



the small stuff

By McKenzie Long

A Trip Report & Mini-Guide for Small Peaks in the Alaska Range

After two eventless days of walking back and forth through fog and rain between the Talkeetna Air Taxi office and the bunk house, and eating random food abandoned in the bunk house kitchen, we were finally assigned a flight. Luke and I quickly changed into our mountaineering boots, stashed our sneakers and jeans in a backpack, and began lugging our huge duffle bags to the plane; a small Otter that only fits four people plus the pilot. Another couple was flying with us, and we chatted with them as we heaved our bags into the plane. It turns out we had the same fly-in and fly-out dates and both of our teams were planning to stay near Kahiltna basecamp, climbing peaks around there.

Luke said “Cool, we are pretty much on the same program.” The woman crossed her arms.

“No. We plan to climb much bigger peaks than you.”

Luke and I did have our sights set on smaller objectives in the Alaska Range. Everything there is enormous, even the little mountains, and for my first time climbing in Alaska I hoped to successfully summit some of the more modest peaks and experience the climbing style of that region.





Radio Control Tower

Luke Lydiard on the summit of Radio Control Tower.

Radio Control Tower sits above the east side of basecamp, obscuring the view into the Southeast Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier, and is an easy, non-committing peak. It does still require the navigation of objective hazards such as crevasses and seracs. Due to its close proximity and easy grade, it makes the perfect warm-up climb, especially for someone like myself who has never climbed in Alaska.

Luke and I skied out on the glacier between RCT and Mt. Frances in the morning with the goal of ditching our poop bag in a crevasse (which is shockingly what the Park Service actually directs you to do.) After completing this all-important mission, we looked towards RCT and decided that since we were already most of the way there, we should climb it. A guided group was already making its way to the top, so we realized it was going to be even easier: we could follow their bootpack up the snow ridge. Navigating our way around a few large crevasses, we skied quickly under the serac on the west side of RCT. The guided group had left their snowshoes at the base where the vertical climbing began, and we followed suit, ditching our skis but remaining roped up.

I started up the climb, with two pickets dangling from my harness, following the footsteps of the group in front of us. The climbing consists of walking up a snowy ridge edge, which can be narrow at points, and has a few steeper sections mixed in. After traveling over a few rises and dips, it reaches a broad, flat summit with excellent views into the Southeast Fork of the glacier, with Mt. Hunter to the left and Mt. Foraker on the right.

Somehow, standing on the summit in this grand setting made me feel especially miniature.



RADIO CONTROL TOWER (POINT 8,670)

Elevation: 8,670'

Elevation Gain: 1,500'

Distance from Basecamp: Less than a mile, approximately half an hour ski

Route climbed: East Ridge (Standard Route)

Difficulty: Walk-up, easy glacier travel

Descent: Reverse the route

Time Required: Half day

Protection: Rope, 2-3 pickets, 2-3 slings



Where we left our skis to start climbing, The route goes up to the left of the photo. Foraker is in the background.



Looking down on the lower half of the climb from above. Kahiltna Queen is in the background.



Looking up at the upper half of the climb, with the rises and falls in the ridge, from below. Foraker is in the background.



McKenzie climbing up Radio Control Tower's East Ridge.



Point Farine

Luke and McKenzie on the summit of Point Farine with Denali behind.

Point Farine sits as a proud, perfect triangle, a slight apex surrounded by giants. It stands right above Ski Hill Camp, the first camp climbers attempting Denali reach, about five miles from basecamp. We decided to ski to the base and camp in the bowl below the peak to enjoy the glacier from a new, solitary aspect.

We woke early, brewed strong coffee, and began ascending a snow field to gain the ridge, starting our climb before the snow had a chance to soften. On many peaks we had been experiencing sugary, unconsolidated snow that was difficult to move through and quite frightening due to its lack of solidity, so our goal was to climb up and down this peak before the snow became soft and sloppy from the intense sun. We crunched up the snow in our crampons, one ice axe each, relieved that it felt firm beneath our feet.

Once we gained the ridge, we were faced with piles of loose, dark rock forming a knife-edge. I carefully navigated the first few loose sections, scraping stone with my crampon points and testing each big block carefully with gloved fingers. Eventually we wound our way to more solid, wider terrain where snow covered the ridge.

We plodded up the last steep snow section to the summit, sweating in the reflected, microwave-world sun. Only allowing ourselves a brief celebratory moment to eat a snack and take some photos, we turned around and returned the way we came, racing the sunlight, hoping to make it down before the snow deteriorated in its warmth.

