

A person is seen from behind, skiing down a vast, snow-covered mountain slope. The skier is leaving a trail of tracks in the snow. In the background, there are jagged, snow-capped mountain peaks under a bright, hazy sky. The sun is low on the horizon, creating a strong backlight effect and illuminating the scene with a warm, golden light. The overall atmosphere is serene and majestic.

Alaska

Spring 2024



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Summary

In May 2024, we travelled as a team of 7 to the Alaska range to go Alpine climbing around Mount Hunter. From the 'last frontier' of Talkeetna, we were flown onto the Kahiltna glacier where we base-camped for 3 weeks amongst North America's highest peaks.

We formed three teams: Naoise & Adam and Will, Michael & Iain had the main objective of climbing Bibler Klewin on the Moonflower Buttress (Alaskan grade VI, 6000ft), while Sinead & Anna aimed to climb the West Ridge (AK V, 8000ft). Unfortunately, dominant low pressure and poor snow conditions meant these objectives were not to be. Instead we climbed multiple fantastic day routes around camp.

Will, Iain and Michael climbed most of Bacon and Eggs (AK IV, 1500ft) as well as making attempts on the SW ridge of Mount Frances and a still unrepeated mixed route on the Mini Moonflower. With regular heavy snow hitting the range, Naoise and Adam skied a pair of impressive couloirs, as well as climbing past the cruxes of the SW ridge of Frances (along with



Sinead and Anna), before retreating due to avalanche danger. Naoise & Adam and Will & Michael also made attempts on the Bibler Klewin, but both teams turned back in the lower sections due to snow dangers. Anna and Sinead pushed the high point on Bacon and Eggs, before going on to climb North Couloir (AK IV, 2000ft) to just below the ridge cornice. Following their noses up the South face of Radio Control tower, they climbed a possible new mixed route (~1700ft, M6).

The climbing was fantastic, but the trip was a formative experience that went far beyond this. We developed practical expedition skills: how to live on snow, cook with petrol stoves, ski roped together, pack sleds and how to (mostly) get along when bored, tired, cold and packed together in tents like tinned sardines. Other teams on the glacier became good friends, through whom we experienced a surprisingly different attitude and culture around Alpine climbing. Overwhelmingly, we enjoyed the peace of being disconnected from the outside world, sparking a desire for future expedition trips.

This report mainly covers Sinead and Anna's experience on the trip, and is written from Anna's perspective.

Above: Michael enthusiastically fetching snow for water, and Below: Watching seracs collapse on Mount Hunter.

Previous pages: Sinead skinning up the East Kahiltna fork, and on the crux of North Couloir

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The Team



Sinead Thin (24)

Highly accomplished Norway-based ice and mixed climber. Always smiling despite grumpy climbing partners.



Anna Soligo (24)

London-based rock and Alpine climber, most at home on long alpine rock routes. Doesn't like the cold.



Will Hempstead (25)

Scottish mixed climbing wad and outdoor gear designer. Would make an excellent diplomat.

Adam Bowman (28)

Elite sport/ trad climber and does ultra-runs for fun. Impressive ability to thrive on solely instant mashed potatoes



Naoise O'Muircheartaigh (28)

Chamonix-based IFMGA aspirant guide from Ireland. Excellent Ski-babysitter and available to guide Mont Blancs.



Michael Chan (?)

Rock, ice, and mixed climber extraordinaire. Funemployed and won't tell us how old he is.



Iain (28)

Scottish mountaineering instructor and mixed climbing wad. Will's second half in the hills.





3 Logbook

Arrival in Alaska

After months of Zoom meetings and messaging, we reunited at the basecamp hostel in Anchorage. We had one day to complete our first and most important objective: buy a month's worth of food. Sinead and I tackled Walmart, where excitement rapidly turned to anxiety. After several hours wondering about important information such as freezing temperature of tinned sardines, we made it back to the hostel, where our baggage (which was still in Seattle when we arrived at Anchorage) had thankfully been delivered. We proceeded to unleash chaos in the yard as we unpacked and repacked our gear multiple times. Much of the evening was spent searching for the eclectic set of stove components which US border control had confiscated and then frantically trying to source replacements.

Left to Right: Adam Repacking in Seattle Airport, More repacking in Anchorage, and Sinead fighting the chickens for her lunch



Travel to the Kahiltna

This programme of “team-building challenges” continued the next morning, when a very small looking minibus rolled up to the hostel. We loaded gear in, out and back in again, and had nearly booked a second minibus by the time the last backpack was miraculously slotted onto our laps. Arriving at the air taxi base, we raced to weigh and tag all of our ~500kg of bags register with the rangers’ and collect our ‘clean mountain cans’ (aka poo buckets). By late afternoon we were loading bags onto two Otter ski-planes on the runway.

