

BACK-COUNTRY



During the Alaska Adventure, organizers had the opportunity to test rope systems for glacier travel and crevasse rescue to help people with disabilities inch closer to their goals.

BOUNTY

by Sylvie Fadrhonc



DREW LUDWIG

What started as a typical winter-sports program has blossomed into a place people can heli-ski or handcycle down a winding Utah trail.

During summer 2009, six athletes set out from all corners of the United States to convene in the remote Alaskan wilderness to break new ground in the realm of back-country access for people with disabilities. Participants came with a range of stories and experiences, from recently injured veterans to a seasoned mountaineer who sustained a traumatic brain

The energy surrounding the Alaska ventures seemed to leave resounding effects with everyone.

injury during a climbing accident. They joined together as part of the Second Annual Alaska Adventure, organized by the Telluride Adaptive Sports Program (TASP) of southwestern Colorado.

TASP partnered with Mountain Trip Guides, an internationally recognized guide service, to offer a seemingly impossible trip for adaptive adventurers. Together they pioneered a new movement in adaptive recreation, opening a whole new level of back-country access to people with disabilities.

The 2010 expedition began in the small outpost of Talkeetna, Alaska (gateway to Denali National Park). The team flew by bush plane to the Pika Glacier in the Alaska Range. Here, Mountain Trip



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The group flew by bush plane to Pika Glacier in the Alaska Range and learned what it takes to live among and travel within Alaska's glaciated mountains. Rope travel while on skis, crevasse rescue, rope ascension, and self-care were covered.

EMILY WILBERT



Mono-skier Keith Pendill (right) and Tim McGough plan their descent after being towed into Prospect Basin, located in Telluride (Colo.) Ski Resort.

guides and TASP personnel spent six days facilitating the exploration of an area known as Little Switzerland, with the objective of learning the safety and care it takes to live among and travel within Alaska's glaciated mountains. Rope travel while on skis, crevasse rescue, rope ascension, and self care were just a few of the daily topics covered while exploring the landscape.

At the end of the glacier tour, the expedition team departed Little Switzerland in ski planes (provided by Talkeetna

Air Taxi) for Talkeetna. The following day the group traveled with a local riverboat service up the Talkeetna River. After a day of salmon fishing on the river, the team left its outpost, returning to Anchorage for flights home.

Cultivating Opportunities

TASP is a nonprofit organization that provides therapeutic recreation opportunities to people with physical and cognitive disabilities. The group began as a ski and snowboard school in 1996,

expanding in early 2006 to offer summer programs—rafting, kayaking, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, and camping—and in 2009 to provide destination travel. TASP came together with fellow Telluride outfitter Mountain Trip in 2008 when 5-year-old Logan Rutledge, a local adaptive student, was learning to ski with TASP. Logan's

Participants came with a range of stories and experiences, from recently injured veterans to a seasoned mountaineer who sustained a traumatic brain injury during a climbing accident.

father, Todd, fell in love with TASP's services and wanted to do something to show his appreciation.

Todd, the owner of Mountain Trip, a guide service that operates internationally and reportedly has led more climbers to the summit of Mount McKinley than any other outfitter, approached TASP regarding offering a fully guided mountaineering trip for adaptive athletes in Alaska. After extensive logistical planning meetings, TASP and Mountain Trip proposed the first-ever Alaska Adventure to take place in July 2009.

While cultivation of the new venture in Alaska was a first for TASP, the group

was not new to offering unique programs to people with physical disabilities. Since its inception, TASP has offered an annual Expand Your Horizons! ski camp for intermediate to advanced skiers and snowboarders with physical disabilities.



TASP's annual ski camp began with just a few wheelchair athletes on groomed terrain and has evolved into a state-of-the-art program for 20–25 individuals. Currently, the camp offers participants access to back-country hike-to terrain and heli-skiing opportunities.

In addition to Expand Your Horizons!, TASP also began offering rock and ice climbing in partnership with local outfitter San Juan Outdoor School.

With growing interest in more extreme sports and back-country access for people with disabilities, TASP and Mountain Trip believed the Alaska Adventure would provide an incredible progression in the adaptive sports industry.



National Park. The trip was an astounding success. One participant reflected on her experience in a Telluride newspaper

Whether a day hike or multi-day venture, I loved getting off the beaten track and into the part of the mountains only

Participants had the opportunity to enjoy a back-country glacier mountaineering trip to previously inaccessible areas of Alaskan wilderness.

article published in August 2009:

“From a personal standpoint, I felt overwhelmed with gratitude for being able to experience firsthand Alaska in its most primitive state,” she said. “Prior to my spinal-cord injury in September 2007, I was a climbing and hiking guide in Telluride and found enormous pleasure in any back-country excursion.

