

19th DECEMBER - SUMMIT DAY

I heard the zipper of the tent go and Dorje came back inside to say that the weather was bad. I checked my watch and it was 1.00am. My heart sank and i tried to go back to sleep and not think about the repercussions of this bad weather at this stage.

The next time i woke up, it was 2.30am and i could hear the stove going - that meant our summit attempt was a go. Nervously i started to get ready to go, the winds were still apparent but it was clear outside. I got all my hand and foot warmers ready and managed to force down some plain oatmeal and by 3.30 am we said goodbye to Luis and Dorje and i headed on our way. Luis was going back down to basecamp in order to be able to get to Santiago to fly back to the states by 21st December. It was very windy as we made our way along the long traverse to Independencia pass. I was stopping every so often to rest and it was apparent to me that my body was tired and i was going to have to try and pace myself and focus hard on my goal. It took us about 3 hours to reach the place where camp 3 is normally established and fighting against the wind Dorje and i walked up to Independencia pass, where i seem to remember from my last climb here that there was a hut there. I was quite excited about the prospect of a sheltered rest from the icy winds in the hut i have to say.

I was wearing full face mask and my goggles and it had frozen to my hair and was forming an icicle across my face but i was too tired to change anything right now. We finally arrived at the hut and i almost cried with disappointment to see it was missing most of its planks and the wind was howling through it. Dorje and i hid behind some rocks and he helped me get a gu shot down me. I was tired but very determined at this stage to get to the top. We rested here for about 10 minutes with the wind howling around us making the temperature seem much colder than it probably actually was. Somehow i found the energy to get up and continue walking upwards to the traverse. The altitude was taking its toll and i was gasping for air at various intervals, my feet were numb and my hands were heading that way. We arrived at the ridge and i could see the traverse that takes us to the canalette, a sharp 2,000ft rocky slope that we need to ascend before reaching the summit. When we reached the ridge, the wind seemed to worsen if that was conceivably possible. I was trying to get myself into that zone whereby you feel removed from your body and all the pain and fatigue. Finally we reached the bottom of the canalette and slowly with me gasping at regular intervals for breath we headed up the final part of the climb. I was really talking to myself at this point in order to rationalise the pain i was feeling, i needed to stay focused and i was constantly reminding myself that i had done this mountain before. After 8 agonising hours of being battered by 80kph winds i arrived at the cross which indicates that you are now on the summit of Aconcagua.

I collapsed into a crumpled heap by the cross and just started whimpering on the ground. I still had this huge icicle of frozen hair across my face and i just lay there amazed that i had done it. I was trying hard to rustle up the energy to get out my sponsors flags in order for Dorje to take my summit photos for me. Dorje was a rock, he was so great and helped me get the flags out of my pack and take the pictures. I garbled a few words for the camera and then wondered how the hell was i going to get back down, i had zero energy right now. I stood up and thought i was going to pass out. I had another gu shot and started to put one foot in front of the other and head back down the mountain. Dorje decided to short rope me in case i stumbled and fell flying down the mountain. Amazingly enough i felt a little more energised and we began a fairly quick descent. After 3 hours we arrived back at camp 2. I burst into tears as soon as i heard my mothers voice on the phone, i was beyond exhausted now. Once in the tent i removed my boots and my feet were like solid blocks of ice, completely numb and weird feeling. I forced down some food and fell asleep, unbelievably happy that i had made the summit.