

TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS • PHYSICAL PREPARATION • MENTAL PREPARATION • JUDGMENT AND EXPERIENCE • CARING FOR THE WILDERNESS • PRESERVING WILDERNESS • A CLIMBING CODE • GAINING THE FREEDOM OF THE HILLS



## CHAPTER 1

# FIRST STEPS

**Mountaineering is many things: climbing, breathtaking views, and wilderness experience. It can be the fulfillment of childhood dreams or an opportunity to grow in the face of difficulty. Mountains harbor adventure and mystery. The challenge of mountaineering offers you a chance to learn about yourself by venturing beyond the confines of the modern world and to forge lifetime bonds with climbing partners.**

In the words of British climber George Leigh Mallory, “What we get from this adventure is just sheer joy.” To be sure, you will also find risk and hardship, but despite the difficulties climbers sometimes face—or maybe because of them—mountaineering can provide a sense of tranquility and spiritual communion found nowhere else. But before you find joy or freedom in the hills, you must prepare for the mountains by learning technical, physical, mental, and emotional skills. Just as you must take a first step in order to climb a mountain, you must also take first steps to become a mountaineer. And though becoming skilled in the mountains is a process that continues as long as

you spend time there, you have to begin somewhere. This book can serve as your guide and reference in acquiring those skills and, as such, your passport to the freedom of the hills.

## **TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS**

To travel safely and enjoyably in the mountains, you need skills. You need to know what clothing, basic equipment, and food to bring into the backcountry and how to spend the night outside safely. You need to know how to cover long distances while relying on only what you carry in your pack, navigating without trails or signs. You need technical climbing skills, including belaying (the technique of securing your rope partner in case of a fall) and rappelling (using the rope to descend), to competently scale and descend the mountains you reach. And you must have the specific skills for the terrain you choose—whether it is rock, snow, ice, or glacier. Mountaineers strive to minimize risks, but mountain travel can never be completely predictable. Thus, every mountaineer should be trained in safety, wilderness first aid, and rescue with the goal of becoming truly self-reliant.

## **PHYSICAL PREPARATION**

Mountaineering is a physically demanding activity. Nearly every type of climbing has become increasingly athletic, especially at the higher levels of difficulty. Climbers today accomplish feats that were once considered impossible. In rock, ice, and high-altitude climbing, new standards are set regularly. Limits are being pushed not only on the way up peaks but also on the way down. Steep routes once considered difficult or impossible to ascend are now also descended on skis and snowboards. Among the changes to the landscape of climbing, notable are the advances in and increasing popularity of steep ice climbing and “mixed” climbs, those that include a combination of rock and frozen water. Although most people appreciate such extreme achievements from the sidelines, higher standards at these maximal performance levels of climbing often result in increased standards at all levels.

Whatever your skill level and aspiration, good physical conditioning is critically important. The stronger you are, the better prepared you will be to face the challenges of climbing mountains, whether your outing goes as

planned or includes unexpected difficulties. You will have a wider choice of mountains to climb, and you will be more likely to enjoy trips rather than to simply endure them. More important, the safety of the whole party may hinge on the strength—or weakness—of one member.

## **MENTAL PREPARATION**

Just as important as physical conditioning is mental attitude, which often determines success or failure in mountaineering. The ability to keep a clear, calm mind helps in everything from deciding whether to stay home because of a weather forecast to pushing through a difficult technical climbing move or rescuing a climbing partner after a crevasse fall. Mountaineers need to be positive, realistic, and honest with themselves. A can-do attitude may turn into dangerous overconfidence if it is not tempered with a judicious appraisal of the circumstances and environment.

Many a veteran mountaineer says the greatest challenges are mental. Perhaps this is one of mountaineering's biggest appeals: while seeking the freedom of the hills, we come face-to-face with ourselves.

## **JUDGMENT AND EXPERIENCE**

Essential to mountaineering is the ability to solve problems and make good decisions. Sound judgment, perhaps a mountaineer's most valued and prized skill, develops from integrating knowledge with experience. This book outlines equipment and techniques ranging from the basic to the advanced, but the goal of every mountaineer is to determine how best to use that learning to answer the sometimes unpredictable challenges faced in the mountains.

Much of what mountaineers need are coping skills and problem-solving skills—the ability to deal with external factors such as adverse weather, long hikes, and mountain accidents, as well as internal factors including fear, exhaustion, and desire. As climbers experience challenging situations, they become better decision makers, gaining judgment and experience that can help them in the future.

Mountaineering, however, tends to provide many new situations that require careful judgment rather than automatic responses. Although you may use past experience to make decisions in the mountains, you will never face

the same exact situation twice. To be sure, this uncertainty can be scary, but it also creates the allure and challenge of mountaineering.