As we flew towards the range, the marshland below us became increasingly white and the scale of the mountains became apparent. The 60 year old Otters cut through cols and in and out of clouds, and within an hour we were descending towards the Kahiltna glacier.

The scenery was breathtaking, but we had little time to stop and take it in: it was getting late and we needed at least our sleeping tents ready for that night. The next hours were spent shuttling bags, hauling sleds and having a very diplomatic discussion about tent placement. With our sleeping tents pitched, we were cooking dinner when the sun disappeared behind mount Foraker. Within minutes temperatures were miserably low. We shovelled down food and scrambled into our sleeping bags (and I began to question if this trip was all a terrible idea).

The next two days were spent building camp: digging out a ‘kitchen’ to pitch our cook tent over, burying deep tent anchors and enthusiastically constructing a back porch for the Hilleberg tent (complete with a sofa and shelves). We learnt that things takes an extremely long time when everything is frozen, but did still manage a ski up the gentle North Slopes of the Radio Control Tower to stretch our legs.

Above: The gun section of the store, where the considerate assistant empathised with our curiosity and ‘how difficult it must be living in a country with so little freedom’

Below: Pitching the sleeping tent with Mount Frances in the background

Next page: A half built base-camp with Mount Hunter towering above





Radio Control Tower

On Wednesday the weather was looking unstable, with the forecast for the week ahead not looking any better. After a slow start, Sinead and I went for a wander around to meet the other teams on the glacier. One pair had just spent 6 days on the West Ridge, our main objective, and had made it to 3000ft below the summit. Their summary of conditions was 'not as described': steep ice, cornice-burrowing and unprotected sugar snow. Other conversations were more encouraging: several parties reassured us that the weather was rarely great, and sometimes it was better to just ignore forecasts and go climb when the sky looked clear.

So, when the sky did briefly clear that afternoon, we shoved a rack and rope into our bags, and skied up towards the nearest climb-able looking face – the South side of Radio Control tower. After wading up steep snow, we attempted to climb a pair of steep rocky chimneys that turned out to be both hard and loose. By the time I had downclimbed the second one, it was snowing heavily. We skied back down the glacier, roped up and in a white-out, but extremely happy to have climbed anything. Back at camp, we celebrated our success by cracking into our 1kg bag of powdered eggs and decided that we needed go back for round 2 the next day.

Attempt 1 on RCT with clouds closing in, Next page: Skiing in under the South Face





This time we were slightly better prepared. We chose a appealing looking line that alternated between snow slopes and weaknesses in the rock bands, and by 9am we were tying in at its base. It was early afternoon and we'd done 5 pitches of steady climbing when Iain and Mike skied up the glacier below us. "We're one pitch from the top" we shouted down enthusiastically, but we couldn't make out their replies.

At this point the route got much harder. I confidently started up a pitch of very loose looking rock (stating that it was just like the Swiss Alps in Summer and I would be fine) before getting scared about 15 metres in and downclimbing back to the stance. After a 60m traverse, 80 metres more steep snow and two pitches of steep chimney climbing, we realised Mike had sent us a message on the In-Reach several hours earlier: "No you're not – you're maybe halfway up". By this point, every new pitch looked like it would take us to the summit, and in any case it seemed faster to go up than back down.

We eventually reached the summit of RCT as darkness fell, and stumbled back into camp at 3am with one headlamp between us (my batteries had completely drained in the cold). Dinner was peanut butter straight from the jar.

Right: A collection of pictures of Sinead wondering where to go next



Mount Frances

It had snowed relatively consistently while we were out climbing, and did so for two more days after. Little happened, but Sinead and I did have a big ego moment when a couple of guys came over to camp saying “rumour on the glacier is that you guys put up something new on the control tower”. By the next good weather day (Sunday 5th), the faces were too heavily loaded to climb, so Naoise and Adam (the only competent skiers in our group) suggested we make the most of the powder and ski a couloir on the South face Mount Frances. After being reassured that it wouldn't be no-fall terrain, Sinead and I joined them for an early morning skin up the SE Ridge, and a leg-destroying ski down. We then watched in awe as Naoise and Adam went back up to ski an incredible looking couloir on Peak 12,200.