Experiencing it Firsthand

As logistics unfolded between Mountain Trip and its partners in Alaska, TASP was presented with a unique opportunity to offer a back-country glacier mountaineering trip to previously inaccessible gems of Alaskan wilderness. The trip was designed to be an education-focused introduction to glacier living and travel for novice athletes.

TASP and Mountain Trip set out on July 17, 2009, on the inaugural expedition with a team of 12 (4 adaptive participants: 3 had spinal-cord injuries and 1 a traumatic brain injury) to the Coffee Glacier in Denali

The energy surrounding the Alaska ventures seemed to leave resounding effects with everyone.





Amanda Young says the adventure taught her to not function, but thrive in the Alaska environment.



The group enjoyed great times despite bad weather that prevented them from completing all their planned adventures.

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accessible by foot. While I have maintained that passion for the outdoors since my injury, I still miss the ability to reach the trails and peaks around me that were once just a few hours hike away. Being in remote Alaska restored my own inner vitality and belief that I could still experience what I thought was untouchable from a wheelchair.”

TASP program director Tim McGough spearheaded the Alaska Adventure.

“The success of our inaugural 2009 expedition to the Coffee Glacier proved to the adaptive and mountaineering community that this sort of thing is possible—individuals in wheelchairs can access the glaciers of Alaska with limitless success,” says McGough. “Having this achievement behind us, we filled two ten-day expeditions for the summer of 2010 to the Pika Glacier with bigger objectives and a more mountain-skills-based curriculum that one would expect in any world-class mountaineering course in Alaska or the Himalayas, able-bodied or not. We’re proud to shape a new way of

After a day of salmon fishing on the river, the team returned to Anchorage for flights home.

looking at these glacier systems that were once thought out of reach by individuals in wheelchairs.”

Offering more trips in 2010 allowed TASP to invite additional participants

and extend the experience to six athletes (two with SCI, two with traumatic brain injury, one with spina bifida, and one with a visual impairment). While two returned from the 2009 trip, the majority were experiencing Alaska for the first time.

James Colt, one of the returning participants and a long-time mountaineer before his rock-climbing injury in 2006, said Alaska has allowed him to push toward his goal of “regaining some sense of what my life was like before (my brain injury).”

For Amanda Young, a new athlete with spinal bifida joining the 2010 expedition, Alaska taught her to “not function, but thrive” in a seemingly unfor- giving environment.

The energy surrounding the Alaska ventures seemed to leave resounding effects with everyone. Steve Hodges, one of the participants with SCI, said, “I knew when I got on the plane to fly home, that I wanted to come back.” He



TIM MCGOUGH

plans to return to Alaska this summer.

Lead guides Drew Ludwig and Kevin Koprak agreed that taking adaptive athletes into the Alaska Range “rejuvenated their will to guide.”

TASP and Mountain Trip had the chance to evolve rope systems for glacier travel and crevasse rescue to help people with disabilities inch closer to their goals. The added experience on the glacier has also enabled the two groups to work toward creating a more

objective-focused trip in 2011 to complement the more novice, education-focused ones offered in years past.

TIM MCGOUGH



Darol Kubacz enjoys trailblazing through treacherous Utah terrain.

chair athletes with SCI and neurological disease in a four-day camp featuring three days of intense riding on classic Moab trails. As a rest day, the crew floated the world-famous Westwater Canyon, which presented class III-IV rapids and some of the most stunning canyon scenery outside the Grand Canyon.

“We’re proud to have successfully completed this first annual camp,”

says McGough. “While researching another high-caliber adventure like Expand Your Horizons! and Alaska Adventure, we

“I can’t think of anything that has been accomplished by an able-bodied athlete that couldn’t be accomplished by an adap-

The group began as a ski and snowboard school in 1996, expanding in early 2006 to offer summer programs—rafting, kayaking, hiking, mountain biking, rock climbing, camping—and in 2009 to provide destination travel.

tive athlete when a sufficient amount of time is available,” says Ludwig.

Successful & Determined

The buzz of energy from Alaska led TASP to continue offering unique “off the grid” trips. In September 2010, TASP organized an adventure to Moab, Utah, for off-road handcyclists using their newly acquired One-Off handcycles (courtesy of the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation). TASP supported four wheel-

thought a Moab handbike trip would present a unique set of obtainable challenges.”

With sheer determination and strength, the athletes completed the experience with incredible respect for the terrain and left with hopes this event would grow into the future.

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A four-day off-road camp featured riding on Moab, Utah, trails filled with stunning scenery.