

# Foraker Expedition, 17,400 feet / 5303 meters



View of the Sultana Ridge with MT Crosson's southeast ridge in profile. Photo taken from 17,200 feet on Denali by Brian McCullough

## **ROUTE: SULTANA RIDGE, ALASKA GRADE III, 9400', 18 MILES**

Deposit: \$1000

Balance Due: 90 days prior to starting date

Group Limit: 4 climbers, 2 AMS lead guides

Cost Includes: Professional guiding, round trip glacier flight, field food and fuel, group camping and climbing equipment, personal issue sleds, space in the AMS campground (tents are not provided), base camp fee.

You are responsible for: Transportation to and from Talkeetna, lodging (AMS campground is free, tents are not provided), National Park Service Mountaineering Special Use and Entrance Fees (Totaling \$210) to be paid in Talkeetna during the first day of the expedition, 2-4 lbs of lunch/snack food (optional), travelers cancellation insurance (highly recommended), personal equipment and clothing, AMS equipment rentals, guide gratuities.

## **GROUP SIZE & RATIO**

4 expedition members and 2 lead guides. The exposed nature of the climb requires a smaller group size and higher ratio.

## **THE MOUNTAIN**

Mount Foraker, is Denali National Park's second highest mountain and sixth highest in North America. Located 8 miles from Denali, it rises above the Kahiltna Glacier like a towering cathedral. Foraker, by any route, is a formidable mountaineering challenge of the highest caliber. AMS chooses to climb the Sultana Ridge over other routes primarily to avoid exposure to hanging avalanches, but also for its aesthetic appeal and worthiness as an objective. To gain access to the Sultana Ridge, we first climb the Southeast Ridge of MT Crosson which is a good climb in itself. A bump, 12,472', on the backside of Crosson is climbed before traversing 1.5 miles on a classic double corniced ridge to the base of the Sultana.

## **HISTORY**

Sultana, which means "woman," or "wife" (of Denali) is the Tanaina name for Mt. Foraker. In March 1979, Brian Okonek, Roger Cowles, and Dave Johnston made the first ascent of the Sultana which was also the second winter ascent of Mount Foraker. Rising above the Kahiltna Glacier, the Sultana is an awesome sight from anywhere on the West Buttress route.

## **GRADE/DIFFICULTY**

There are unique qualities inherent in Alaska's arctic environment that make climbing conditions such as temperature, wind, and snow pack unlike any other mountains in the world. Alaska Grade III is given to the Sultana because of its high altitude, exposure, cornicing, crevasses and sustained climbing. Foraker is a difficult mountain to climb and demands all the strength, commitment, and mountaineering savvy one could expect from such a classic Alaskan big mountain.

## **PRIOR EXPERIENCE**

Foraker's Sultana Ridge is for experienced mountaineers only. As an advanced climb, Foraker requires extensive prior climbing experience and training beforehand. Applicants have to be in excellent physical condition and have climbed mountaineering routes that require roped glacier travel, winter snow camping, and the extensive use of an ice axe and crampons in exposed locations. Prior winter camping and travel experience is essential; there is no time to learn these skills on Foraker. Climbing knots, rope handling, and belaying have to be second nature. The ability to immediately arrest a fall on a steep snow slope is paramount to your safety and the safety of your rope team. All Foraker applicants must have a climbing resume which includes Denali or close equivalent.

## **WEATHER**

It is said that the greatest challenge of an Alaska mountaineering expedition is not the climbing, but the storms. Unlike where most of the world's highest mountains are, Foraker is 200 miles south of the Arctic Circle at 63<sup>8</sup>° North Latitude. It is sub arctic and 35<sup>8</sup>° north of Everest, the same latitude as northern Hudson Bay and central Scandinavia. The average climate around Foraker's summit is probably more severe than any spot on earth. The weather on Foraker will dictate every move. It will force us to be flexible and patient and spontaneous. It is one thing we cannot change.