That afternoon was spent heavily debating what would be in condition over the coming days. More snow was forecast for the next day, which would need time to settle and clear, followed by a 36 hour window of good weather. We were all eager

Right: One of many snowy mornings in camp

Below: Scouting for steep ski lines

Next page: Naoise testing avalanche conditions with Adam belaying





to get out: Sinead and I were on our third rest day, and the others hadn't managed to climb at all yet!

Sinead and I decided we would set off late Tuesday morning to attempt the SW ridge of Mount Frances, a route we expected it would take us a solid 24 hours to climb! Adam and Naoise settled on the same plan, while Will, Iain and Michael decided to instead leave at 2am that night to climb the Bacon and Eggs on Mini-Mini Moonflower (the night forecast was slightly less snowy than the day...). The three arrived back at camp completely drenched on Monday afternoon. They'd climbed to a few pitches below the summit, then been completely pummelled with snow and spindrift as they descended.

Tuesday was as sunny as forecast, and by 9am several teams were loading gear into planes, eager to escape after several days of un-flyable conditions. By this point it was becoming clear that this was not a great season for Alaskan climbing: continually unstable weather and avalanche-prone snowpack was not making any climbing easy.

For us, however, it was time to go climbing, and we set up on Mount Frances as planned. The ridge crosses 4 rock towers, interspersed with sections of scrambling and snow ridges, before reaching the 'death traverse' underneath the false summit

Approaching the SW Ridge of Mount Frances,
with its upper half hidden in the clouds
Next page: Traversing under the 3rd Rock tower





cornice, and the summit slopes beyond. The climbing was brilliant, and we progressed faster than expected (despite spending a considerable amount of time making fun of Naoise and Adam, who had chosen to carry skis for the descent and seemed to be regretting it). However, by early evening, the full day of sun had deteriorated conditions. By the time we topped out onto the fourth tower, we'd seen several slopes avalanche and the southerly summit slopes were not looking appealing. We debated our options: downclimb/ski a steep couloir which had already avalanched, so was likely to be safe, or sit and wait for the falling temperatures to stabilise the summit slopes overnight. Sitting out through an

Alaskan night with our meagre bivy gear was not particularly appealing, especially since Naoise's rope had already frozen solid– so the choice was down.

Adam and Naoise clipped in and began to ski, but this was short-lived. Within metres both had lost a ski trying to make aggressive turns on the frozen snow. The rest of the descent was less eventful, and we returned to camp shortly after 2, with all skis recovered and many lessons learnt.

Clockwise from Left: The first rock crux, Naoise looking surprisingly cheery at his frozen (and completely unusable) rope, and Adam and Naoise making a very late dinner back at camp



Its Included

We woke up late on Wednesday to more glorious sun and blue skies. Eager to make the most of this seemingly rare good-weather, I tried to persuade the others to go climbing again, but with no luck. It turned out, however, that another climber in camp, Ali, was also in search of a climbing partner. She suggested an M7 mixed route she'd already attempted a few days earlier, and I agreed, eagerly but with the warning that this was likely going to be much too hard for me! After a classically late Alaskan start of ~3pm, we climbed 4 pitches, by which point it was dinner time, and I was physically wrecked. We headed back to camp in high spirits, with my total attempt to summit ratio now at 3:1.

Bacon and Eggs

Once again, the forecast was uncertain, and we began to see the daily weather updates from Uisdean as more of a daily entertainment than a source of information. (Some of our favourites included "I think its snowing there. Is it snowing?" and "If its bad, don't go climbing".) With a 'maybe it will snow maybe it won't' outlook for Friday, Sinead and I decided finally decided to attempt one of our planned objectives for the trip, Bacon and Eggs, a ~1200ft ice route on the Mini-Mini Moonflower.

As we skied up the glacier in glorious sunshine, we congratulated ourselves for making the right call. Underneath the route, we dug a little ledge, took skis off and swapped our boots to climbing boots and crampons. I tied in, took one step uphill, and sunk waist deep in the fresh snow. The next two hours were spent digging a trench uphill to reach the start of the ice – an activity which was watched through binoculars with great entertainment by the others back in camp.

Two pitches in (if you count digging a trench as a climbing pitch), clouds began to roll in. As Sinead led up to the first narrow ice runnel, increasingly heavy snowfall began to trigger waves of spindrift from above. Once again, it was time to bail. After an extended ordeal with a stuck rope (which involved Sinead re-ascending 60m of rope while I complained about being cold), we gratefully swapped back to skis and began the descent to camp.

