

outdoor magazine



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Volume 02 • Issue 07 • November 2010

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The View from the Top: Guiding with Conscience

Alpenglow Expeditions Founder Adrian Ballinger on ascent, industry and responsibility

BY JULIE JIGOUR

A mountaineer of over 15 years, Adrian Ballinger has led over 70 international expeditions on five continents. The founder and head guide of Alpenglow Expeditions is certified by the American Mountain Guides Association and the International Federation of Mountain Guides Associations. He has accomplished successful solo climbs of some of the highest peaks in the world and guided three of the world's tallest peaks: Everest, Manaslu and Cho Oyu. We were fortunate enough to get in touch with Ballinger at base camp after an especially intense summit of Manaslu in Nepal.

Congratulations on your most recent summit of Manaslu. How was that climb?

Thanks! I love Manaslu as a peak. There are always way fewer teams on the mountain than on Everest, and the challenges of route finding, rope fixing, and avalanche hazard management are pretty serious. So, as a guide I end up spending a lot of time up front on the hill, working alongside the sherpa. These are some of my favorite days in the mountains—moving fast, working hard, surrounded by sherpa climbers that love their job and take a huge amount of pride in making the mountain accessible for our members.

How did you face the challenge of the especially windy weather?

The wind was a big challenge. In a normal year there is a period of a few days to a couple of weeks of good, dry, windless weather between the end of the monsoon and the start of winter. This year the winds came in right as the moisture moved out. We went up for our summit bid in what looked like the best window, but still with some high winds (up to 60 mph) predicted, along with very low temperatures. Getting to Camp 4 at 24,500 feet was a really hard day, with high winds all day and lots of climbers turning around and descending. We pushed through and spent a tough but safe night tucked into our tents with the wind pounding relentlessly.

Then, we had a lucky chance. The winds dropped a bit as the sun rose and we made a dash for it. With the cold temps we gave everyone the maximum possible flow of oxygen and then we pushed hard. We were lucky to have a strong team that really stepped up. They understood the small window and worked super hard, enabling us to reach the true summit as a tight team, and get back off quickly. About 45 minutes after our summit a huge wind plume developed off the summit. And that was it, the window was closed and summits on Manaslu were done for the 2010 season.

Tell us a little about yourself. How did you get into mountaineering?

I've been lucky to have incredible mentors and opportunities. My first trips were backpacking in the White Mountains with my father. This quickly went to the next level of technical rock climbing and mountaineering with my best friend growing up, Greg Childs. He was like my brother (I spent summers and many

winter snow days living with his family) and my hero—he already climbed and skied when I met him, and I spent the all of my teenage years just trying to keep up with him (unsuccessfully for the most part). It just kept going from there.

When I was 17 I had the opportunity to climb my first high altitude peaks, in Ecuador. I summited Cotopaxi (19,347 feet) and Chimborazo (20,565 feet). On Cotopaxi I got really severe altitude sickness, vomiting and hallucinating most of the way up, and needing some serious help from my teammates to get back down. I swore I would never do it again. Five days later I found myself back up high on Chimborazo and loving every minute. My body broke through whatever barrier it had and I felt so strong. And that was it. I knew I needed to keep



Alpenglow guides return to camp on Manaslu after a successful summit

doing these big peaks, preferably by more and more technical routes. That was 15 years ago and I've been climbing full-time ever since.

At what age did you start guiding, and why?

Climbing pretty quickly morphed into guiding. I knew I wanted to teach in whatever field I ended up in, and that fit really well with my climbing. By age 19 I was taking people rock and ice climbing. As soon as I finished college, I started guiding high altitude climbs.

How do you feel IFMGA and UIAGM certifications have improved your guiding?

The certification forces guides to study every detail of their guiding style, techniques, and decision-making in challenging and varied environments. To gain full IFMGA/UIAGM certification (which I did in 2008) you have to excel on ski, alpine, and rock terrain. The process itself takes years. I found working and training with lots of different guides from around the world really broadened my skill set, and of course I made some great friends.

In your experience on the mountain, what innovations in equipment have particularly impressed you?

A few innovations have really changed the sport since I've been involved—hydration systems, LED headlamps, carbohydrate gels, and insulated leather/synthetic boots come to mind immediately. As categories these things have made our sport easier, lighter, and safer. And those things mean it's all more fun!

Can you tell us about your plans for the Ama Dablam clean up expedition in November?

The total expedition is about a month long, with about three weeks on the mountain itself.



Ballinger celebrates a successful summit on top of Manaslu (26,759 ft.)


We have three focuses—removing old fixed ropes from the route, encouraging and teaching the use of human waste disposal systems (to western climbers and Sherpa), and of course removing accumulated trash from the camps and mountain. The group is a mix of friends, sherpa, and guides, all competent in the mountains and ready to work hard.

What message would you like to send the outdoor industry about the importance of these kinds of projects?

We have a huge responsibility to the Himalaya. Many American climbers seem to hold to a very different ethic when in the mountains in the USA versus the mountains here in the Himalaya. We need to treat these peaks with the same respect and care that we treat our own, even though it is more work here, and

more expensive. I hope our Ama Dablam trip can serve as a model for other expeditions, and this is why a big focus of our effort is outreach to other teams and especially their sherpa. If the sherpa get behind the removal of fixed ropes each season and the use of human waste disposal bags, then we will see more permanent and meaningful change!

What are your plans for the future of Alpenglow Expeditions?

We plan to continue offering the absolute highest level of mountaineering and trekking expeditions around the world, and to do it in a sustainable manner. Alpenglow Expeditions is growing as a company, but all of our trips will continue to be led by a small group of certified guides, with local partners that are also our good friends. 



Guides camp perched on the knife-edge of the Southwest Ridge of Ama Dablam

Alpenglow Expeditions

Adrian Ballinger founded Alpenglow Expeditions in 2004 after working for a decade as a guide. He was inspired by a desire to bring the focus of guiding back to teaching mountaineering skills, rather than tagging summits. Alpenglow has made itself the first U.S. guiding service to require AMGA/IFMGA certification from all of its lead guides.



Alpenglow's expeditions vary in difficulty and length. The following are a few of the upcoming programs scheduled for 2011:

Difficulty Level 1: Trekking

Torres del Paine, Patagonia \$3,850 (land costs, including all meals) February 11, 2011 – February 20, 2011	Kilimanjaro, Summer Climb, Tanzania \$4,150 (land costs, including all meals) July 16, 2011 – July 25, 2011
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Difficulty Level 2: Introductory

Cotopaxi, Ecuador \$2,450 (land costs, including all meals) January 8, 2011 – January 16, 2011	Mount Elbrus, Russia \$4,950 (land costs, including all meals and internal flights) July 30, 2011 – August 14, 2011
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Difficulty Level 3: Intermediate

Pisco and Chopicalqui, Peru \$3,750 (land costs, including all meals) June 22, 2011 – July 10, 2011	Aconcagua, Argentina \$4,650 (land costs, including all meals) January 22, 2011 – February 13, 2011
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Difficulty Level 4: Advanced

Alpamayo and Quitaraju, Peru \$4,450 (land costs, including all meals) July 9, 2011 – July 24, 2011	Everest, Nepal €40,000 (land costs, including all meals) March 28, 2011 – June 6, 2011
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For the full list of expeditions planned for 2011, visit Alpenglow Expeditions online at: alpenglowexpeditions.com