

Personal Project-Zermatt Mountain Guide Interview

Date: September 20, 2019

Citation:

Geissler, Francis. "Personal Project - Interview 1." *GoogleDocs*, Google, 20 Sept. 2019

Interviewer: Francis Geissler

Interviewee: Roman Haltinner

FG: Why did you choose the career path as a mountain guide in Zermatt and why is it your passion?

RH: For me, mountaineering is my passion and my job; I do it for the sake of climbing and spreading it to other people as a healthy sport. It was always something that I could improve my technique and knowledge with. When growing up I was very active with sports such as skiing, hiking and biking, but nothing really compared to climbing and mountaineering. I started off when I was 25 years old and I had to decide whether I should continue my education background or try something completely new and start my apprenticeship as a mountain guide. I've lived in Zermatt since 1990 and have been a certified mountain guide from the "Bergführerverein Zermatt" since 2000; along with being a ski instructor since 2001.

FG: What sets mountaineering apart from other climbing sports (rock climbing, free-solo climbing, bouldering, etc)?

RH: Before other rock climbing sports came to light (such as free-solo climbing, bouldering, ice climbing, etc), climbing at its simplest form in the olden days was just referred to as alpinism or mountaineering: the idea of reaching the summit and making it down safely within the process, for the sake of having climbed the mountain. Alpinism originated in the European alps in the late 1700s and had much more to do with the exploration and the discovery of the mountain: the process of figuring out how to operate with equipment and plan multiple routes/expeditions to ultimately make it to the top. But sports such as free climbing and bouldering are no longer part of the original purpose of mountain climbing. Once us humans began to gather more knowledge and climbing techniques over the centuries, climbing evolved into many separate branches and lost its original purpose. Sports such as free-solo climbing have more to do with record breaking and **how efficient** you can climb the rock rather than **how to climb it** in the first place. These sports are sometimes even seen as extreme sports where people reach their limits and risk their lives for the sake of earning a sort of "dopamine kick".

Now a days, many mountains in the alps have been explored and optimized to be climbed (rock bolts pre-built, into the mountain) safely **with an experienced guide**. Mountaineering has now to do less with the discovery of the mountain (since we have gathered knowledge on climbing over centuries) and in my opinion more to do with the passion of climbing a mountain in a controlled environment for self betterment/enjoyment and health.

FG: Is rock climbing (in a sportshall) a good way to get started with mountain climbing and how should a beginner first approach mountaineering?

RH: I would definitely say so. It is the easiest way to get into the climbing sport and simple to access (many gyms available). Factors such as grip strength and hand-eye coordination can be effectively practiced, therefore, I would recommend it to beginners. But if you specifically want to get into mountaineering, climbing on a climbing wall is not exactly enough. There are so many factors that just cannot be practiced indoors. You have to be more attached to nature and the outdoors to truly get in touch with the different physical and geographical aspects of mountaineering, since it consists of not just climbing but also hiking and walking downhill as well as uphill. Not to mention, the equipment and shoes are a lot different (you're going to be carrying a lot more when mountaineering and you will be approaching various textures of terrain such as rocks, snow and glaciers). If you have the opportunity or chance to go alpine climbing or have available hiking routes, you definitely should; especially if this is available and close to you in your region.

FG: What is the proper and necessary physique of a mountain climber? What muscle groups are most used?

