not too difficult, this ability need not be as great as that exhibited by many ambitious amateurs. However, although great technical proficiency may not be required for guiding, certain other peculiar traits and abilities are. Of the very greatest importance, for instance, is the guide's "safety sense." Not only must he exhibit the usual party-leader's awareness of the factors making up the over-all margin of safety, but the total lack of experience of most of his clients also forces him to take the most minute precautions at all times with each individual member of the party. To begin with, all the knots are either tied or checked by the guide, all the belays are either applied personally or personally supervised, and a constant flow of instructions concerning handholds, body position, and the use of the boot-soles is kept up for the benefit of the weaker members of the group. Also, personal attention must be

directed to the continual intake of quick energy foods by those who are in especially bad physical condition, as well as frequent checks on the temperature of their extremities when the weather is cold. Finally, a running fire of stimulating comment must be introduced as the party nears its psychological limit. The remaining pitches are verbally reviewed and cunningly down-graded in difficulty (which is quite easy to do), while each successfully surmounted pitch is commented upon in such a way as to convince the party that it was really much easier than it seemed and that they are all getting stronger and stronger as they near the summit (a conviction which is not always so easy to instil). The success of this highly developed safety sense which has been exhibited over the years by the guides who have been employed either by Paul Petzoldt or Glenn Exum is attested to by the high percentage of successful guided climbs and the amazingly low accident rate. In the nearly 30-year history of the concession, there has been only one accident to a client which required immediate treatment by a doctor—and this accident involved only a fractured little finger.

In addition to his sense of safety, a guide must also possess certain specialized techniques. One of these is the ability to climb easily while carrying a heavy pack. Quite often the party is judged physically incapable of carrying even its few sandwiches to the summit, so all the food goes into the guide's pack along with his piton and hammer, extra sling ropes, first aid kit, extra clothes for everybody, canteens of water, flashlight, and any cameras which might be meant for the summit. Often the cameras are expected to be used during the ascent, which requires the guide to climb with them hung around his neck and to take shots of their owners (often while simultaneously belaying those same owners).

Another specialized technique is the judicious use of the harmonica. This helpful instrument is usually reserved till the going really gets tough. Just as the client is preparing to wilt in the middle of the friction pitch, the stirring strains of "The March of the Men of Harlech" snaps him to attention, then the sweet strains of "Nearer My God to Thee" gently eases him up over the holdless wall. Again, during the often agonizing descent along the interminable horse trail into the valley, the rousing march from "Bridge on the River Kwai" seldom fails to bring the last exhausted climber limping doggedly into the parking area.

One last technique might be mentioned in connection with the Pownall Rappel on the descent of the Grand Teton. Since many of our clients have never rappelled before, the prospect of this sheer, hundred-foot drop—at least 50 of it actually overhanging—is a terrifying sight. With gay banter and light badinage the guide can usually ease the first couple of climbers

over the lip, but those who are forced to wait dismally in the wind and the cold gradually lose their stomach for such heroics. A shift in mood to overemphasize the somberness of the occasion sometimes diverts another few sufficiently to nerve them for the step into space. Here a few well-chosen songs such as "Three Cheers for the Next Man Who Dies" or "They're 'angin' Danny Deever in the Morning" will often do wonders. But all too often, despite all gentler efforts, the final maneuver known as the GATO must be resorted to. These letters stand for Guide Assisted Take-Off. In place of a bottle of propellent applied to the underside of a rising plane, this technique consists of the sole of a guide's boot applied propellingly to the underside of a descending climber. Since it is always used in conjunction with a safety belay, it has never been known to fail.

The above discussion gives some idea at least of the special techniques and qualifications required of a Teton guide. Now what are the peculiar pleasures and rewards which attract the guides back to Jenny Lake year after year? The attraction certainly does not lie in the excitement and challenge of difficult climbing which is the chief interest of many amateur climbers. The great majority of the guided climbs are technically quite easy, and after one has been up the same route a great many times even the more complicated pitches become rather routine. Of course, there are occasional days-off when a guide can relax by romping up one of the more demanding Teton routes, but such chances are relatively few—far less frequent than would be the case if you were merely visiting the range during a two-week vacation. In fact, it seems to me that before a man takes up guiding, he should get most of the desire for really tough climbs out of his system. Otherwise the boredom of the familiar grind up easy routes will almost surely prove too high a price to pay for the privilege of guiding.

Likewise, it is not the financial return which acts as the lure. The cost of living is so high in the Jackson Hole area during the summer that the guide is lucky if he clears a few hundred dollars for two months' work—not counting travel costs to and from Jenny Lake. Of course, just the chance to be earning any money at all while spending two solid months in as grand a range as the Tetons must certainly be admitted as a major factor, yet the chief attraction of the job still remains to be noted.

This seems to me to be the constantly changing contact with the people themselves . . . with the clients who come from all over the U. S. and even from overseas. The routes may become so familiar that one is forced into doing them "no hands" just to keep up interest, but the party members always present distinct and unpredictable challenges. No matter how commonplace the climb may seem to the guide, it is always a test of his constant

attention, skill, and ingenuity to make sure that the various party members enjoy it. This, then, seems to me the peculiar reward of guiding. To see the look on the face of a distressingly overweight office-worker as he slumps on the summit muttering between gasps: "I'd never have believed it possible." (I remember one middle-Westerner . . . only 43 years old, but weighing 240 pounds . . . who at times had even me doubting if it were possible—but it was.) To watch the reaction of the cocky young prepper who suddenly realizes that in order to cope successfully with some situations mere breeding, brass, and bank account are not always sufficient. Or to watch the slow dawning of appreciation in the eyes and actions of anyone who is making his first acquaintance with the mountains—an appreciation of the sublime intricacy of the minute structure of a great peak, of the overwhelming fascination which lies in the growing ability of the human form to successfully adapt itself to that structure, and finally an appreciation of the deep affinity possible between the mood of the mountain itself and that of the human soul. The unique degree to which the guide is privileged to implement relations such as these between men and mountains should be reward enough for any climber.