Satisfied, we skied back to basecamp in the never-ending sunlight.

POINT FARINE (POINT 9,300)

Elevation: 9,300'

Elevation Gain: 1,500'

Distance from Basecamp: About a 5 mile ski (a couple hours) just before Denali's first camp, Ski Hill Camp

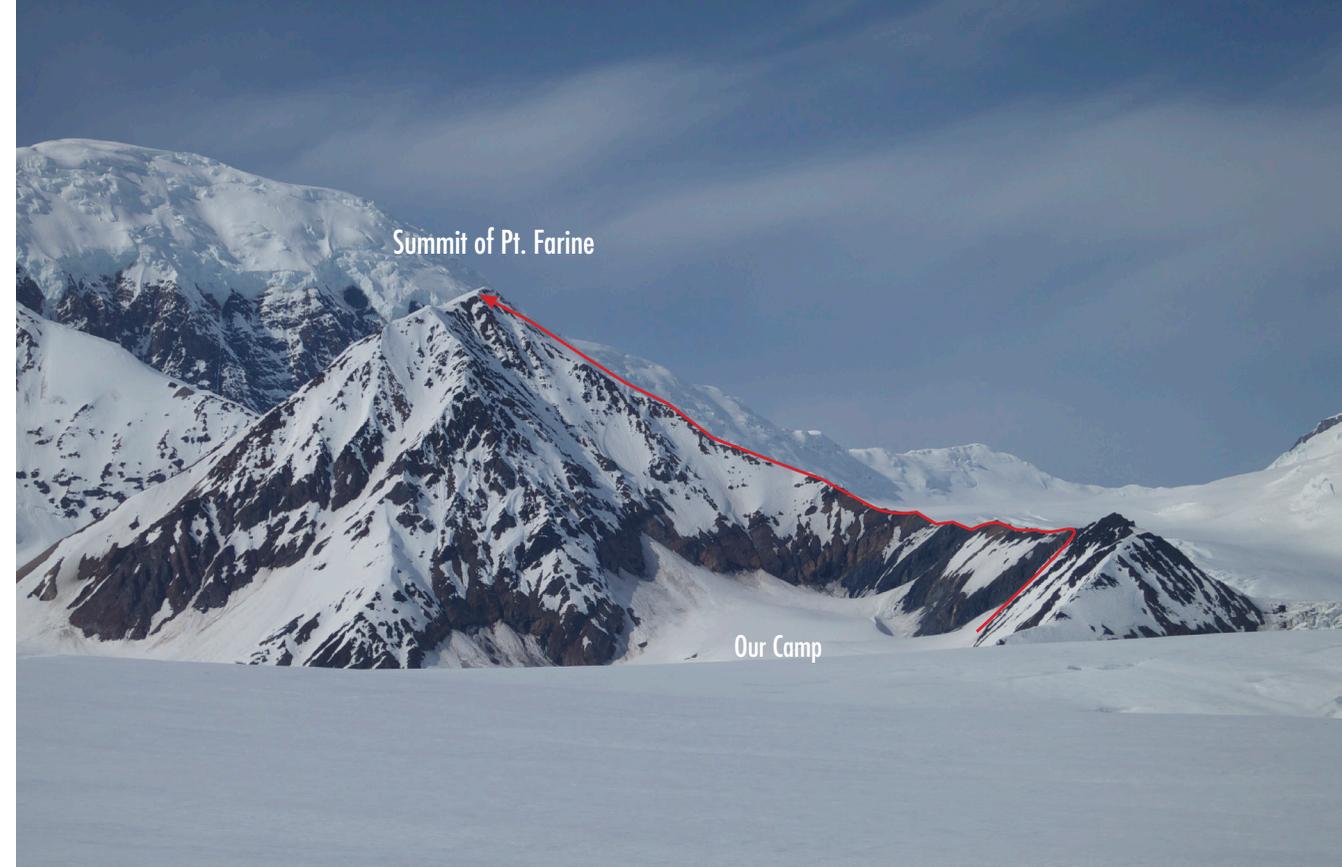
Route climbed: Southeast Ridge

Difficulty: Ridge walk, scramble

Descent: Reverse the route

Time Required: Full day from basecamp, can be done with a camp at the base

Protection: 2 pickets, slings, minimal rock gear



The snowfield behind Luke is the start of the route. We climbed the snowfield to gain the ridge, then headed left along it.



Luke climbing after we gained the ridgeline. Mt. Frances is behind.