Above: Sinead disappearing into a cloud of spindrift

Below: The result - a very snowy but somehow still smiling Sinead as we began to bail



Bacon and Eggs (Attempt 2)

Several days of snow followed. I was surprised to be finding these days doing nothing peaceful and actually quite enjoyable, but by the Monday the 13th, frustration was starting to build. Thankfully, there seemed to be a whole 3 days of good weather on the horizon. Planning began: Iain, Will and Michael decided to attempt an un-repeated M7 on the Mini-Moonflower, Adam and Naoise made plans to attempt their main trip objective, the famous Bibler Klewin on the Moonflower and Sinead and I, sceptical about any forecasts, decided to make an advanced base-camp beneath the Mini and Mini-mini and see how things developed!

After a horrible afternoon hauling our sled up a slushy glacier, we settled into our new camp, nestled in a horseshoe of potential climbing objectives. After a very pleasant few hours of doing absolutely nothing, we ate, zipped our lightweight sleeping bags together for warmth and were curled up to sleep by 8pm.

A speedy 20 minute ski the next morning took us back to the base of Bacon and Eggs, and we were pleased to find that the snow was consolidated enough to leave the shovel behind. Unfortunately it was not consolidated enough to stop me from falling through a snow bridge and into the bergschrund on the first pitch. Thanks to some attentive ropework from Sinead and some very un-elegant climbing on my part, I was quickly back on solid ground. Within a couple of hours we were above our high point from a week earlier and by early evening we had reached the top of the final ice channel. The other teams on the route this season had all descended from here, and we debated our options for a while. There was a steep snow slope above us with little apparent protection, followed by a section of mixed climbing to reach the top of the buttress. Eventually, we settled on trying, and I set off up the snow, wary that anything I climbed up, I might have to climb back down. It was soft and unstable, but with just enough ice to place protection, and two pitches later we reached the ridge cornice. With thankfully no stuck ropes this time, we made a smooth descent back to camp.

This page: Better weather on Bacon and Eggs - a photo of the same gully as the previous page

Next page: Boiling up water for a 3am dinner back at camp





As we boiled water for our 3am pot-noodles, we could see three lights moving on the lower section of the Mini-moonflower. Iain, Will and Michael had waited an extra day for the snow on their route to consolidate, and were up for an Alpine start. After some time of slow ascending, however, the lights began to retreat back down the face. They had found poor and unprotectable snow slopes, and made the decision to bail.

That same night, Naoise and Adam headed up Moonflower. They made steady progress up to the base of the Prow, the first crux of the route, but were met with bad news. Two Canadian climbers who had set off several hours earlier abseiled down the route to them. They had reached several pitches higher but hit an impassable snow mushroom that had accumulated on the route. The 4 retreated back to camp together.

Kahiltna Queen

Drying kit at our advanced camp the next day, we were in prime position to hear the glacier gossip from teams skiing up and down from climbs. Two other groups had bailed on the Mini because of bad snow, and several teams we had become good friends with were flying out as it was uncertain when the next weather window would be to leave. Soon after, we had an InReach from the others: Iain, Naoise and Adam were also leaving.



We were surprised and a bit sad at this news, but increasingly driven to make the time we had left. With weather looking good till the next morning, we made plans to climb the West Face of Kahiltna Queen: a big, but relatively easy face that was described as being a 'bowling alley' of falling ricks and avalanches when in the sun, making an overnight attempt the obvious choice. After some napping, we packed up and skied to the base.

At this point we realised we may have been a little overoptimistic. Sinead was feeling very tired, having gotten to bed at 3am that morning, and an all-nighter didn't seem like the best idea any more. At this point, I demonstrated that I was also pretty tired: I clumsily put a ski on the snow when taking my skins off, and turned around to see, that, to my horror, it had slid down the hill and into a crevasse. After burying two of our remaining three skis as an anchor, I went to peer over the edge. Thankfully, the ski was caught on a snow bridge 20 metres below, so I rappelled down, strapped the ski to my back, and reascended the ropes back to safety, much to Sinead's entertainment. By this point, we were both very happy to be heading back to basecamp, where now just Will and Michael remained.

Above: Sinead at our bivy higher below the moonflower buttresses

Below: The view out of the crevasse, looking at a slightly-concerned, slightly-amused Sinead

Annie's Ridge

I was the first out of the tents the next morning, and went over to chat to our nearest neighbours, Ben and Ross. They had planned to attempt the West Ridge, but were met with dangerous snow conditions. On the approach slopes they had felt a 'big woomph' – a chilling sensation as the whole snowpack shifted beneath them. Both had guided in Alaska in the past and described in detail the unstable layers they'd found when they then dug a snow pit. They asked if I wanted to join them on a ridge above camp that day, but I declined, still groggy and not wanting to slow them down.

