



AAC Publications

Speed

The Why And How Of A New Denali Record

It was just getting light toward the east, always the coldest part of the day. I'd been walking for hours in the darkness, slowly, my shoulders painful under the weight of a heavy pack. My feet were frozen, crammed into an old pair of plastic Koflach boots that had been too small for years. My crampons bit without precision into the hard snow illuminated by my headlamp, the fingers of my hands clenched into fists inside my gloves, and the rope swinging behind me and slapping my calves. And the sun was not yet up.

Three days after summiting Mont Blanc, my partner and I returned to the heat of the valley. I was grateful for having reached the roof of the Alps. But something was gnawing at me. We sat in a bar in Les Houches, where the menu was decorated with a line that followed itself with no beginning and no end. It was an endless knot, a Tibetan symbol representing the interweaving paths of time and change that bind all existence. As we were driving back to Catalonia—I was still just the copilot, too young by a few years for my driver's license—I finally understood my unease. I had the satisfaction of having completed my objective, but I hadn't felt the pleasure of the journey.

Many years later in Chamonix: "Did he do it or not?" I asked the French guide. "Yes, but he did not do it in alpinisme," the guide proclaimed, as if to end the discussion. *Les règles de l'art*, as defined by French guides, had rendered my friend's descent of the north face of the Aiguille de Peuterey illegitimate, since he had descended on skis, without using crampons or ice axes.

Such rules have always left a bad taste in my mouth. I am bored by the limitations of names, definitions, and etiquette. On the one hand we can be alpinists; we can climb mountains with ice axes, crampons, and ropes. Or else skiers, descending mountains with rectangular boards on our feet. Or climbers, ascending steep walls with only the strength of our arms. Or runners, repetitively putting one foot in front of the other like animals, even in the mountains. Or parapenters, those who have ignored humans' inability to fly. Or, on the other hand, we can look at things more simply. We can look at a particular mountain and ask: What tools do I have at my disposal for my own enjoyment?

At the beginning of June 2014 I arrive in Talkeetna with three skilled friends: Seb Montaz, an excellent alpinist and extreme skier, and additionally a great filmmaker; Vivian Bruchez, an extreme skier in the tradition of Tardivel, Baud, Boivin, or Siffredi; and Jordi Tosas, a hyperactive first ascensionist with many solo ascents in big mountains all over the world. Our goal is to set a speed record on Denali. What is the reason for trying to set such a record? None. Why do we do the things we do, why do we risk our lives, wear ourselves out for days and years training to climb a particular peak? There is no rational answer. What moves us is emotion and passion. Going fast is not an end, but a consequence of going light, and going light is a consequence of my desire to be connected to nature, with the fewest layers separating me from my environment. So the record really isn't the reason behind the trip, but merely the excuse.

After a couple of days waiting out bad weather we finally fly onto the glacier. We load up our sleds, and soon we are settled into the medical camp (the 14,200-foot camp on the West Buttress Route). With our thirst for lightness—while we were shopping in Anchorage, Jordi discretely removed food from the shopping cart because he felt we were getting too weighed down—we are the only group in

camp without a vestibule in which to cook. When there is heavy snowfall it is an ordeal to prepare our food and eat.

The fourth day the weather is exceptional (and is not going to last long), so we jump at the opportunity to climb the West Rib. The snow conditions are good and the ascent goes smoothly. In five hours we arrive at the Football Field. I decide to continue, and Jordi descends to camp. The first turns of the descent cost me, due to the altitude and the steepness, but skiing the West Rib, with the views out over the glaciers, is spectacular. The snowy first part leads into a mixed section, picking between rocky ridges with some snowless bits, but soon I arrive back at camp.

—

Without a doubt moving light and fast in the mountains is a paradox of opposites, between security and the lack of security. Traveling quickly allows one to spend much less time exposed to rockfall or seracs, to the cold, to bad weather. But it also demands much more technical precision and physical conditioning. The absence of extra gear means that a comfortable or safe bivouac is out of the question.

Going light in the mountains is not popular. Guides don't know what to say to their clients when they see someone descending Mont Blanc in running shoes or going light on the Innominata or Chardonnet. In 2013 I was climbing the Frendo Spur on the Aiguille du Midi with my girlfriend, and we underestimated the speed of an approaching storm, and three-quarters of the way up she injured her feet. When the storm came I did not hesitate to call for rescue. If I was alone, probably I would not have asked for help, but when I am with someone I prefer to make it safer. There was a lot of criticism afterward. This can happen in the Alps, where there is rescue available and an easy approach to the mountains. It's like a big training gym for alpinism, with 3G coverage throughout the massif and web services providing real-time conditions. You feel a bit more secure, and this is dangerous.

This is what I like about remote mountains where there is not cell coverage and you don't use a satellite phone. The exercise of decision-making is more challenging, more consequential, requiring you to absorb all the external elements. Denali is surprising because it is a big, remote mountain but it's really crowded and the camps have a lot of infrastructure. We carry a sat phone on Denali, but during the record attempt I will communicate with no one except the climbers I meet along the way. My team will not even know if I break the record—or fall into a crevasse—until I come back up to the medical camp afterward and tell them I'm okay.