## **UN-FLYABLE WEATHER**

Be aware, Alaska has unpredictable weather which can prevent flying into or out of the mountains on schedule. Bush planes can only fly if the weather is suitable. In the event that expeditions are unable to fly to the glacier at the scheduled time they will base out of the AMS Talkeetna Facilities which consists of the office and staging area, Schoolhouse, and Matt Porter Rock Gym. This allows expedition members to view slideshows and additional educational media, practice fixed line ascension and other climbing techniques. Usually un-flyable weather persists only for a day or two and then courses are able to fly into the Alaska Range. Sometimes expeditions can be weathered in the Alaska Range beyond their end date. We will do our best to ensure that your expedition ends on schedule and most do. However, we recommend allowing 2 days on the return end of your travel plans (or purchasing flexible airline tickets) in the event that weather inhibits you from flying off the glacier on time.

## **WHEN TO CLIMB**

The most common question asked by climbers is "which is the best month to climb?" There is no right answer as every year is different than the previous year as far as weather and conditions. It is generally agreed that the popular climbing season on Denali begins late April and lasts through most of July, shrinking the acceptable window down to 90 days. In March and April, cold temperatures and strong winds at higher elevations make conditions too severe. The month of May shows less precipitation on average than June or July, but it is colder and requires more aggressive cold-injury prevention. Statistically, there are more people on the mountain in June and therefore more people summit. Once you start getting into mid to late July, the snow conditions on the lower half of the mountain can deteriorate so bad that crevasse hazard becomes extreme and landing conditions impossible.

## **ACCLIMATIZATION**

AMS' expedition climbing strategy is concerned with giving everyone the best chance to acclimate to a lower oxygen environment. Foraker does not pose as big a threat as Denali for altitude-related problems due to its lower elevation at 17,400 feet, but altitude-related illnesses are still a major concern. Different strategy to accelerate acclimatization, like climb high and sleep low will be used. AMS expeditions carry a pulse oximeter to measure blood oxygen saturation levels and prescription drugs to treat life-threatening conditions. Advanced signs or symptoms of pulmonary and/or cerebral edema are serious, life threatening conditions that require immediate descent. Each year AMS is briefed by our medical director, Dr. Peter Hackett, who pioneered high altitude medical research on Denali, on any advancements in the research, prevention, and treatment of altitude-related illnesses. Our training supervisor, Lance Taysom, a life-flight nurse and Park Service mountaineering VIP certifies AMS instructors in wilderness emergency medicine. Together they wrote our medical protocols and standing orders which allow AMS instructors to evaluate and treat within the scope of their Wilderness First Responder training. Instructors teach altitude and discuss the use of Diamox and touch base with everyone individually, but your self-monitoring is paramount to early detection.

## **LEADERSHIP AND TEAM WORK**

Successful expeditions are properly equipped, have the necessary skills, but most importantly they learn to become a strong team. We need to show signs of strength from the first day: tight camps, efficient travel techniques, and a positive attitude. Your instructors expect you to be organized, participate 100%, and support the effort of being a strong and safe expedition. Of primary importance is taking responsibility for monitoring yourself: what your comfort level is, how you sleep, how you recover each day. Not fully participating, or failing to meet the day-to-day demands may necessitate your departure from the expedition. We expect you have good expedition behavior: be supportive, solution-oriented, and hard working and you will have an extremely rewarding experience.

## **GUIDES**

AMS staff are unique professionals who have a gift for teaching as well as guiding. They are talented climbers with extensive backcountry experience to draw upon. Guides on Foraker are AMS' most experienced professionals. They have a wealth of experience on the mountain as

well as leading mountaineering courses on the surrounding peaks. All instructors are familiar with altitude-related problems, extreme weather, and know how to set the pace for a successful expedition. All our staff have mountain rescue, avalanche safety and wilderness medical training. Their knowledge of the natural and climbing history of the area and personal stories of climbing in Alaska add immensely to the climb.