McKenzie leading on the ridge during the climb. Denali looms to the right.



McKenzie descending the ridge with the climb stretched out before her.



Mount Frances

McKenzie at an awesome belay stance on the Southwest Ridge of Mt. Frances.

We attempted Frances three times. It sits lazily above basecamp, dwarfed by the monsters that surround it. From camp the summit is not visible, and the false summit doesn't seem far away. The Southwest Ridge of Frances seemed like a deceptively easy objective.

At first, the climbing on the SW Ridge went smoothly. We made it through most of the technical rock sections, finding the pitches exciting and fun, and felt that we were on track to summit, only to be turned around by a broken crampon bale. After acquiring a new bale plus extra replacements, we went back. This time the climbing went even faster since we knew exactly where we were going. Shortly after the place where we turned around the first time, the route traverses onto the west side of the peak and ascends low-angled snow to regain the ridge. In other conditions this section would be easy and fast, instead we found ourselves wallowing in a few feet of insecure, unconsolidated snow with no protection. I pushed my boundaries of comfort and skill, leading the scariest pitches I have ever climbed. After a few time-consuming, nerve-fraying pitches, we regained the ridge, where we reevaluated how long the rest of the climb would take. One more technical rock section and over a mile of snow-walking up the ridge remained. We made the decision not to wallow through sugar snow for a mile, knowing it would take us much longer than we had planned for.

We eventually made the summit of Frances via the East Ridge. This route has less technical portions than the SW Ridge, and is mostly a snow climb that requires navigating crevasses, climbing some brief, low-angle ice steps, and one notably steep but short snow pitch. The different aspect allowed for firmer snow conditions, and we started early to avoid the soft evening snow. Proudly we stood on the summit, which is spectacularly centered between the titans: Denali, Hunter, and Foraker.

What a rare and special place to be.



MOUNT FRANCES: SOUTHWEST RIDGE

Elevation: 10,450'

Elevation Gain: 3,600'

Distance from Basecamp: 1-2 miles (30-45 min ski)

Route climbed: Southwest Ridge (attempted twice)

Difficulty: IV, 5.8, 60 degree snow

Descent: Descend the East Ridge

Time Required: 1-3 days

Protection: 2 pickets, 3-4 ice screws, slings, small alpine rack (4-6 cams and nuts)

False Summit of Mt. Frances



Notch
(our high point)



The route begins by heading up the snowfield on the right of this photo.



Luke navigating a snow and rock ridge.



McKenzie leading a 5.7 technical rock pitch.



It doesn't look like much, but this is the scariest pitch McKenzie has ever led: unconsolidated snow on top of granite slab.

MOUNT FRANCES: EAST RIDGE

Elevation: 10,450'

Elevation Gain: 3,600'

Distance from Basecamp: About 1 mile (30-45 min ski)

Route climbed: East Ridge

Difficulty: Sidge walk, snow and glacier travel, easy ice steps

Descent: Reverse the route

Time Required: 1/2-1 full day from basecamp

Protection: 2 pickets, 2 ice screws, slings



McKenzie skiing towards the East Ridge of Frances.



Luke climbing the East Ridge towards a large cornice.



Luke downclimbing the crux: a steep snow and ice step.



McKenzie and Luke on the summit of Frances with Denali behind.



Mini-Mini-Moonflower

Luke Lydiard at the top of the crux ice hose pitch on Bacon & Eggs.

