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From Carter Notch to Aconcagua

A Yankee discovers community between the mountains

Stephen Kurczy



Trailhead at Carter Notch

I FIRST HEARD THE WORD *Aconcagua* WHILE HUDDLED AROUND an antique wood stove inside Carter Notch Hut, in the deep ravine between Wildcat Ridge and Carter Dome in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. *Aconcagua*. It sounded exotic, mystical, almost sinister—all apt descriptors of the Western Hemisphere’s tallest summit, which sits in the Andes on the border of Argentina and Chile.

The temperature inside the stone hut hovered at 40 degrees Fahrenheit, but outside it was –10 and dropping in 40 MPH winds—just another winter day in the Whites. On this, my first trip there, I was blown away by not just the weather but by the trails that seemed to extend all the way to Aconcagua itself.

My companions had climbed South America’s highest peak in February 1998. “Thinking back, maybe we bit off more than we could chew,” Phil Plouffe was saying, “but we were younger and eager and a little naive for what we were actually getting into. It seemed like the next logical step from mountaineering in the White Mountains.”

I raised my eyebrows at that: How was it “logical” to jump from the White Mountains to Aconcagua, which is more than three times taller than the peaks in the Whites? Yet my friend and former newspaper editor, Steve Fagin, agreed.

“People use the Whites as a training ground and a stepping-off point,” Steve said. “It’s where they cut their teeth and realize that there are many higher summits and more challenging endeavors.”

I’d been hoping to get to the Whites since 2005, when I graduated from college and began working at a newspaper in southeastern Connecticut with Steve (who is also the Books editor for this journal). He planned a trip to Mount Washington for us. Then a blizzard hit, so we canceled. Soon I left Connecticut to pursue journalism jobs in New York, Cambodia, and Boston. We kept in touch.

Now it was January 2013, and I had escaped New York City for a three-day trek with Steve and Phil to the White Mountains. It was my first time meeting Phil, a long-haired mail carrier who reminded me of a fitter version of the Dude from *The Big Lebowski*. Steve, who had lent me double boots,

Stephen Kurczy points to the summit of South America’s highest peak, which he’d dreamed of and feared. COURTESY OF STEPHEN KURCZY

crampons, and gaiters, still wore the same bushy moustache that seemed to be a relic of his hippie youth. Both a generation older than me, they were full of stories. Years ago, with *Appalachia* editor Christine Woodside, they had climbed the tallest mountain in each New England state in one round-the-clock expedition (they finished in 41 hours, after driving 2,000 miles). Steve's other adventures include kayaking the 341-mile Erie Canal, while Phil nearly climbed to the top of Mount Everest before turning back 3,000 feet shy of the top of the world. As we sat in the deep notch between Wildcat Ridge and Carter Dome, they also described their three-week expedition to Aconcagua.

"A friend of ours had gone the year before and said it was just a walk-up," Steve recalled. "She showed us pictures of herself in shorts and a T-shirt on the mountain. But then the year we went was an El Niño year, and the same place that she was in shorts, we were in three feet of snow and 60-mile-an-hour winds."

About two weeks into their expedition, a blizzard shut them inside their tents 3,000 feet below Aconcagua's 22,841-foot summit. They were losing strength and suffering headaches. "If we opened the tent to get fresh air, snow would fly in. But when we sealed it up, our breath would freeze," Steve said. "You were doomed to suffer one way or the other."

When the blizzard finally let up, Steve and another member were too drained to go on. Phil set out for the summit with their guide and their other team member, but she decided to stop after a few hours. The guide zipped her in a bivy sack and continued with Phil. They passed a corpse near the summit, one of about 15 climbers who died on the mountain that season. I asked Phil if the dead body had made him wonder if he could be next, but he shook his head and said they'd continued wordlessly to the metal cross that marks the top of the hemisphere. "You're just so wrapped up in your own shit," he said.