—

The day after my first trip up to the summit we awake to heavy snowfall. We've been intending to climb the West Buttress next, for more acclimatization, but looking ahead we can see the weather report is fairly poor. There will be a two-day window of good weather, followed by a week of storm. What should we do? Wait for a new window while we continue to acclimatize or try for the record right away? We decide to go for it. In early afternoon the following day, Seb and I pack a small tent and some food and ski down to base camp.

After a few hours of sleep, we began our ski back up the glacier early the next morning. I'm carrying everything I will need for the day, including crampons, ice axe, insulated pants and two jackets, down mittens, one liter of water (I will refill at 14,200 feet), and a 300ml energy gel. The technique and fitness gained from more than 14 years of ski mountaineering competitions allows me to move quickly over easy ground. I can climb comfortably while still being able to converse with Seb. After three and a half hours I arrive at the medical camp. I drink a bit of water and begin to ascend the Rescue Gully [a shorter, steeper route to the 17,000-foot high camp on the West Buttress], in order to avoid all the crowds on the fixed lines. Now I have to carry my skis, but they weigh less than 800 grams.

By the time I come out of the gully, the light breeze of the morning has become a strong blast. Clouds cover the highest part of the mountain, and it has begun to snow. I put on my jacket and break trail in fresh snow up to 20 centimeters [nearly eight inches]. Two other people are above me, but their tracks disappear in the strong wind. I have to stop from time to time to warm up, swinging my arms and legs, as breaking trail isn't allowing me to move quickly enough. I have to fight for each step, thinking only of the summit. After a little more than 9 hours 43 minutes I finally arrive on top, but I can't see anything around me, just snow.

I take a bit of time to buckle my boots and then begin to ski down the summit ridge. The visibility is only a few meters, and I have to be careful not to go too fast, trying to remember the way I had ascended and not miss my tracks. Finally I arrive at the entrance to the Rescue Gully, and there I meet Vivian and we ski quickly together to the medical camp.

Still in poor visibility, I continue alone down the glaciers to base camp, leaning back hard to keep my tips up and absorb the changes in the snow and terrain. Through soft drizzle and fog, I see my orange tent a few meters ahead, just two hours after leaving the summit. While I am preparing dinner Jodi arrives, carrying three ice axes and a rope for us to use the next day. "Hey, congratulations! Tomorrow we are going to climb ice on Hunter, right?"

—

For me, speed ascents are not about being the fastest but about being out of my comfort zone—those moments when I am in limbo between the animal instinct to preserve life and the intellectual drive to approach one's limits, and perhaps even death, in order to understand life. In the mountains there is the possibility to choose one's own line, to decide to continue on or turn back, to take a risk or to avoid it. It is, in the end, the only place where I can apply my anarchistic beliefs without fearing the police.

But taking a risk is not like taking a leap into the void or playing the lottery. It is a spontaneous sum of decisions, taking into account our technical and physical skills, our experience, our mental state, the conditions of the route and the mountain, and with all of that being able to see the probability of success and recognize the level of commitment we want to assume. And sometimes our choices are wrong, and it is through our errors that we learn.

These attempts at records are, in the end, the excuse to learn something, to experience new mountains, and to see a new way of attaining the mountain—more directly, without aid or assistance, without téléferiques, without intermediate camps, without materiel that separates us from the land.

Summary: Speed ascent and descent of Denali (6,168m) in Alaska by Kilian Jornet Burgada on June 7, 2014. Jornet followed the West Buttress Route with the Rescue Gully variation, reaching the summit in just over 9 hours 43 minutes. He then skied down the same route for a round-trip time of 11 hours 48 minutes.

About the Author: Born in 1987 in Catalonia, Spain, Kilian Jornet Burgada was raised in a mountain hut and began climbing at age three. He is a multi-time world champion in trail running and ski mountaineering races, and he holds the speed records for ascending and descending Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn.

Translated from Spanish by Pam Ranger Roberts.

Images



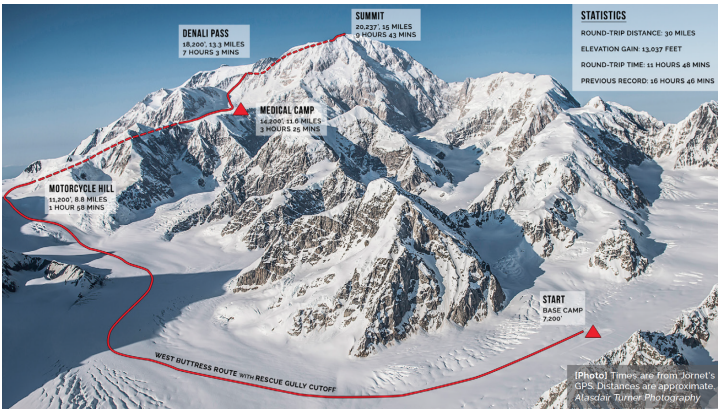
Jornet descended the 15-mile route in a little over two hours.



Jornet climbing the Rescue Gully toward Denali's high camp. He wore or carried his lightweight skis throughout the ascent.



Kilian Jornet



Kilian's route and split times from his Denali climb.

Article Details

Author	Kilian Jornet Burgada
Publication	AAJ
Volume	57
Issue	89
Page	0
Copyright Date	2015
Article Type	Feature article