Quarter an hour and a second coffee later, I stepped out of the cook tent to see them roping up to leave. I suddenly felt extremely motivated, and jogged over to ask if the offer was still there. It was, so I threw everything useful I could see into my backpack, (which later turned out to include 7 gloves and 3 spare socks) and we were off.



The day turned out to be an extremely entertaining and very Alaskan experience. After a long rocky scramble, we reached a corniced snow ridge. Having followed their tracks on the approach, I offered to break trail, but it turned out this wasn't very useful: I could walk over the crust while Ben and Ross sunk in past their knees behind me. By early evening, we reached the saddle above camp and, after some roped-up jumping to test the snow stability, we downclimbed a steep snow slope which conveniently deposited us a couple of hundred metres from the runway.

North Couloir

Ironically, the weather had been quite good since the three others (and several other teams) had flown out, and we were now looking at another two day window. Michael and Will decided to test their skills against the snow-mushroom on Bibler Klewin and Sinead and I settled on attempting the North Couloir of Mini – a 2000ft ice route with a distinctly steep crux.

Left: Type 1 fun with rocky scrambling on solid rock

Right: Scouting for a safe place to descend the snow slopes on the right back to camp





By 3am the next morning we were skiing out under RCT, and by 6 we were on the first pitch. A couple of hundred metres of gradually steepening ice brought us to the base of a steep, narrow couloir, with the crux just out of view above. In good years, this forms a channel of 85 degree ice, but we'd also heard reports of ice not forming, leaving a steep and hard to protect M7. Reaching the top of the first couloir, I was relieved to see ice, (mainly because this was an excuse for me to ask Sinead, as the better ice climber, to take the scary lead). It proved an eventful pitch. Spindrift poured down on her head as she navigated through some scarily hollow sounding ice and over a brittle bulge to a stance above. By this point we had news from Will and Michael: they'd bailed low on the Moonflower because of poor, dangerous snow, and were also saying we needed to fly out two days later – the last certain good weather day before our flights home.

From here the climbing got easier, but we also became much slower. We were exhausted from climbing at our limits and had both managed to drop ice screws, forcing us to climb shorter pitches. But slowly, steadily and thanks to much stubbornness, we made it up, reaching a few metres below the overhanging ridge cornice before beginning our descent.

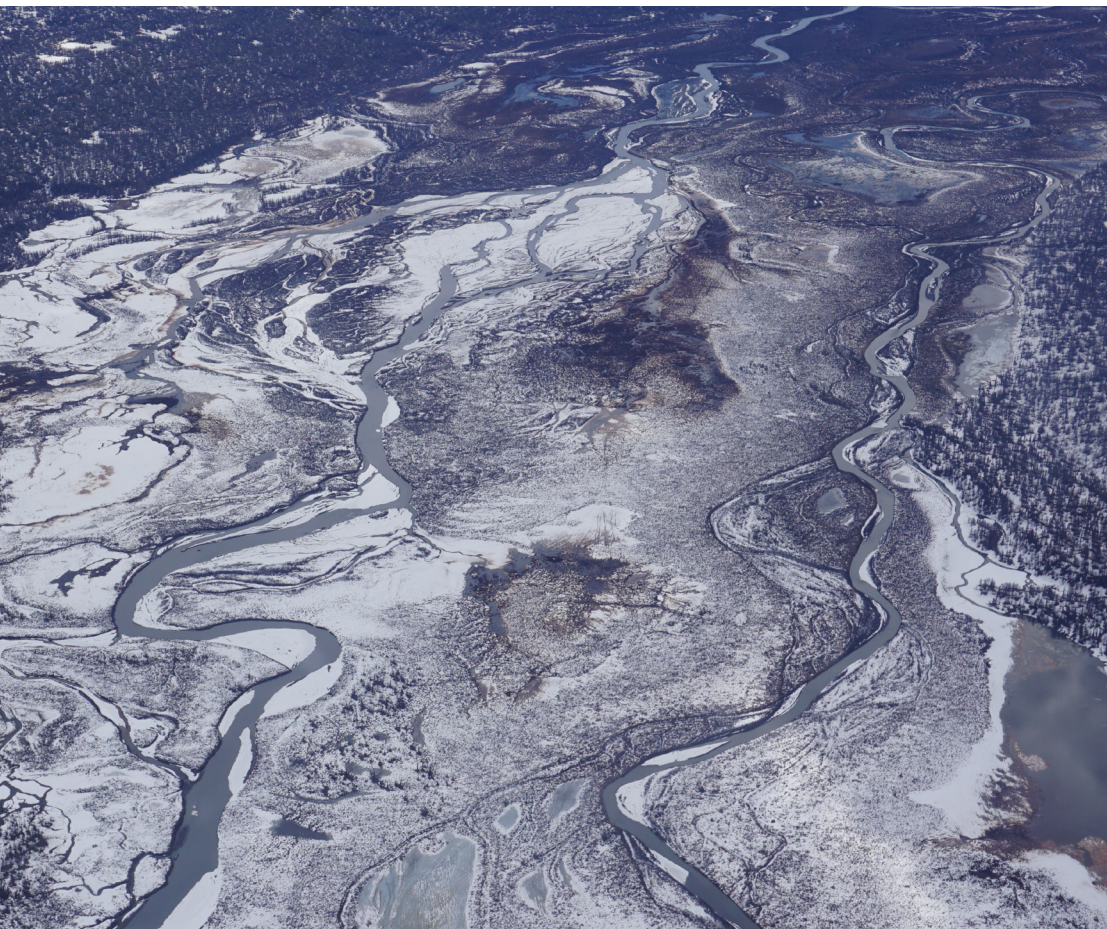
Hanging on to the crux of North Couloir, with spindrift pouring down from above