I was fascinated with the story, and, as we sat shivering around the stove, with the White Mountains. The next month I visited Harvard Cabin and Gray Knob and climbed Mounts Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Madison. That spring, Phil and I skied Tuckerman Ravine. I got into rock climbing, spent the next New Year's Eve at Zealand Falls Hut, guided my uncle and his son on a winter trek around the northern Presidentials, and later speed-hiked (parts were running but much was just fast-trekking) the 25-mile Presidential traverse with Phil. I was addicted to the beauty, danger, freedom, and simplicity. I was 30 years old, and the mountains were bringing me back from an untethered feeling that birthday had brought on.

The mountains took my focus off the obsessive road to “success.” I felt emboldened. That summer I pursued an old dream. I moved to South America as a freelance foreign correspondent, which is how I found myself in November 2014 reporting on a presidential election in Uruguay, on the border of Argentina, and falling under the long shadow of Aconcagua.

The Path to Aconcagua

At first, I relived Steve and Phil’s expedition on Aconcagua vicariously: Steve’s being sick inside a frigid tent, Phil’s push to the summit past a dead man. In Uruguay, I constantly met backpackers on their way to or from Patagonia, a region covering the southern cone of South America, just south of Aconcagua. Their excitement was infectious.

“Did you think about going to Aconcagua?” I asked one American hiker.

“Man,” he said, “you’ve got to be crazy to try to climb Aconcagua.”

“It can’t be *that* crazy,” I said. “Lots of people do it every year, and as long as you’re in *decent* shape, you can just follow the guide up, right? Like, look at all the people who do Everest.”

“*You* should do Aconcagua,” he needled me. “Then I can say that I know a guy who climbed the biggest mountain in the Western Hemisphere and the tallest outside Asia.”

Once he said that, I couldn’t shake the idea. Could I climb Aconcagua? Did I have the audacity to try? My birthday was approaching on December 14, and what better way to turn 32 years old?

I researched guide services and contacted several reputed to cost little and whose climbers succeeded often. One Mendoza-based company, Inka Expediciones, quickly responded that it had a spot in an expedition departing the following week. I must pay a nonrefundable \$500 deposit plus another \$2,700 before the expedition departed. I didn’t have the money, but I put aside that little problem and emailed Steve and Phil.

“Big mountain, lots to consider,” Phil wrote. “The weather is the biggest factor. If you got the fever, go man.”

Steve emailed: “I can’t think of anyone better qualified to do Aconcagua, but of course the weather is always the wild card.”

Their response looked like a green light to me.

I hadn’t told Steve and Phil that I had bronchitis. Life as a shoe-string freelance journalist often meant staying in hostels where I was exposed to all kinds of sicknesses. I distinctly recall a woman on the bunk bed above me

hacking terribly when I'd first arrived in Uruguay. Soon my own lungs and nasal cavities were full of green mucus as I suffered from fatigue, shortness of breath, and what felt like whooping cough. I had hoped the sickness would go away on its own. Now, with plans developing for Aconcagua, I splurged on over-the-counter antibiotics. Then I turned to the issue of money. I looked to the Bank of Mom and Dad for a loan of \$5,000, which would be the cost of the expedition plus park permits and rental gear. My father maxed out a low-interest credit card for me. I wired the money to Inka Expediciones, hopped on a ferry from Montevideo to Buenos Aires, and took an overnight bus to Mendoza, the launching point for expeditions to Aconcagua. I had had so little time, planning, that I half-expected Inka Expediciones to be a scam. It was not. In two days, our expedition was departing. Walking around the city, I met a Canadian Rockies guide who had just returned from a solo expedition on Aconcagua. He told me that he was the first climber to be emergency air-lifted off the mountain that season because of the onset of altitude sickness.

His tale made me question what I was in for. If a professional climber failed, what hope did I have? Was jumping into this expedition, with bronchitis and no training, ambitious or impetuous? I had signed up to climb Aconcagua via the Ruta Normal ("Normal Route"), which is not a difficult climb in a technical sense, but the elevation and unpredictable weather are notorious for scuttling climbers' ambitions, or worse. The mountain claimed the lives of two American climbers in December 2012, adding to the tally of 33 who died between 2001 and 2012. Would success for me be reaching the summit or just returning alive?