Many situations similarly involve risk, challenge, and accomplishment. As Helen Keller observed in 1957 in *The Open Door*, “Security is mostly a superstition. It does not exist in nature, nor do the children of men as a whole experience it. Avoiding danger is no safer in the long run than outright exposure. Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing.”

## CARING FOR THE WILDERNESS

The mountaineering skills in this book are tools that allow you to visit and enjoy remote areas of the world. But remember that the beauty of wilderness often becomes its undoing by attracting visitors—leaving the landscape touched by human hands and eventually less than wild.

People are consuming wilderness at an alarming rate—using it, managing it, and changing it irreparably. For this reason, The Mountaineers and many other outdoor enthusiasts have adopted a set of principles and ethics referred to as Leave No Trace.

Mountains owe climbers nothing, and they ask nothing of climbers. Hudson Stuck, a member of the first team to ascend Denali (formerly Mount McKinley), fervently described this attitude in *The Ascent of Denali*: the summit party felt they had been granted “a privileged communion with the high places of the earth.” All mountaineers who travel in the wilderness can consider their minimum charge for this privilege to be leaving the hills as they found them, with no sign of their passing.

## PRESERVING WILDERNESS

The privileges climbers enjoy in the mountains bring the responsibility not only to leave no trace but also to help preserve these environments they love. The facts of mountaineering life today include permit systems that limit access to the backcountry, environmental restoration projects, legislative alerts, clashes among competing interest groups, and closures of roads, trails, and entire climbing areas. In addition to being vigilant in treading softly in the mountains, mountaineers must now speak loudly in support of wilderness preservation, access, and sensitive use of public wildlands. Climbers can no longer assume that they will have access to explore the vertical realms of

Planet Earth. In addition to being mountaineers, climbers, and adventurers, everyone must be active wilderness advocates if they want to continue to enjoy what was once taken for granted.

## A CLIMBING CODE

The Mountaineers have devised a set of guidelines to help people conduct themselves safely in the mountains. Based on careful observation of the habits of skilled climbers and a thoughtful analysis of accidents, these guidelines have served well not only for climbers but, with slight adaptation, for all wilderness travelers. (See the “Climbing Code” sidebar.)

This Climbing Code is not a step-by-step formula for reaching summits or avoiding danger, but rather it is a set of guidelines for encouraging safe mountaineering. It is recommended especially for beginners, who have not yet developed the necessary judgment that comes from years of experience. Seasoned mountaineers often modify these guidelines in practice, making judgments based on an understanding of the risk as well as the skill to help control that risk.

### CLIMBING CODE

- Leave the trip itinerary with a responsible person.
- Carry the necessary clothing, food, and equipment.
- A climbing party of three is the minimum, unless adequate prearranged support is available. On glaciers, a minimum of two rope teams is recommended.
- Rope up on all exposed places and for all glacier travel. Anchor all belays.
- Keep the party together, and obey the leader or majority rule.
- Never climb beyond your ability and knowledge.
- Never let judgment be overruled by desire when choosing the route or deciding whether to turn back.
- Follow the precepts of sound mountaineering as set forth in books of recognized merit.
- Behave at all times in a manner that reflects favorably upon mountaineering, including adherence to Leave No Trace principles.

Climbers sometimes question the need for such standards in a sport notable for the absence of formal rules. However, many serious accidents could have been avoided or minimized if these simple principles had been followed. This Climbing Code is built on the premise that mountaineers want a high probability of safety and success, even in risk-filled or doubtful situations, and they want an adequate margin of safety in case they have misjudged their circumstances.

## **GAINING THE FREEDOM OF THE HILLS**

“Freedom of the hills” is a concept that combines the simple joy of being in the mountains with the skill, equipment, and strength to travel without harm to yourself, others, or the environment. The hills do not offer this freedom freely—but only in trade for your training, preparation, and desire.

This is an age that requires a conscious choice to avoid civilization with all of its technologies and conveniences. In the modern digital world, many people are accessible by phone or email every minute of every day. With the right equipment, this can be true anywhere on the planet. Although you do not have to leave these things behind to go to the mountains, for those who want to step out of—if only briefly—this mechanized, digitized world, the mountains beckon. They offer a place of richness and communion with the natural world that is now the exception rather than the rule.

Mountaineering takes place in an environment indifferent to human needs, and not everyone is willing to pay the price for its intense physical and spiritual rewards. But those who dream of climbing mountains can use this book to follow that dream. And if you learn to climb safely and skillfully, body and spirit in tune with the wilderness, you too can heed the inspiration of John Muir. “Climb the mountains,” he wrote in *Our National Parks*, “and get their good tidings. Nature’s peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.” Like Muir, you too can “walk away quietly in any direction and taste the freedom of the mountaineer.”