RH: When talking about alpinism and mountaineering specifically, the muscle group most used are the legs. When comparing mountain climbing to speed wall-climbing, there is a lot more pulling involved with the upper body rather than the legs. A good phrase I teach my guests when climbing is: "Es ist Bergsteigen, nicht bergziehen" (translation: this is mountain climbing, not mountain pulling). The legs are there to push you forward and help you when traversing across various terrain, whereas the arms are purely there for stability and balance. What you should aim for is not to be too heavy, but still relatively strong. It's a lot more to do with being agile and flexible, rather than being heavy and muscular. I'd say the ideal height of a mountain climber is between 176cm-180cm, as you want to have enough arm and leg span to reach things, but still stay relatively light (around 70-75 kg). If you are rather tall (about 190 cm) I would still recommend you stay strong and practice cardio, but definitely try to keep a lightweight (about 80-83 kg maximum) body if you want to pursue mountaineering or climbing in general. If you are rather short (160-170cm) it is reversed. You should try and gain a sufficient amount of muscle mass to be strong, but still not weigh too much (stay more athletically agile). But in the end, it's all about finding a good mix between power and agility; not to mention flexibility for good reach.

Apart from muscles, you should also focus on aerobic capacity. Big lungs are very useful in long distance running sports as well as long term exercises similar to mountain climbing such as marathons. Speed climbing is something you could compare to sprinting, as it is anaerobic (non-endurance sports that are very fast paced and use highly intensive movements to build strength).

FG: What diet and nutrition is best suited for alpine mountaineers and climbers in general?

RH: I would recommend a good balance between carbohydrates, fats and protein. Some mountain climbers are even vegetarian which is not an issue. Protein can be consumed through other products than just meats such as beans. Building muscle is a part of it, but a lot of the strength will also be coming from the lungs (calm and steady respiration). As mentioned before, being light and agile is essential for mountaineering (you do not want to be too heavy and bulky).

Before going for the ascent, breakfast is very important. This is where you'll have to find a balance between not eating enough (not getting enough energy) and not too much (overloading on food and throwing up). While taking a break during an ascent, eating is also not exactly a good idea as this will make you heavier and your stomach will have irritation when digesting foods that you will have just eaten. I recommend a few oat-meal bars and power gel in case you are losing energy during a climb. Lastly, never forget to drink enough water.

FG: Which workouts/exercises and sports are best suited to prepare for mountain climbing?

RH: A mix between muscular and cardiovascular endurance should be enough to make you fit for mountaineering. Cardiovascular endurance can be trained through sports like rowing and swimming, which are very good activities to build strength as they are both full-body exercises that train every muscle of the body (except the pectoral muscles). Endurance sports teach how to keep consistency in strength over prolonged periods of exercise. A more available alternative can also be running as it trains the legs and can include different terrains (uphill).

However, if you really want an apt body for mountain climbing, hiking is a very good option to train balance and is a good way of practicing for walking both uphill and downhill. You can run on a treadmill for weeks and weeks, but if you're only running, certain muscles in the legs used for downhill walking won't be trained. Mountain climbing will consist of a lot of downhill walking as this comes after the summit (once you have reached the top of the mountain). Therefore, hiking can both train various muscles of the body and also build technique and sure-footedness to give you a good feel for mountaineering (various terrain can give your feet a good feeling for rough surfaces too).

FG: Would you describe mountain climbing to potentially be an extremsport and how does the „Bergführerverein Zermatt“ overall determine safety?

RH: If you have a mountain guide with you that has studied the terrain and has experience, risks are minimized and controlled properly. That's why I would not call it an extreme sport as it can be done in a controlled environment. Mountain guides try their best to optimize the route for their guests in correlation to their experience and the mountain guides of the „Bergführerverein Zermatt“ are very well coordinated as we can always communicate and report any safety hazards on mountain routes.

I do think it can be an extreemesport in some cases if it is not done without caution, for instance if you do not have a mountain guide with you and you're underestimating a route you have no knowledge of (you'll be walking into unknown territory essentially).

FG: How do you deal with fear when climbing (this includes fearing for your own safety and also wanting to keep your group safe during an ascent)? How many die each year?

RH: Caution is more useful than fear. If you're scared you shouldn't be a mountain guide or be mountain climbing in that manner. I'm only actually scared or over-cautious if something does not go according to plan that is out of my hands like a change in weather or hazards in the terrain (such as a broken rock bolts or rubble falling off the mountain). But if any of these cases were to occur, I would know exactly what to do to keep my group and myself safe to get us off the mountain.