Soon I was in one of two vans rolling toward the snow-capped Andes. We were fifteen climbers ranging in age from 20 to 55 and comprising ten nationalities, plus four guides from Argentina and Peru.

Steve wrote to me before I left: "You're in for a real adventure, and hope you enjoy the experience. Follow the mantra chanted by the porters on Kilimanjaro: 'pole, pole,' which is Swahili for 'slowly, slowly.'"

Phil instructed: "Drink-drink-drink lots of water. Bring handy wipes."

Mountain Madness

The climbing season on Aconcagua is December to February, which is summer in the Southern Hemisphere. On December 8, 2014, my two-week expedition set out on foot from the entrance of Parque Provincial Aconcagua.



The hike in covered 14 miles over dusty, windswept valleys. STEPHEN KURCZY

Over the next three days, we gained 1,500 feet elevation as we hiked through 14 miles of dusty windswept valleys, flanked by mountain walls ribboned red-and-green, to the colorful tent village of base camp. At an altitude of about 14,400 feet, we were already as high as the tallest summit in the continental United States.

Base camp is known as Plaza de Mulas because of the caravans of mules that come and go every day with climbing gear, food, and other provisions for the thousands of climbers who come to Aconcagua every season. We arrived to the sound of Guns N' Roses' "Paradise City" blaring from a boom box strapped to the door of one of dozens of trailer-sized tents containing bunk beds, plastic dining tables, and kitchen equipment. Porters played foot volley (volleyball for your feet) over a 4-foot-high net. A local Argentine painter sold paintings from his Guinness-certified highest elevation art gallery. This would be our home for the next five days as we acclimatized and test-climbed a nearby 16,400-foot peak.

The effects of high altitude were already apparent. At sea level, normal blood oxygen saturation should be above 94 percent; below 88 percent qualifies for a supplemental oxygen supply. That first morning at base camp, as the guides recorded our vitals, most of us measured in the low-80s and

some in the 70s. Blood pulse pressures read as high as 200/120 and required attention from the base camp nurse, which is provided once you've paid the exorbitant park entry fee of as much as \$945 per person.

Prices were just one way Aconcagua had changed from when Steve and Phil came in February 1998. Then, the park entry fee was around a hundred bucks. They recalled base camp as a dreary shantytown without a nurse or the kind of infrastructure available today, such as \$5 hot showers and Wi-Fi at \$40 an hour (I splurged on both). For additional fees, porters will carry all gear, as well as set up and take down tents at the high camps. We were served three hot meals a day, including dinners of steak and pizza paired with Malbec wine from the vineyards around Mendoza. This was not the rustic, no-frills winter trekking that I'd learned in the White Mountains.

All this had its pros and cons. The extra services opened Aconcagua to a wider range of less-experienced climbers, according to Sebastián Angel Tetilla, the founder and director of Inka Expediciones. "The mountain is more tame, but not just Aconcagua, also the Himalaya and other destinations that look more like adventure tourism," Tetilla told me. About 3,000 people entered the park during the 1997–1998 season, including Steve and Phil, half as many as during the 2014–2015 season, when I visited. This has created a new type of danger—unprepared people, which has helped earn Aconcagua the nickname "Mountain of Death." "Aconcagua is not a very dangerous mountain," Tetilla said, "but big storms happen and mountain sickness happens, and this is when the mountain becomes dangerous." The influx of people has coincided with quickening glacial melt, a trend on big mountains worldwide as the growing human population fuels climate change. One of my guides said the glaciers are receding so fast that he could see the changes every season.

On the positive side, the mountain is much more hospitable than it was fifteen years ago. Belén Zanino, the manager of base camp operations for Inka Expediciones since 2003, told me the new amenities reduced staff turnover and introduced a degree of normalcy to life. "You have to be comfortable, bring books, music, a drawing pad," she said one afternoon while sitting in the kitchen knitting a wool hat, her black hair pulled back neatly to show silver earrings. "You have to think you live here."

