

Aconcagua – January 2011 – Francois Jordaan



On Wednesday the 5th of January a group of us, led by Sean Disney of Adventure Dynamics International (ADI), left for Aconcagua in the Andes Mountains in South America. Quick info: At 6 962 masl, Aconcagua is the highest point in the Western as well as the Southern hemisphere and the highest point outside of Asia. After Everest, It is the second highest of the 7 summits.

Amongst the group was me, Francois Jordaan, who, thanks to *first Ascent*, had all the required gear. We flew straight to Buenos Aires and then on to Mendoza. The next day we got our permits sorted and had some time to sort out kit. We also had some time to taste some of the Argentinean's world class beef (and you think the South Africans like a monster steak...).

On the 7th we were off to Punta del Inca, from where we would start our ascent. Punta del Inca lies at 2800masl and Mendoza at 800m, so you could imagine the mountain passes were the bus had to go. The 4* hotel accommodation from Mendoza now made way for a Hostel, next to the main road to Santiago, Chile.

Finally, the day arrived and on the 8th we were taken to the park gate, checked in with the rangers and off we went. We had a unique route planned, where we would do a traverse (up and over) of the mountain. Our route would take us up along the Vacas Valley for 2 days, before we would turn into the Relinchos Valley on our way to Plaza Argentina, our base camp at 4 200masl. From there we would go on to Camp 1, 2 and Colera Camp before we would push for the summit. Thereafter we would descend down the other side of the mountain to Plaza de Mulass (base camp) and follow the Horcones Valley out.

The 1st two days along the Vacas Valley was hot and dry, except for the rain as we got closer to Casa de Piedra at 3 200masl. My FA Trek Lite Pants, Switchblade long sleeve shirt and Dundee Sun Hat protected me from the sun whilst my Summit Jacket kept me dry. The trek to Plaza Argentina at 4 200masl was

tough and long, as well as warm again. On this day we were treated to our 1st view of Aconcagua, which was amazing. It was hard to believe that the summit was more than 3 500m above us at this stage. The next day we had a rest day to assist with our acclimatization. This day was spent playing cards, wash some socks, check gear, etc. We also had to be cleared by the doctor before we could continue our ascent. Unfortunately Sean received bad news and had to return to South Africa due to a death in the family (all the best to you Sean).

On the 12th things started to get more serious as we would be moving up to Camp1 at 5 100masl. This would only be for carrying a load of equipment up and caching it before returning to base camp for another rest day. The path was steep and rocky. We were using high altitude mountain boots (Double Plastics) from here on, which made the climb a little bit tougher. The last part of the climb was loose scree and quite a mission to go forward rather than sliding back. The views from Camp 1 was absolutely amazing and the 1st real opportunity to see the Andes in all its glory.

Back down at base camp we experienced some cold evenings with the temperature plummeting to -11 at night. This was not a problem for me as my Blue Wolf sleeping bag kept me nice and warm. The days were quite pleasant, with the guys wearing shorts and T-shirts.

After another doctor's check we were all cleared to continue. From this point forward there were no more mess tents, cooks, etc. This meant hard work further for the team. Our 1st night at Camp 1 proofed to be a realization that we were on one of the windiest mountains in the world. The night was tough with strong winds. The tents were rattling in the night and it made sleep a difficult task. The 2nd night at Camp 1, after a rest day, was much better. Although still windy, we got some sleep and were ready for the climb up to the next camp.

The climb up was tough and very windy, but with my *first Ascent* Soft Shell Ear Muffs and Powerstretch Beanie I had no problems keeping my ears and head warm and protected. It was now really cold at night and leaving the tent to attend to natures calls was not an easy task. Luckily I wore my Polypropylene Long Johns and long sleeve top to keep me warm when I had to wonder outside.



After another rest day we pushed up to high camp at 6 000masl. Because we had a unique route we were almost alone on the trail and the campsites were quiet. Things were getting serious as we rolled into camp with winds gusting at 50 – 60km/h. Pitching tents in these conditions were not easy. It was also not very comfortable outside, so by 17:00 we were inside our tents melting snow for cooking and drinking water. The plan was to go for the summit the next day, but with gale force winds prevailing we decided to postpone for a day. During the night the wind got stronger and stronger and by 2am we were woken up (not that we were sleeping much in any case) by tents flapping and guys running outside trying to fix tents. The wind was now very, very strong. We 'lost' 3 tents during the night, with guys moving into other tents with some team members. The next morning the wind was still very strong and all of us had to fix the tents which made it through the night, fixing ropes and securing that the tents will survive the day. These are no ordinary tents, so it just shows you how strong the winds were.