In regards to deaths:

25-30 people die every year in Switzerland doing alpine sports (mountain biking, free climbing, skiing, mountaineering, etc); 10 of which die in Zermatt each summer.

In the past 150 years, approximately 500 people have died in Zermatt and 5 die each year attempting to climb the Matterhorn **without a guide**.

FG: Are there other factors that can ensure a person's safety besides just having a mountain guide with you?

RH: A useful thing someone can do is self-evaluation, which consists of picking an optimized route for yourself before meeting up with the guide. You have to know your limits and try to pick an apt challenge where you can learn as much as you can at an optimized difficulty level. After that, you and the guide will be able to talk things through and he might propose an idea of which mountains would suit you. Checking the weather is also an important factor as this is necessary to evaluate if the climb is safe or not (storms, clouds and fog are very dangerous hazards).

FG: What safety hazard comes up most when guiding your group on an ascent (altitude sickness, weather, wrong equipment)?

RH: A real issue I have sometimes is when the guest appears not to be experienced enough during the climb (**overconfidence**) and turning back is most likely the option in such a case. Equipment is always checked beforehand as well. Altitude really starts to begin when you reach 3,200m-3,500m. In the end, you can always turn back.

FG: Would you want legal enforcement/regulation to exist to lower the risk of accidents or deaths during a mountain ascent, in the event that inexperienced people do not have a certified mountain guide with them during an ascent?

RH: No, I would not prefer any enforcement as this would be difficult and complicated to regulate. I trust that most people will use common sense before going for an ascent. In fact, most injuries and deaths actually occur on hiking routes and not on mountaineering terrain. I would of course like to see less deaths happening in Zermatt, but in reality, if people die it is their fault for going into such an endeavour without an experienced guide.

FG: What does it mean to you philosophically as a human being to have a perceptual goal and actually achieving it?

RH: Mountain climbing means a lot to me. It really began to pay off after I took my first climbing course/expedition. Checking equipment, planning out routes and learning terminology first seemed tedious, but deemed to be very useful. Over the years, you'll really get to see how well mountain climbing prepares you to become a disciplined alpinist and healthier human beings, along with the responsibilities that come with it.

FG: How can different psychological aspects of mountain climbing/mountaineering be used for other situations in life (like a problem solving tool) to better the overall quality of life (maybe sports in general are just an outlook/lens for goals)?

RH: Sports are a great way to test limitations; mountain climbing teaches discipline and setting realistic goals. It is still my passion and I always try to challenge myself by teaching new tourists and beginners. I'm not mountain climbing for myself at the moment; it's more about comradery, making relationships and helping other people with their mountain climbing goals.

Although your concentration may drift you have to see the big picture. You'll be thinking what you could be doing at home, instead of what you're actually supposed to be focusing on during the ascnet. But no matter how uncomfortable the situation is (physically painful) pull through. When you overthink something, there's just one thing you have to remember: **it's not complicated**, just pull through. The ultimate payoff of reaching the top and making it back down safely from the mountain forces you to self assess and think of how you can improve next time (it's a small scale activity used for the big picture). If you accepted the challenge and I have to plan out the route and instruct you on equipment, I want my guests to get the most out of it. If you want to reach the summit, then go all the way. Otherwise there's no point in starting.

Overall, I think mountaineering can be used as a tool for long-term decision making and how we plan it up to the moment of the ascnet.

FG: Who do you think, as an experienced mountain climber, is my website supposed to be intended for? Is age a factor? Would you personally want my website to include a target demographic of all ages?

RH: I would definitely agree that your website should be open for all audiences as this sport is a good way to test limitations and become a good problem solver. Perhaps the exercises aren't all going to be optimized for older people, but you should still try and educate all ages on the psychological aspects along with nutrition.