Although some members of my group were put off by all the amenities, I wasn't fighting it. I told Zanino my birthday was in a few days, and she suggested a cake might be in order.

I awoke December 14 unable to stomach anything because of a gastrointestinal infection. As we hiked several hours to drop supplies at camp

one, I repeatedly ducked behind boulders to relieve myself. By the time we returned to base camp, where we would have a final rest day, I was dehydrated and lightheaded with a pounding migraine.

It would be impossible for me to continue if I felt this way and was unable to retain liquid. I visited the nurse, who gave me antibiotics and advised against eating meat or sweets. “But today is my birthday,” I said, “and the kitchen is making cake and a special dinner of *asado* (Argentine barbecue).” She shook her head. That evening at dinner, the aroma of sizzling beef and pork wafted from the open-air grill outside the kitchen tent. The antibiotics seemed to be kicking in, so I ignored the nurse’s warning and ate beef, drank a glass of wine, and enjoyed a slice of the chocolate birthday cake that Zanino baked. It seemed to all mix into some kind of homeopathic elixir because I could have cried for happiness. I had expected to be lonely, shivering, and surrounded by grunting, frostbitten tentmates this birthday. Instead, I felt embraced by people singing “Happy Birthday” in Arabic, English, French, Hindi, Malay, Portuguese, Spanish, and Swedish. Earlier that day, as we had zigzagged up Aconcagua’s steep switchbacks to drop supplies at camp one, our Argentine guide had repeatedly looked down and smiled, “Stephen, a happy birthday to you.”

All Bets Off

Who would reach the summit? That unspoken question lingered, always. From the moment we assembled in Mendoza, we were sizing each other up, asking about past ascents and training, watching for fatigue and trying to hide our own. Unbeknownst to us, staff at base camp made a bet that only three of the fifteen of us would summit: a lean 31-year-old French man who ran trail marathons, a 20-year-old American woman who had just completed a 12-week wilderness survival course, and me, the sole New Englander.

On December 15, a Monday, we gathered for a final base camp meeting to discuss the forecast and how it would affect our pace. Wind speeds on the summit would be 20 to 30 MPH through the week, with a lull Friday before picking up Saturday and Sunday.

“The best day will be Friday,” said our lead guide, Heber Orona. “One day is the difference for the whole expedition.”

We would push to camp one Tuesday, camp two Wednesday, and camp three Thursday—meaning no rest days and little time to acclimatize. Looking

up to the summit from base camp, we could see where our path wound up the barren mountain and the sites where we would camp.

The mood was apprehensive. My palms were sweaty. But we had good reason to trust Orona. The 44-year-old had guided in the Andes for more than two decades and was the first Argentine to complete all “Seven Summits” (the moniker describing the highest peaks of each of the continents).

“It’s hard, we know,” Orona told us. “Maybe each day we will take a different decision. But now we want you to organize everything to move to camp one tomorrow.”

We would not be alone. Among several groups also gunning for Friday was a pair of European mountain runners, Kílian Jornet and Emelie Forsberg, who had come to set a new speed ascent-descent of Aconcagua, starting and ending from the park entrance, a round-trip journey of 38 miles. The previous month Jornet had been featured on the cover of *Outside* magazine, and his presence at Plaza de Mulas added a new dimension to our own expedition. On the one hand, we were all doing this together, we and the best mountain runners on the planet. On the other hand, our two-week expedition would be a mere half-day run for Jornet and Forsberg.

We told Jornet and Forsberg we would see them at the summit in several days and set off for camp one, known as Camp Canadá, elevation 16,570 feet. Within hours, two group members were lagging behind: an Argentine woman in her early 30s, and a petite Indonesian mother in her late 40s. I felt good: The antibiotics had killed the parasites foraging in my stomach, and that morning my oxygen saturation measured 99 and my heart rate 70 beats per minute (BPM). After we all arrived to camp and set up our tents, the guides prepared a soup dinner, with sides of tuna, cheese, and cookies. The setting sun reflected off the snow-capped peaks and glacial-sided mountains all around us.

