

## Breathtaking Climbing Mount Aconcagua in Argentina (6962 meters)

It's somewhere between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> of January 2011. I'm staring through the darkness at the roof of the inside of my tent. It's dark but there's a full moon out so I can make out the roof of the tent. It's being violently shaken by the wind raging outside. I can hear it roaring through the mountains before it hits the tent, sometimes blowing it flat on my face. I wonder how much the tent can handle before it's shredded to pieces. On our way up to high camp I overheard a guide from another group telling our guide that there was no way he was going to camp at high camp in a storm because he had already lost his tents two times there.

I have tugged all my essential things and warm clothes around me in my sleeping bag in case the tent will break. I wonder what to do if it should happen and decide it's probably best to hide deep inside the sleeping bag until help arrives. It's hard to sleep with these violent conditions and it has been hard to sleep the last few days anyway because my body is having problems with the lack of oxygen. We are now at 6000 meters and there's about 40% of the amount of oxygen in the air that's available at sea level. Your body has to work very hard even when you're trying to rest. I measure my pulse, it's 120 at rest and I can feel my heart pounding hard in my chest. I have to breathe much faster and when I try to turn around in my mummy sleeping bag, I already get out of breath.

I wake up, feeling that I'm suffocating. I must have fallen asleep. In sleep your body can slow down to the point where you don't get enough air. I'm breathing in deep and slowly manage to calm myself down. I'm stressed that I can't get much sleep because in the morning we have to wake up at 5 and try to push for the summit.

I feel I have to pee but there's no way I'm going outside. The wind can easily knock you over and it's very cold at night. The breath from me and my two tent mates is frozen against the top of the tent. They are sleeping or lying with their eyes closed opposite to me. I'm sleeping in the middle, they have their heads on the other side of the tent, otherwise we don't all fit. I've been told the middle is the warmest place.

I open the tent to get my pee bottle from the vestibule. When I open it, I can see, in the bright full moon light, that one of the tent zippers has been broken by the wind and the wind is freely blowing through our stuff. I try to fix it and hope nothing essential has been blown away. I sit up in my sleeping bag and take a few deep breaths, even the smallest actions exhaust you at these heights. I pee, close up the bottle and my sleeping bag and try to fall asleep again.

We arrived here at high camp after a ten-day hike and the thin air has become an increasingly big problem. We walk short distances in the day but with our speeds we take a very long time. When we get to our camp, we pitch our tents with our last energy and then collapse in there. Because it's hard to sleep, I try to lie as much as I can and rest a bit. I never leave the tent to go for a walk or look around. The environment here is hostile and the tent is a safe haven. Before going out, you have to put on a lot of clothes and the strong winds can be dangerous. Besides that, the thin air makes walking a task in itself and the things we have to do – getting water, eating, organizing our gear for the next day, taking care of the tents and going to the toilet – already take more energy than I have. Headaches are very normal at this height, the lack of oxygen can cause your brain to swell up. The first night at camp one, I had a tremendous migraine. Your brain can swell up because of the lack of air and push against the back of your eyes. This can cause blurry vision and even temporary blindness. I got a flash in both of my eyes with every heartbeat. I took some painkillers and luckily it was gone in the morning.

I wake up because I hear voices outside, a headlamp shines into the tent and from the light a voice appears and tells us that we have to get ready to go soon. The wind has calmed down but it's freezing cold and still dark. I try to find everything I have to wear, which is a lot for the summit day. Most of my things are in my sleeping bag. It seems to take forever to find my things and to put them on. Being with three people in a dark small tent doesn't make things easier. I crawl out of the tent and walk very slowly to the guides' tent.

Somehow I woke up too late for breakfast and they are screaming that we are leaving in 15 minutes. I think I will need more time and start to get stressed and hurry. I give one of the guides my two water bottles and they fill it with water that they made by melting snow. I put in five drops of iodine to avoid getting sick, I can't stand the taste anymore. We have been walking up the mountain for two weeks now and I have the feeling that I have been drinking from a swimming pool for that time. I hurry back to the tent and have to regain my breath when I get there. I sit down and for a minute all I can do is breathe. I put on my big double mountaineering boots, first the inside boots and then I have to use all my strength to push them into the outside shoes. Together they weigh more than 5 kilos. One of the guides helps me put the crampons on. One part of our group has started walking already and I wanted to join the first group. I throw some energy bars, some hand warmers, my camera and random things I think I need in my backpack and try to rush to catch up with the group. My heart is pounding from stress and when I finally join them, I have to concentrate on breathing to be able to keep going.