## **TRAINING**

All applicants must adopt a goal of being in excellent physical condition at the start of the expedition. Please don't show up sick, injured, or out-of-shape. On any mountaineering expedition there are factors that are completely out of the control of anyone, namely weather and individual acclimatization rates. By joining a professionally run expedition, you leave expedition logistics, food, equipment and leadership to us. You are responsible for and have control over your physical fitness and climbing ability. It is imperative that everyone joining our expeditions be physically fit when the expedition begins. The better condition you are in, the more you will enjoy the climb, the safer it will be for you, and the better chance for summiting. The more climbing experience you have prior to the climb, the more comfortable you will be on Foraker.

The amount of time needed for training depends on the level of fitness at the start. Climbers make it a priority of being in good shape. Those that are able get out and climb. Climbers with less time exercise to stay in shape: lift weights, run, bike, swim, martial arts, and stair master. Athletes need only to adjust their training habits to include mountaineering-specific routines. Others may have to plan a year or more of serious training in advance to ensure success.

Focus on developing stamina over brute strength. Upper body strength is necessary for lifting your pack, shoveling snow, and building camp, but most strength should be aerobic for the long hard days breaking trail and moving camp. Train on irregular terrain in poor conditions. Maintain a pulse rate 80% of maximum for a half hour during the workout. Vary your routine to prevent overuse injuries and push yourself without injuring yourself. Think about how much stronger you will be in a blizzard with that 60-70 pound pack. Exposing yourself beforehand to similar activities will condition your body. Scramble up peaks, climb snow and ice, embark on a rigorous multi-day winter backpacking trip, ski uphill as well as down hill, go snow shoeing. Pushing yourself in uncomfortable environments while staying focused and alert is training. You cannot successfully prepare for this expedition in your office or solely by training indoors. The more familiar the stress of Foraker is for you, the better you can pace, acclimate, and be a team player.

## **EQUIPMENT**

Foraker is not the mountain to "just get by" with mediocre equipment. Your gear will be put to the ultimate test. A thought out layering system will be more comfortable, efficient, lightweight, and hold up. "Quality" does not necessarily mean "expensive" and a trip to the Army surplus store often turns up many of the basics. Read carefully the Equipment List written for this expedition; it answers most questions and gives recommendations for particular items. The equipment listed as "rental" is good quality and in ample supply and will supplement what you do not have. Try to have equipment questions answered by a knowledgeable sales person in a local climbing store; they are often the most informed about the pros and cons of a particular brand or style. Your instructors will insure you are properly outfitted before you go. Please wait until the morning of the first day to check equipment, as we are busy preparing for the expedition a full three days before.

## **FOOD**

AMS provides hearty, nutritious and balanced meals on its expeditions. Using a trusted spreadsheet rations program we successfully balance calories, carbohydrates, fats, proteins, and weight to create a variety of tasty and creative meals that promote strength and health. Up to 14,200 feet with strong appetites we eat big pasta meals, burritos, and pancakes. As we gain altitude, lighter and more easily digested foods are used. Examples include: hash browns, noodles, rice, mashed potatoes, Ramen, cous-cous, soup, tortellini, dried vegetables. We do not use freeze-dried meal-in-a-bags. Our rations come from organic wholesalers from Washington State and a modern supermarket in Anchorage. Most of our rations are vegetarian. We will provide most of the food for this expedition. To ensure satisfaction, we ask that you bring your preferred hot or cold drinks for 14 days: tea, cocoa, instant coffee, and cold drink mixes like Gatorade. We also ask that you bring 2-4 pounds of your favorite lunch food to be saved for multiple summit day attempts. Please contact us if you have any dietary restrictions or questions about our food and we will try to accommodate.