The next day, more people began to struggle. The Indonesian woman couldn’t catch her breath, the Argentine was fatigued and dehydrated, and now also a Brazilian couple was falling far behind. We all eventually arrived to camp two, called Nido de Cóndores, elevation 18,270 feet, a plateau-like area with a ranger station and emergency helipad. We set up tents while the guides boiled snow for drinking water. Before dinner, which was bread layered with tomato sauce and cheese to create a sort-of pizza, Orona called another meeting. The forecast had worsened. Wind speeds were now predicted above 20 MPH for Friday, meaning we’d face a windchill of -35.

“We can go back with nothing, or we can try,” Orona told us as we stood in a circle, hoods pulled up as flecks of snow blew between us. “I think it’s better if we try.”

We all agreed, although this meant the end of the expedition for the Argentine and Indonesian women, the Brazilian couple, and a 55-year-old Argentine man making his fourth attempt of Aconcagua who could not keep pace.

The next morning, the remaining ten of us hiked three hours up to Camp Colera, elevation 19,690 feet, a flattish area surrounded by high rock outcroppings that stifled the wind. This was where Steve and Phil had dug through several feet of snow in 1998 to clear an area for their tent, and where a blizzard stranded them for several days. For us, there was no snow, and the sun burned down through a clear blue sky.

Dinner was freeze-dried chicken soup. While we ate, Orona gave a final weather update: the forecast had worsened further. The temperature would be as low as -10 , and the wind in excess of 30 MPH, translating into a windchill of -50 . “This is still our best summit day,” Orona said. “Don’t worry about the weather. Focus on the summit.”

I was still optimistic. Summit day would be cold, but no colder than in the White Mountains with Steve and Phil two years earlier. Later that night, however, I woke less confident: My head was pounding from an altitude-induced migraine. For two hours I tossed until my Australian tentmate urged me to take a dose of strong painkillers. I owe him because I would not have slept otherwise. And it seemed karmically unjust in the morning when he was forced to stay back because high blood pressure put him at imminent risk of heart attack. “Good luck, mate,” he said as I crawled out of the tent.

Adventure Justifies Itself

It was 5 A.M. My headlamp quickly died in the numbing predawn cold. “This is our summit day!” Orona exclaimed. “Concentrate. Focus on your feet. The sun will be up in a few hours, I promise.” At that same moment far below us, the European sky-runners Jornet and Forsberg were also embarking for the summit from the park’s entrance gate.

For the next two hours, each time I looked back, it seemed another climber had turned back, including the French marathoner because of nausea and the American woman because of the cold—both of whom had been favored to

reach the summit. Soon, only three remained: me, the Frenchman's younger brother, and a burly Swede, led by Orona and a Peruvian assistant. The rising sun cast a shadow of Aconcagua's peak onto the valley below us.

At 21,000 feet, we came to a wooden shack known as "Refugio Independencia" (Independence Refuge), where we rested ten minutes and strapped on crampons to ascend a steep ice field that led to a ridge known as "Portezuelo del Viento" (Door of the Wind), aptly named because of its full exposure to the deafening wind. Orona warned that exposed skin would quickly suffer frostbite.

I felt I was drowning in the thin air, gasping for oxygen. I focused on Steve's climbing mantra, "pole, pole," and concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

At the end of the ridge, at nearly 22,000 feet, we rested beneath a rocky outcropping called "La Cueva" (The Cave). I could not eat because of nausea. I could not drink because my water froze. Orona offered a cup of tea from his Thermos. The Swedish climber tilted sideways and dozed off. The French climber looked at me and said, "I'm dead." Orona pointed to the summit several hundred feet above us and urged us on. We crept up a steep boulder-strewn area that led to a ridge alongside Aconcagua's south face—said to be the world's tallest wall.