I'm staring at the back of the double mountaineering boots of the guy in front of me. He takes one step, I take one step. We stretch our back leg at roughly the same time to take the tension off our support leg and try to breathe and rest. I breathe in two times between each step and then shift my weight and throw my other leg forward at the same pace as the guy in front of me. We straighten our other leg, which functions now as our support leg. And breathe again. I have been staring at his shoes for over an hour now and at other people's shoes the days before. They similarly plough through the snow and the loose rocks. I never look up or around me, because the distance from the top of the mountain is very de-motivating. Staring at the ground makes you feel like you're covering more distance. I don't allow myself to look up when I'm walking, only at the breaks do I peek at the summit. I just stare at the ground and at the double mountaineering boots of the person in front of me. Their boots are made of hard plastic and are very colourful, very ugly and uncomfortable. I wonder why all these mountaineering clothes are so ugly. It reminds me of the top of Mt Everest, which is called "rainbow hill". This is because of the large amount of dead mountaineers lying there in their colourful clothes. At high altitudes helicopters can't fly and when something happens, basically you can only use your own strength to get down.

The guide finally announces a break. I collapse onto a stone and just breathe for a few minutes until I have enough energy to take my backpack off. I drink my ice-cold water. I'm not hungry nor thirsty, haven't been for many days but you have to keep eating and most importantly drinking. The lack of air makes you feel nauseous. I don't look around me but focus on the things I have to do before we start moving again. I drink, apply sunscreen and grab a muesli bar out of my backpack. We shouldn't stop too long otherwise we get to the summit too late, and the longer you stop the harder it is to start again. At this altitude everything is hard. I can't open my muesli bar and try with my teeth. When it finally opens, I have to breathe for about a minute to catch my breath. I take a bite, have to breathe a few times again before I can chew. I chew, take a few more breaths and then swallow. I look up to the summit, the scale of it is still too large to be understood by a human, which must mean we are still very far away. I remember my camera but I can't get myself to take any pictures. The sun comes up and gives a bit of warmth, which is very welcome; my feet were getting cold and my socks started to slide down in my boots. The next break I use all the time and energy I have to take them off and I tape my socks to my pants to stop them from falling, I don't have

a chance to get any water, because the guide tells us to get ready.

We are about half way towards the summit and I'm totally exhausted. More than I have ever been in my life. These two weeks have been tough, it started out bad with food poisoning and mountaineering just drains you little by little. The one who manages to collapse most slowly will make it to the summit.

I'm still staring at the boots in front of me and at the path, I have completely stopped looking around me, the ground consists mostly of rocks, scree they call it. It's hard to walk up on it, because you slide down. Every step feels like a punch in the face, I have started to breathe four times between every step. The hours pass and my consciousness turns into a blur, I'm only busy with trying to walk. We stop every hour for about ten minutes in which I robotically perform my duties – first drink, apply sunscreen, eat something and most importantly try to catch my breath. The last break I couldn't bring myself to take off my backpack anymore and I had to ask a fellow climber behind me if he could give me a muesli bar from the top pocket. I look up at the summit and still don't understand the scale but it looks like we are close. Some climbers from other groups pass us on the way down and tell us comfortingly that we are getting there; they look relieved. The wind has picked up again. I'm wearing my face mask. It makes my goggles fog up but there's enough clear surface left to see where I'm going. I don't have the energy to try to clean them, neither do I want to take my gloves off. I'm terrified of frostbite. I divert my face from the wind, because it's impossible to breathe otherwise. It feels like the wind blows all the oxygen away, leaving only a vacuum around your head.

Our group has fallen apart, two people out of ten have decided to go back and everybody else is following their own pace. I just focus on each step and tell myself I can catch my breath after every 27 steps. I finally reach the small steep path to the summit and it's just ten meters long. I have to sit down first to catch some air. I force myself to stand up and walk the last few meters. I arrive at the summit and three members of our expedition group are already there. We hug, I sit down on a rock and try to breathe. I don't really know what to do. There's a small cross. One of our guides comes towards us and asks us for a group picture. I stand up and walk very slowly to the cross. The picture is taken. I walk to the edge of the summit plateau and I have to stop in the middle to breathe. I take a few pictures and a panorama movie and sit down again. I wonder when we are going back down, it's already three and I guess it takes us four hours to get down.

I was looking forward to reaching the summit, mostly because people had told me that that's the moment you realize it's all worth it. I look at my fellow climbers sitting down trying to catch their breath and taking pictures. I don't feel anything besides being completely exhausted. One of our team members asks the guides when we are going down and I'm happy to hear we are leaving the summit. While I walk down I feel relieved that I made it and that I didn't spend two weeks and a lot of money without reaching this clear goal, otherwise I don't feel anything.

Back in the tent I collapse with all my clothes on, the wind is picking up and we should get ready for another stormy night. Tomorrow we will again leave early and walk all the way back to base camp and there's a big storm approaching. I realize I forgot to have a good look at the view from the summit. I turn on my camera and look at the pictures and the movie I took randomly from the summit, most look impressive, unreal and hard to grasp. I realize I ended up taking a lot of pictures of the sky.