As well as the two screws, we had also dropped our Abalakov threader – a tool used to build anchors to descend off. Finally, our engineering degrees came in useful, and using a combination of nuts, slings and an ice axe, we made the many rappels back to the ground. It was once again past midnight by the time we were back at our skis.

Return

Despite Will and Michael making a good attempt at setting our cook tent on fire, we made it safely back to Talkeetna. The air taxi offers a free bunkhouse for climbers, so the plan was to spend most of our remaining days here, before heading back to Anchorage for our flights. We took our time sorting kit, drying tents and sampling the local delicacies: reindeer burritos and blueberry mojitos.

Clockwise from Right: The remainder of the team about to fly out, Reindeer burritos in Talkeetna, Flying out of the range over thawing marshlands



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Conclusions

As Sinead quite accurately summarised it “Anna and I had the time of our lives, not sure about the boys though”. It was objectively a bad season for Alaskan climbing, and our main objectives were unclimbable - Mount Hunter has seen 1 summit this year, and Mount Foraker has seen none! However, setting out with no expectations meant Sinead and I were able to enjoy everything that was possible to the full (when agreeing to the trip, my main hope was that I wouldn't be miserable for three weeks). In contrast, the others, as more experienced winter climbers, had high hopes of hard ascents, and were less willing to go out and try other things. I feel this was an incredibly valuable lesson for future expeditions.

For all of us it was our first 'expedition' and we all wanted to find out if it was a kind of climbing trip we enjoyed. I had my doubts: I don't have much free time and always feel I want to maximise climbing when I am away. But, myself and Sinead are definitely now convinced: the whole experience, particularly the remoteness and being fully disconnected, was very worthwhile. Our experience of climbing something new also felt like it unlocked opportunities: the idea of putting up



new routes in the mountains seemed far from our abilities, but in reality it just came down to knowing we had the skills and energy to get down if needed.

One thing that surprised all of us was how social base camp was. We made some great friends and were able to get lots of advice from climbers with several seasons of Alaskan climbing behind them. This definitely made things seem much less intimidating, and I would highly recommend the Kahiltna as a basecamp for a first trip to the Alaska range. With no phone signal or life obligations, everyone had a huge amount of time for other people, which was also a lovely experience. Many promises were made about trips to visit the US, Canada, Australia, Scotland etc – hopefully some of them happen!

We were lucky to get advice from climbers who had spent time in the range before leaving, and they gave lots of niche tips that made our lives much more comfortable. I wouldn't have thought fleece-lined washing up gloves were an essential, for example. Climbers generally like talking about their trips at great length, so I'd highly recommend anyone planning a trip to reach out to people who have been to the ranges before for advice.

From top: Heading out on a snow-day ski tour with new friends. Peak camp entertainment: digging holes (this one was going to be the 'rave cave', inspired by the 'cinema' next door). Second-best entertainment: discussing the progress of said holes.

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A perfect ice gully on Bacon and Eggs