Finally, twelve days into the expedition and eight hours after departing that morning from camp, I stepped atop the summit. I was the tallest point in the Western Hemisphere. All other peaks looked up to me. We hugged and posed for photos, but we didn't linger. There was no sign of the European runners Jornet and Forsberg; they had already turned back because of the increasing winds.

We returned to Camp Colera in four hours, half the time it took to reach the summit. Tents were collapsing under the force of the high winds, and the rest of our group had already retreated to base camp. The emergency shelter was full. We were exhausted and dehydrated, but the wind was too strong to light a stove to boil water or prepare dinner. Orona radioed the rangers at camp two, and they agreed to take us in. We repacked and descended another two hours.

The two rangers welcomed us into their dirt-floored tent as the sun was setting. They said only three other climbers reached the summit that day, whereas on good days the tally can be more than 100 people.. We recalled how we had passed a solo Canadian climber near the summit who appeared delirious, rambling and asking for water. The lead ranger, Oscar Mayorga,

shook his head disapprovingly: How could someone dare to climb alone, without adequate provisions, on such a fierce day? He recalled how the previous season the bodies of two Americans laid on the mountain for weeks before the rangers pulled them down during a break from the more important task of assisting climbers still alive “That’s our focus,” Mayorga said, “keeping people alive.”

The next day, gale-force winds and an incoming blizzard shut down all mountain activity. The rangers ordered all climbers down to base camp.

Months later, after the frostbite on my nose healed, and my fingertips regained feeling, I was back in the White Mountains. “I was so happy when you said you did the summit,” Phil told me as we camped at the Hermit Lake Shelters after a day of spring skiing around Tuckerman Ravine. I asked if he thought I’d acted recklessly in climbing Aconcagua without preparation, but he and Steve both said it was a “carpe-diem” approach. “You didn’t have time to obsess or fret over it,” Steve said. I told Steve how I felt that I had, in a way, carried on his torch to the summit after he was turned back by a blizzard years earlier. But he said climbing Aconcagua hadn’t been just about the summit. It was about the adventure.

“I didn’t go there just to get to the top,” he said. “That would have been icing on the cake. Going there, experiencing the mountain, being in that fellowship of the mountaineering community, and being on a big expedition, it was something I hadn’t experienced before. Being success-oriented is less important than just experiencing it and coming back alive.”

Steve had reminded me of a lesson from our first trip to Carter Notch: to enjoy the trail, to not obsess over preconceived assumptions about what success is. I’m not saying climbing a mountain isn’t about reaching the summit. It’s just that the summit doesn’t justify the adventure. An adventure justifies itself. That was the spirit that put Steve and Phil, and now me, on a path to Aconcagua.

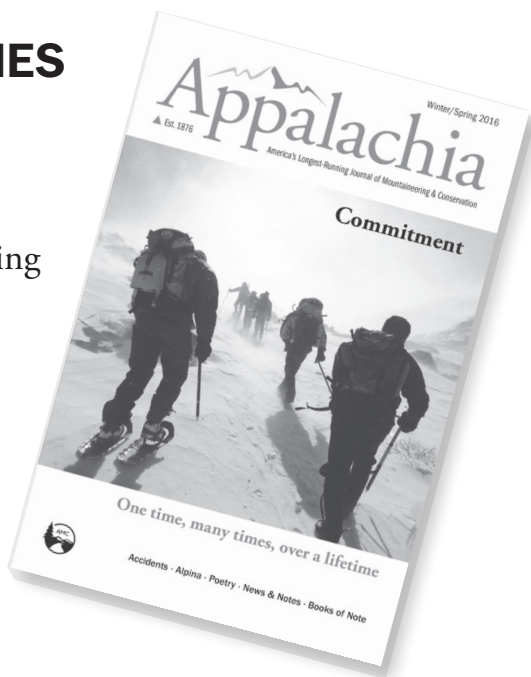
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