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### **Interview with a Mountaineer**

Until today, I assumed all mountaineers climbed to satiate an ever-increasing need to conquer nature thus feeding their control-hungry egos. I learned my generalizations fall short of the real motivations of at least one mountaineer named Trent.

Trent is a forty-year-old male who grew up in rural, central Iowa but now makes his home in suburban Spokane, Washington. He began climbing volcanoes in 1988. Since his first ascent on Mount St. Helens, Trent has climbed volcanoes not only in the U.S. but also in Mexico and Central America.

What prompted his interest in climbing and why an interest in volcanoes? He recalls, "I was living in Iowa at the time Mount St. Helens erupted and I remember watching the news on T.V. I thought, 'This is interesting stuff; I want to go see it.'" Trent remembers reading an article in 1988 published by *Outside* magazine describing a climbing route opened to the public providing access to the summit of Mount St. Helens for the first time since the eruption. His curiosity and interest in geology—especially volcanoes and volcanic formations—prompted him to call a friend in Seattle with whom he shared this interest.

Neither of them had previous experience in climbing, only backpacking. When arriving at the base of the volcano, they witnessed the various groups and individuals climbing the route, and read the posted signs noting the “moderate” difficulty of the climb; they felt more than qualified to make the trip. Four hours later, the sunburned duo stood at the rim of the crater looking down into the still-active volcano. “We had a great learning experience and from that moment I was hooked,” states Trent with a grin a mile wide.

Since that first experience, Trent has spent hundreds of hours physically training. He has also spent thousands of dollars on training seminars and climbs learning the technical skills necessary for survival at and above 20,000 feet, as well as guide services, and specialized equipment. Trent feels this monetary investment in planning and preparation for a major climb enhances his experiences. “Being prepared physically isn’t enough. You won’t be comfortable or survive if your technical skills are lacking or your equipment is second-rate.”

Besides “training, trying out new gear, and refining your system,” Trent also enjoys pouring over guidebooks, literature on the local geology, and climbing route maps in preparation for his experiences. Much of the trip is carefully planned out yet some decisions may be deferred until reaching the final destination (e.g., weather may dictate which route(s) are open/closed, safe/more dangerous).

Trent uses a variety of means to reach his destinations. Automobile and airplanes make up the primary modes of transportation to and from his climbs. Often the route to his destination is indirect. Since his philosophy is: “if you don’t stop to do or try something along the way, you may never get the chance to do or try it again,” acclimation

days may consist of venturing into local rural areas to hike, shop in a street market, or stay in an interesting village overnight. Each may take place at varying altitudes in preparation for even higher elevations on the volcano and each enhances the total experience.

While participating in his climbs, several preferences play a vital role in the resultant satisfaction/dissatisfaction he experiences. Trent concedes that, “When I first started climbing, summiting was the ultimate goal; it was the link between success and failure of a trip for me. Now I have other goals such as making the climb as technically efficient as possible, traveling safely and comfortably, and constantly improving my skills through increasing challenges. Ultimately, the *experience* is the goal, not the summit. Face it, the only really great climbers are those living because they know when to turn and go back down.”

He prefers the physical setting to be interesting and challenging so as to change the mental and technical challenges he will face. It is that mental challenge, “being on the edge” as he states, which adds satisfaction to his experience. He prefers isolated routes to minimize contact between other climbing parties as well as, climbing in a group of no less than three (due to safety reasons) and no more than six people. More than six tends to make planning a trip very difficult due to so many individual schedules and preferences to work around. Other social preferences include the choice of climbing party members and whether or not to go as a guided or unguided group. Trent prefers a “good ratio of experience and inexperienced people” and “a balance of guided and unguided trips.” “This way” he says, “you can learn a lot from those others’ experiences and their techniques as well as test your own skills.”

When asked if he had any preferences or expectations about management of the areas he visits he replied, “No. I do what I need to do; I conform to whatever is required to do so that I can experience the climb I came to do. Besides, I know why these places need to have management—rules and regulations. Some of these places would get trashed worse than they already are if no management took place.” I then asked how management differed from his U.S. trips versus his Mexico and Central America climbs and whether or not the management added to or detracted from his experience. He noted that the U.S. tends to manage with more rules and regulations and that the areas are more developed (signage, parking, amenities) whereas, Mexico and Central America managed less aggressively and with little development. He felt, “The more primitive management can add to an experience but having more ranger information and impact management can add to the experience, too.”

Overall, what adds to Trent’s satisfaction is “good attitudes of others” in the climbing party, “good weather and proper gear so you are prepared and are as comfortable as can be.” What he feels detracts from his satisfaction are people on the climb “not prepared with proper gear and they complain of their discomforts or don’t have the skills they boasted of or experience they made themselves out to have.”

Travel back home after the climb can bring added satisfaction to the recreational experience. Many times he treats himself to a “hot shower, a cold beer,” and a gourmet meal with “lots of fresh veggies!” There have been other climbs where the goal is merely to “survive the drive” home. As Trent points out to me, “Many times the drive home is more dangerous than the climb since you’re exhausted from the physical and mental stresses. It’s hard to stay awake.” The drive home sometimes includes making stops at

camping areas to consider for a future trip as well as, Forest Service headquarters and visitor centers to gather maps and other information to use in future trip-planning.

“Sometimes,” Trent admits, “I take a small summit rock from my climb as a souvenir. I can look at it, hold it, and relive the experience.” He also writes while on the trip. After returning home, he looks back at his journal notes and writes more detailed entries. A year or so later he may return to those same entries and construct entire stories out of them. All these things help him to recall his experiences climbing volcanoes.

When asked whether he considers himself an “expert” he replies, “No. I consider myself a recreational climber. I am an expert in controls because that’s what I do forty hours a week.” He considers all the time and money invested in climbing to be well worth the experiences he has had, that a climb is not a success or failure based on making the summit but rather on making it back down alive off a challenging climb, and that the benefits on any trip are “the contacts—the people—you meet that can lead to special bonding and other chances to climb other places.”

He started planning his next climb while participating in the last climb; this is standard for him. One trip is just another climb training him for something more. He and the others in the group pick each others’ brains for planning and gear tips as well as, where they all plan to climb next. As for Trent, he will attend a one-week, ice-climbing seminar in Colorado next month. This will refresh his skills for when he tackles Denali in June of 2002. He promises not to take a “summit souvenir” and I promise never to generalize mountaineers as egotistical, nature-conquering, control-mongers.