



Denali's imposing South Face. // Photo: Maxime Turgeon

ALL WALK, NO TALK

Andreas Fransson solos Denali's coveted South Face
by Devon O'Neil

This past May, Andreas Fransson, a 28-year-old Swedish alpinist living in Chamonix, flew to Alaska with one goal in mind: to ski the 8,000-foot South Face of Denali, one of the world's most coveted unskied lines.

Aside from a few close friends, Fransson didn't tell anyone he was going to Alaska. "I usually don't like to talk about it before I've done it, because that changes your decision making when you're there," he says. When he and climber Magnus Kastengren arrived, they found North America's tallest mountain in horrible shape. What little snow coated the 20,320-foot peak had been raked by brutal winds and arctic cold, inhibiting progress for the many teams in camp.

Fransson and Kastengren spent 10 days acclimatizing and waiting out another cruel stretch of weather, then took advantage of a warm, bluebird window and zipped to the summit. Fransson wasn't sure whether that would be the day for a South Face attempt, but

when he looked down the upper portion of the face, he saw enough possibility to give it a shot. He said goodbye to Kastengren and dropped in at 2 p.m.—all alone and 8,000 feet above the safety of the glacier. "I knew it was going to take some time," Fransson said in a post-expedition interview from the Anchorage airport. "I took a lot of clothes with me, and I had some dried food and a stove. I knew I probably wouldn't be able to ski it all during the day. So to me, it was more the mind game, and getting the strategy right to make it back alive."

The fact that he was even there marked an achievement in its own right. Thirteen months earlier, while descending the Aiguille Verte's Y Couloir on a warm day with American Colin

Haley, a wet-slab avalanche ripped Fransson off a rappel and dragged him over thinly covered rocks and cliffs for 1,200 vertical feet. He broke most of his ribs, his sternum, hip, back (in three places) and neck; he narrowly survived the fall. But he also learned a critical lesson that would factor heavily in his Denali descent: Let the mountain refreeze rather than rush to get down in warm temperatures.

Fransson skied the South Face's 4,000-foot, 40-degree upper snowfield quickly, despite very hard and sometimes hollow snow. Then he began to traverse skier's left to the crux of the route: a series of broken snow-and-ice patches riddled with cliffs that eventually funnel into a tight couloir. He proceeded cautiously, switching between skis and crampons four times just to get into the couloir. "The ice and cliff bands were easily negotiated," he said. "But as it was getting warmer and warmer, I knew the rocks were going to start [falling]."

On cue, watermelon-size boulders began whizzing past his head soon after he entered the couloir. Fransson, remembering what had happened when he tried to push his luck on the Aiguille Verte, decided to protect himself under a cliff at 15,000 feet, and wait it out. "I wasn't nervous; I was in my peaceful zone," he said. "I still felt like I was relatively in control of the situation." Five hours later, at 11 p.m., he resumed his descent. By then the snow had refrozen, and Fransson made it down the rest of the dimly lit face and rappelled over the bergschrund at 2:30 a.m. He brewed up some food and water while waiting for more light, then slalomed through the *(continued on p. 84)*

MOUNT SAINT ELIAS

Location: Alaska/Yukon Territory, Canada

Range: Saint Elias Mountains

Elevation: 18,008 feet

Skiable Vertical: 18,008 feet

James Bracken, Lorne Glick and Andy Ward first skied from the summit in May, 2000 by way of the Mira Face. Their descent to the Columbus Icefield totaled 11,000 vertical feet. "I had doubts about skiing the Mira Face with its icy, 55-degree entrance, huge exposure and tight choke through a cliff band halfway down," wrote Bracken in the 2001 *American Alpine Journal*.

Given proper conditions, it's possible to ski from the summit down the southwest face and Tyndall Glacier to the ocean—a 12-mile, 18,000-foot descent. In 2007, Axel Naglich and Peter Rössmann completed this descent in two sections. They first skied from the Haydon Shoulder (10,000 feet) to the ocean, and then returned over one month later to ski from the summit to 10,000 feet. It still awaits an uninterrupted descent.



Mount Saint Elias from Icy Bay, AK. // Photo: Carl Donohue

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complex icefall using a single photo he'd taken on a reconnaissance trip earlier in his expedition. In all, he estimates he skied 6,200 feet of the 8,000-foot face, but believes the right skier in a giant snow year could ski all but 100 vertical meters. "I probably could have skied 50 percent of what I downclimbed at night," he said, "but at that point, I just wanted to be as safe as possible."

When Fransson reached the trail between base camp and ABC around 8 a.m., he collapsed, telling none of the passersby what he'd done. "I'd been up and going for almost 30 hours with little food or water," he said. "A few people thought I needed to be rescued because I was just lying there. They didn't understand how anyone could be sleeping a few kilometers from base camp. But there was no way I was going to get to base camp before I fell asleep."

He slept for six hours before stumbling into base camp, where news of his bold descent began to spread. Not that he relished it for long. Two days later, Fransson climbed the Cassin Ridge in 33 hours, and two days after that, he skied the 5,000-foot Messner Couloir in a blizzard, wrapping up one of the most monumental months in Denali's history.

But by August, Fransson had all but forgotten the South Face. "I had a great time and experience on the mountain," he wrote in an e-mail from Norway, where he was living in a tent and working as a climbing instructor before a fall trip to Peru. "But I let the past be, and I don't really think about it anymore." When asked to discuss his upcoming objectives, Fransson declined, writing: "There is a saying that every time you talk about your dreams, you are using some of the energy you need to make them happen."

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and sustained 45-degree slide paths. His favorite day was his 20-mile Presidential Traverse, which he completed in 17 hours with Hammersmith. The route remains almost entirely above tree line, and crosses seven of the highest peaks in the Presidential Range.

After starting at 2 a.m., the pair reached the summit of Mount Madison (5,367 feet) minutes before the sun breached the horizon. With temperatures in the single digits and no one for miles around, they paused and watched the sky fill with orange and red. "I couldn't help but think of how fortunate I was," White says. "How many people have seen the sunrise from the top of Madison and then gone skiing for 12 hours above tree line?"

"I didn't think skiing all 48 was possible, and I did it. I learned a lot about myself and what we're all capable of," says White, though he is not one to dwell. He's already focused on his next adventure—college at the University in Utah. "[Skiing the 4,000-footers] was cool," he says. "But what's next? I want to do something bigger."

PHOTO FLYBOY *(Continued from p. 63)*

was during kind of the ascendancy of that.

"It's gotten to a point now that I have the technique down, and I know how to get what I want. But you can't be too chancy; you have to take what Mother Nature hands you. If you don't have a fair amount of respect, you're going to get into trouble.

"I have a strong sense of the frailty of the airplane and myself. I'm not a young kid anymore; I always tell people that I'm alive because I hesitated or turned back, and I believe that.

"I've gotten far more value from the way [the website] is now—call it 'giving away' or whatever. I can't imagine having gotten such great reward or value to myself. I've made friends around the world because of it."

Note: John's new coffee-table book, produced by Wolverine Publishing and loosely titled Snow and Spire: Winter Flights Through the North Cascade Range at press time, is due to hit shelves in November, 2011. To learn more and view Scurlock's galleries, visit pbase.com/nolock.