Unfortunately we 'lost' 4 guys during the storm which lasted the whole night. They packed up in the morning and set off down to base camp. Three of them were not well for the last 2 or 3 days and were suffering from altitude sickness, whilst the 4th member started to show signs of illness and decided enough is enough. The only cure was to descend. Just to prove that the strong winds was not for the faint hearted, two other groups at our campsite also decided to go down as well – the entire group! The remainder of the 'rest' day was spent preparing for the summit and sorting out kit, again.

My kit list for the summit attempt consisted of the following *first Ascent* apparel:

- Polypropylene Base Layer (Top and bottom)
- Powerstretch Pants
- Summit Pants
- 100 Fleece
- 300 Fleece (Grawler Jacket)
- Malamute Down Jacket

- Powerstretch Beanie

Add to that the boots, crampons, glacier goggles, etc. and you would soon realize that I had to carry almost R20 000 worth of kit up the mountain, and that was on summit day only!



At 6 am on the 20th we left camp on route to the summit. It was cold, but at least the wind died down and with the right kit it was not a problem. We were treated to the most amazing sunrise ever, a truly awe inspiring moment. The sun was behind Aconcagua and as the sun rose, it casted a shadow over the rest of the Andes. A sight I will never forget! By the time we reached the Grand Traverse we had fitted our crampons and continued up the steep slope. At the bottom of the Canaletto we were still going strong with good weather on our side. It was now after 12 and the last 300m (3 – 4 hours of climbing) to the top was extremely rocky, snowy, icy and steep all at once. We were now at 6 600masl. I had some problems with my crampons before we got to this point and after fixing them on several occasions, I was at the back of the pack. Our group had split into 2 groups, with me joining the slower group of 3. One of our other members, with a guide assisting him, had already turned back whilst on the Grand Traverse. By the time we were 1/3rd up the Canaletto I started to struggle and had a tough time putting one foot in front of the other. I was determined to continue and did so for another hour or so. By this time it started snowing, which made it increasingly difficult to continue. I was feeling *strong* and determined,

but our guide warned us that we have to have enough energy to get to the top as well as get down again. Another member of our 3-man group decided enough is enough and stayed behind. Our guide arranged for him to go down with another group that was on their way down.

Shortly thereafter I was faced with a decision; continue or go down? It was a very tough decision for me, as quitting is not an option for me. This however is harsh conditions and mistakes here could be fatal, so I realized that my strength would not allow me to make a safe descent if I had to go to the top first. I was at 6 812masl, merely 150m from the summit. You would think; 150m, that's all, but the reality is that it would have taken me at least another hour and a half to two hours to reach the summit. This would mean that I would put my team members in danger coming down, as I would probably need assistance from them. A tough decision for me personally, but a good one in the end, as the descent was not an easy one. Someone once said: "Summit is for glory, and climbing is for the soul". Sounds a bit melodramatic, but it is true none the less. Although I did not reach the summit, my soul certainly had lots to feed on and I am a richer man as a result of it.

Six of my team members, excluding our two Argentinean guides, reached the summit. The list included Lance Metz and Barend Engelbrecht who reached the summit of Everest in 2010 with Sean Disney and with the successful summit of Aconcagua have now reached their 6th and 5th summits respectively. Also on the summit were Monte Hague, Bennie Liebenberg, Peter Roberts and Achmat Jackson. Well done guys, it was a privilege to climb with you and call you my team members!!! Our Argentinean guide, Juan Araya, stepped onto the summit of Aconcagua for the 27th time! A true legend of the Andes and a well respected mountaineer and a great ambassador for his country and his people. I am also proud to call him my friend.

The next day was another tough day going down to base camp, followed by another long day with a 28km trek to the park gate. Luckily there were good hotels and good food waiting for us in Mendoza. The next 3 days were spent tasting wine and relaxing before the long haul back to South Africa.

I would like to thank *first Ascent* for their generous sponsorship of some of my kit and although I did not reach the summit, would like to think that I did your name proud. The long days and nights inside a small tent was made more bearable by my Comfort Light Sleeping mat and the cold and windy days were no match for your brilliant, tough and highly effective products.

This expedition taught me so much and I can't wait to apply my newfound skills sometime soon, both in life and work and obviously on another mountain in the near future.