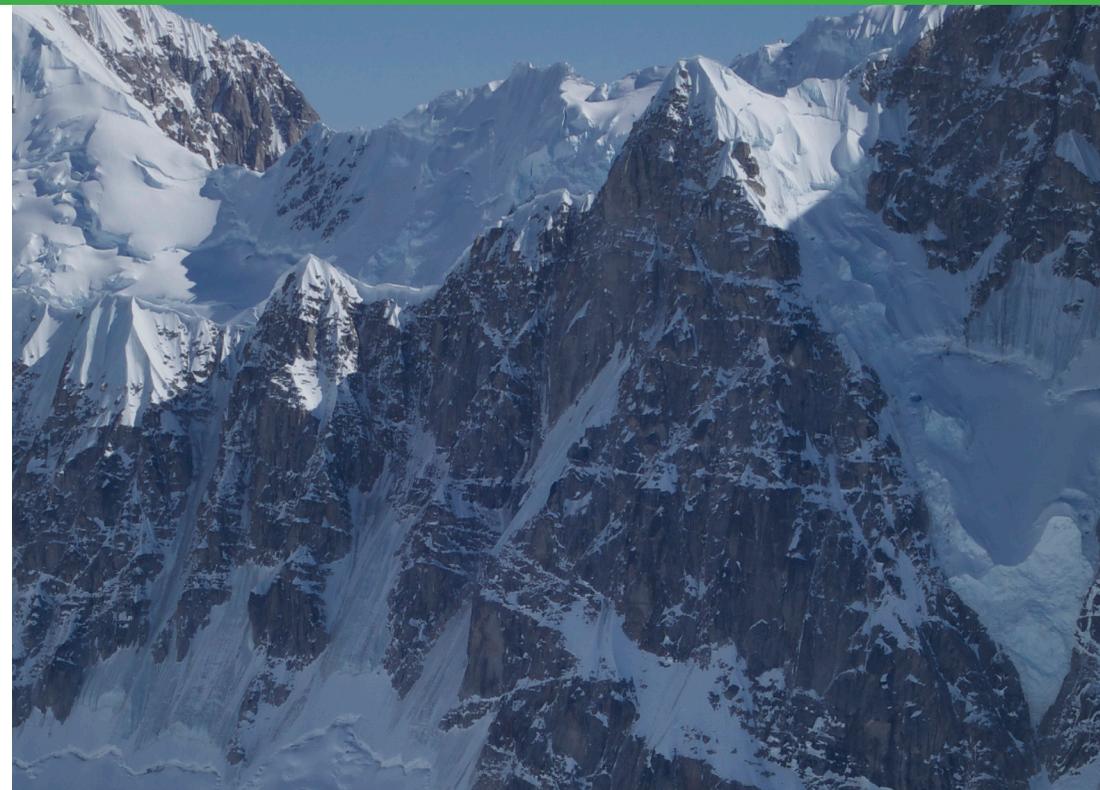
Called the Mini-Mini-Moonflower, what appears as a tiny nub on a much longer and taller ridge is anything but mini. It is a sub-buttress of the monolith Mt. Hunter, which rises to 14,573 feet and is known colloquially as the hardest 14er in North America. To provide some perspective, the Moonflower route (the North Buttress of Hunter) is 6,100 feet tall and typically takes 4+ days to climb. El Cap is around 3,000 feet tall, so less than half the height, and still often takes around 4 days for many climbers. The Mini-Moonflower North Couloir route and Bacon & Eggs up the Mini-Mini-Moonflower are both close to 2,000 feet tall, on par with Half Dome's Northwest Face.

So, in keeping with our theme of climbing small things, we skied right past the Moonflower to the Mini-Mini-Moonflower. (During our trip, the Mini-Moonflower's crux, which is usually a steep ice pitch, was dry.)

Bacon and Eggs begins by navigating around a large schrund, crossing it on a small snow bridge, and then traverses the snow/ice line along a rock slab to gain a relatively low angled ice shield. Shivering in the shade, we swung leads up the brittle ice shield, aiming towards an impressive ice hose which wound its way narrowly through a rock chimney. According to the route descriptions we read, this was listed as the route crux, though the snowier pitches above could still present some major difficulty, especially if it was as unconsolidated as the snow we found on Frances.

We made it to the top of the awesome, narrow ice hose and decided to come down. A route this long is a quite feat to climb in one day anywhere (think the Regular Route on Half Dome, which Luke and I have done together), and 1,500+ feet of ice climbing tends to take even longer than rock climbing. Luke is a very strong ice climber, but neither of us felt that climbing that far and fast in one day was within our abilities for this trip. We contented ourselves with several pitches of fun, steep ice, and decided to head back to camp.

Goal: climb a route this big (**mini?**) in a day.



MINI-MINI-MOONFLOWER: BACON & EGGS

Elevation: ~10,000'

Elevation Gain: 1,500'+

Distance from Basecamp: Approximately 3 miles from basecamp (1-2 hour ski)

Route climbed: Bacon and Eggs (climbed several pitches)

Difficulty: III/IV, AI4, 85° ice and snow

Descent: Rappel with V-threads

Time Required: Should be done in 1 day, usually with a camp near the base

Protection: 8-10 ice screws, small alpine rack (4-6 cams and nuts), slings, optional picket



McKenzie following the first pitch, which navigates around a schrund at the base to gain an ice shield.



Luke following a pitch on the lower ice shield.



Luke leading up the steep and narrow ice hose pitch.



McKenzie about to rappel over the schrund at the base of Mini-Mini.