
SIMON YATES

Short and Sweet

Mount Alverstone's west face

It ended up being a hurriedly organised expedition. I had planned to climb in Alaska with my recent regular mountaineering partner Andy Parkin, but after months away a phone call in late March 2005 to his Chamonix home revealed that his knee had blown out. He would have to have an operation and I would have to find both a new climbing partner and objective. Salvation came in the form of a timely email. Paul Schweizer, an American philosophy lecturer resident in Edinburgh, contacted me in the hope that I might be free to climb in May. We had not climbed together before but had met at several BMC winter meets over the years and interacted well at the bar. He was keen to go somewhere in the Alaska region. I could hardly believe my luck.

We agreed on the remote Wrangell St Elias range on the Alaska -Yukon border and booked flights for late April to Whitehorse – capital of the Yukon. Now all we needed was an objective. The Nottingham based taxman and world-renowned climber Mick Fowler provided a couple of inspiring aerial photographs of the huge west face of Mount Alverstone (4439m). Research revealed that only two routes had been climbed, which avoided the largest section of the face. Two weeks before departure we decided it was the mountain for us.

A couple of nights in Whitehorse were sufficient time for shopping, hiring a satellite phone, arranging a taxi and to discover that there had been a month of unseasonably warm and settled weather. We left town happy on Monday 2 May and after registering at the Kluane National Park Headquarters in Haines Junction completed our journey to the remote airstrip at Kluane Lake. Our transport in and out of the mountains now lay in the hands of Welshman Andy Williams – the only operator currently flying a ski-plane into the St Elias Range from either side of the border.

We had one false start, flying into the range only to be forced back to the airstrip, unable to land on the glacier due to fog rolling in off the Pacific. Second time lucky, we were dropped off on a high lobe of the Alverstone glacier. After a three-day wait it was good to be in the mountains. The remoteness hit as soon as the engine noise from Andy's plane tailed away. The mountain landscape around us was vast and silent, its glaring whiteness amplified by the sun high above.



70. West face of Mount Alverstone in the Wrangell St Elias range. Yates-Schweizer route follows the couloir left of the central glacier cwm. (*Simon Yates*)



71. Base camp on the Alverstone glacier. (*Simon Yates*)



72. Paul Schweizer climbing the 50 degree couloir on day one, Mount Alverstone's west face. (*Simon Yates*)

We set up base camp in the lee of a rognon and the following day made a reconnaissance. The foot of Alverstone's west face turned out to be a mere hour and a half walk away. The prominent west buttress on the left side of the face had been climbed by Pilling and Diedrich in 1995, and the broad gully to its right by Blanchard and Wilford in 1998. On the right hand boundary of the main face we spied a fine unclimbed couloir line that led almost to the top of the mountain.

On the evening of 7 May we left base camp with four days' worth of food and gas and camped beneath the face. Early the following morning we began solo climbing up reasonably angled slopes of hard névé. As the sun came up and warmed the upper part of the face rocks started to fall. At one point, about 750m up, the couloir narrowed. As we hurried through the dangerous bottleneck two rocks hit me almost simultaneously on the forearm and shoulder. My arm immediately swelled and stiffened, but did not appear to be broken. With the sun now out, the névé turning to bare ice and a fatal drop below, we decided to dig out the ropes and start pitching. It was a wise move. The climbing steepened to 50 degree ice, with short steeper sections and the hot intense sunshine ensured sporadic rock-fall continued for the rest of the climb. In the evening we found a snow bank above a small icefall and excavated a tent platform 1200m up the face. It had been a long day.

Due to tiredness and the need to rehydrate we did not start early the following morning. Seven rope lengths of good 55-60 degree ice eventually led to a flat col on the summit ridge. We dumped our rucksacks and wandered up to the top, marvelling at the mountains and glaciers spread out before us in perfect weather. After savouring the views we returned to our rucksacks and put up the tent. The sky became hazy as the evening drew on and a strong smell of wood smoke hung in the air. Somewhere, a long way off, a huge forest fire was blazing. The night was still, but bitterly cold.

Next morning, our hopes for a fast descent were soon quashed. After some easy down-climbing of Alverstone's north flank to the Great Shelf we failed to find a good route down to the Alverstone glacier. Instead we crossed a watershed and dropped down on to the Dusty glacier to the north. With no prior knowledge of the sérac- studded face we found ourselves descending, route finding was soon a little nerve-racking. Finally, we made a nasty abseil from a snow bollard down a sérac, kicking off at its base to clear a huge crevasse, before sprinting down the lower part of the face until clear of the avalanche debris on the glacier below. Hours of trudging up the Dusty glacier followed until we called it a day.

Our last remaining gas canister provided breakfast and then expired. We set off for a col that we knew would access the upper Alverstone glacier, but then just below it we convinced ourselves that a lower col further to the west would be the better option. It was not. Our fit of collective optimism forced a further unpleasant descent on to a fork of the Hubbard glacier.



73. Day two on the west face, Paul Schweizer heading for the col on the summit ridge. (*Simon Yates*)



74. Paul Schweizer begins the descent from Mount Alverstone to the Dusty glacier.
(*Simon Yates*)

However, the real penalty for our mistake was a hideous climb up a long ridge in the afternoon sun to regain the Alverstone. We finally reached our base camp tents in the early evening. The descent, with the crossing of three watersheds, had taken as long as the climb.

A quick satellite phone call to the airstrip arranged a pick-up for the following day. Alas it was not to be. A storm moved in. It snowed for three and a half days. With two weeks' food and fuel remaining, our situation was hardly desperate, but the whisky had run out. After a further two phone calls Andy empathised with the serious nature of our position and in a brief clearing flew in to effect a well-timed exit. We had been in the mountains a mere 11 days.

Back at the Kluane Lake airstrip we celebrated our good fortune with some Yukon Gold Ale. The bottles carried the slogan 'Melt the snow. Brew the beer. Life is good'. We drank to that simple but fine philosophy.

Summary: The first full ascent of Mount Alverstone's 1800m west face in the Wrangell St Elias range from 8 -11 May 2005 by Paul Schweizer and Simon Yates. The route is Alpine IV+, TD+.

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