## **THE FIRST DAY**

On the starting day of the expedition, members, and guides will meet at 8:00 a.m. at AMS. This is a busy day, so please be on time and take care of all personal business before hand. Guides will do a check of each expedition members gear and equipment to make sure that it is adequate. Any rentals which are issued will be done at this time as we prefer not to do this prior to the start date as we are busy briefing and packing group gear and food. After guides go through your equipment and issue any rental items you will need they will provide an expedition orientation. At 12 pm, lunch at AMS is provided. After lunch, we will cover fixed line ascension, visit the NPS Ranger station in Talkeetna, and then we pack, dress, and fly onto the glacier in a ski-equipped fixed wing Cessna 185 or a DeHaviland Beaver. The 30-45 minute flight into Denali National Park is the quickest way to access the snowy, glaciated peaks of the Alaska Range, and is a spectacular and memorable highlight to the trip. Once you arrive at the glacier the rest of the evening will consist of campsite selection, tent spacing, group kitchen set up, and of course dinner!

## **TALKEETNA FACILITIES**

AMS is the oldest and only outdoor school and guiding company locally owned and located in downtown Talkeetna. Our office, staging area, and camping facilities are located at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> street, adjacent to the local airstrip. We have a great location and facilities to properly outfit expeditions. A large staging area allows us to check gear and an indoor climbing gym allows us to practice fixed line ascension. In the event of un-flyable weather, our facility provides a comfortable area to teach classes, look at slides of the route, and try and be productive during a "Talkeetnahang."

## REFERENCES

AMS is a professionally run operation committed to high standards at all levels. We urge you to carefully research and look into climbing Denali. Search for us on the Internet with key words: "ams" or the owners, "caitlin palmer" and "colby coombs." Talk to climbing rangers in the Talkeetna Ranger Station (907-733-2231). Call your local climbing store and ask if they have heard of us. Call the American Mountain Guide's Association, (303) 271-0984. We are a small group of 50 professional educators and mountain guides who have reached senior status at: National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), Jackson Hole Mountain Guides, Colorado Mountain School, American Alpine Institute, Outward Bound, Prescott College, and Alaska Pacific University.

## ITINERARY

Weather and snow conditions will ultimately determine our progress on the mountain. This itinerary is a rough guide and outlines a possible schedule. Our style on the mountain is flexible and will fluctuate on a 24hr. clock depending on conditions. With lucky weather, most expeditions return a day or two early. On the other hand, delays at the start with un-flyable weather and storms at high camp may result in running out of time. It is possible at high camp for us to extend the length of the expedition and allow those who wish to tough it out and have a flexible schedule more time. There is a cost associated with this to compensate the guides'.

- Day 1 Orientation, gear check, NPS registration, pack lunches, fly to Base Camp, distance: 60 miles, elevation gain: 6850 feet.  
8:00 am meet at AMS for introduction, gear check, and pack lunches. 3:30 pm fly to Base Camp, 7200 feet.
- Day 2 Move to Advanced Base Camp (ABC), 6,900 feet, at the base of Crosson's Southeast Ridge. Carry to 9500 feet on Crosson's Southeast Ridge. Distance: 4 miles, elevation gain: 2700 feet.
- Day 3 Move to 11,000 feet, Camp II. Back carry.
- Day 4 Carry to 11,700'. Climb to Crosson's summit, 12,800 feet, and descend to col.  
Distance: 2 miles, elevation gain 2900 feet.
- Day 5 Move to 11,700', Camp III.
- Day 6 Move to horizontal ridge, 11,200 feet, Camp IV.  
Distance: 1 mile, elevation gain 700 feet.
- Day 7, 8 Move to base of Sultana Ridge 11,600 feet, Camp V.  
Distance: 2.25 miles, elevation gain 800 feet.
- Day 9, 10 Move to 13,900 feet, Camp VI.  
Distance: 1 mile, elevation gain 1900 feet.
- Day 11, 12, 13, 14 Summit days, 17,400 feet.  
Distance: 1.25 miles, elevation gain 3500 feet.
- Day 15, 16, 17 Return to Base Camp, fly to Talkeetna.