

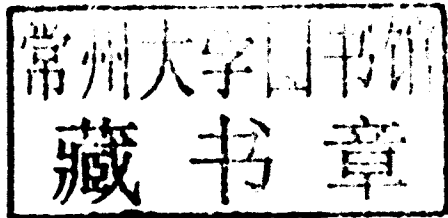
**FIVE
BIG
MOUNTAINS
BY DAVID SCHAEFFER**

**A REGULAR GUY'S GUIDE TO
CLIMBING ORIZABA, ELBRUS,
KILIMANJARO, ACONCAGUA,
AND VINSON**

FIVE BIG MOUNTAINS

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ORIZABA, ELBRUS, KILIMANJARO,
ACONCAGUA, AND VINSON

David N. Schaeffer



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FIVE BIG MOUNTAINS



Endowed by
TOM WATSON BROWN
and
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This book is dedicated to my wife, Kim, and my children, Daniel and Lora, who have allowed me to fulfill my dreams with only minimal protestation, okay, in Kim's case, considerably loud protestations! And these stories are written in fond memory of Alexandr "Sasha" Venger, our Russian guide on Mt. Elbrus, who tragically died while rock-climbing in the Crimea in 2005, less than a year after he took me and two friends to the top of Europe.

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“THANK GOD FOR DUCT TAPE”

David, you’ve got to turn back,” my brother yelled through the bitter wind.

“No, I’ve got some duct tape on my ice axe. All I have to do is wrap it around my boot and crampon so it won’t come off again,” I hollered back.

“You’re crazy,” he said. “It won’t hold. It’s too cold.”

My fingers were quickly freezing in the sub-zero temperatures. Scratching the edge of the duct tape wrapped around my ice axe, I managed to pry a section loose. Normally pliable, the grey duct tape felt stiff and fragile as it peeled off the axe.

Perched on the forty degree slope of the Jamapa Glacier on the highest mountain in Mexico, I dared not look down at the rocks below. Careful not to lose my balance, I reached down to my right Solomon Super Mountain 8 boot and stuck the tape across the toe and around the jagged metal spikes below the steel plated sole of the boot. All the while, I stiffened my left leg which was anchored into the glacier surface by the crampon attached to my left boot. One slip and I knew I would slide 1500 feet down the steep ice and snow into the black rocks below.

With the first piece of tape securely wrapped, I returned my fingernails to the ice axe and began to work another piece of duct tape free.

“It’s not going to hold,” my brother warned again.

Ignoring him, I continued to pull on the tape with one hand, while steadying myself on the ice axe with the other. As my gloveless hand became numb in the cold wind, I panted for breath in the thin air. At 17,000 feet, even a slight increase in my exertion level used up most of the oxygen reaching my lungs.

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After a few more minutes, I had successfully wrapped four pieces of duct tape around the front of my right boot and crampon and they felt reasonably secure. Hopefully the crampon would not slip off again. I had felt shivers down my spine both times the crampon had come loose minutes before. Had I slipped without traction, I would have been another victim on this mountain's history of casualties.

"If it comes off again, I'll turn back," I shouted to my brother. "But we've come this far and I'm not giving up yet."

He shrugged and turned his back, slowly moving away and up the slope at an angle.

Leaning onto my ice axe, I pressed my cold hand into my double-lined Gore-Tex gloves, adjusted my hand around the pick end of the axe, and then took six steps up the icy incline. The tape held for now, but my eyes remained locked on the toe of my right boot.

If only one of the other climber's guides hadn't mentioned that twelve climbers had slid to their deaths the year before on this very mountain, Pico de Orizaba.

People always ask me what got me into climbing. I tell them that this somewhat crazy, regular guy started climbing as a child.

At age 5, Mt. Pisgah, near Asheville, North Carolina, was my Mt. Everest, its radio tower rocketing skywards from its forested peak. But we really climbed it to pick the luscious blueberries at the top, not to feel the rush of making it to the summit. Then at age 8, on a trip to Italy, my family climbed Mt. Vesuvius, the famous volcano that erupted and destroyed the city of Pompeii below. I just remember it was really hot, dusty and brown. I don't recall making it to the top, but it sure was fun throwing lava rocks at my brothers on the way up.

In 1978, after graduating from Duke University (I played varsity soccer, not lacrosse), I headed out west with one of my best high school friends, Steve. There we climbed up to some frozen lakes on the high slopes of the Tetons, hiked up towards the glaciers above Lake Louise in the Canadian Rockies, got lost on some modest mountains in Olympic National Forest in Washington, and climbed to the top of Upper Yosemite Falls in a terrible rainstorm. All in Sears work boots, cut-offs

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and no rain gear. Fun, but stupid. I had never heard of REI and couldn't afford decent gear back then anyway.

Years later, after getting married and having two children, I soloed to the top of Alta Peak in Sequoia National Park, hiking from 6000 feet to almost 12,000 feet in one afternoon. Geez, I used to be in really good shape!

But that was it—nothing extraordinary, nothing difficult. Just fun stuff with no expense and no equipment.

Then, about eight years ago, two of my brothers, Brent and Eric, who live overseas had overlapping home leaves for the first time in about a decade. So I hatched the idea of a brothers' bonding trip to climb Mt. Whitney, which at 14,494 feet is the highest peak in the continental United States. I'm not sure why I picked Whitney, but I have always tried to push my limits and figured we were still young enough to handle the challenge. I was forty-four and my oldest brother was 51 at the time.

My other brother, Mike, the soccer coach from North Carolina, joined us for the trip. I planned to do it leisurely, not sure of everyone's fitness level. To be on the safe side, I procured a two-night back country camping permit to pitch our tents at the high camp at 12,000 feet. At that time, one had to get the permit through a mindless lottery/call-in system six months ahead of the actual climb. It took me eleven days in February to get the permit for two nights in August.

Ultimately, we struggled to make it to the high camp with full backpacks on the first day, as we had not built in time to acclimatize. After pitching our tents, we were all deliriously light-headed. The next morning, we slogged our way up the ninety-seven switchbacks and then plodded up the long stretch to the summit in record slow time, watching Boy Scout troops, middle-aged women, and a few octogenarians pass us on the way to the top. Two of my brothers were too nauseated to eat the picnic we had planned for the summit. But there were almost too many people up there to find a good place to sit anyway. When we signed the book at the little stone house at the summit, we were successful climbers #'s 125, 126, 127, and 128 that day, and it was just noon.

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Let's just say that my euphoria over reaching the top was somewhat diminished by the commonness of it all. Maybe too many regular guys and gals, old and young, were able to conquer that peak. Perhaps I felt like I had not been challenged sufficiently to garner a full sense of accomplishment. Whatever it was, this regular guy decided to look for more extraordinary climbs and a stiffer challenge. I needed to find a beginner's high altitude mountain. Little did I know at the time that my search would ultimately lead me to mountains on every continent on the globe.

I never knew that the third highest mountain in North America was in Mexico. I had always assumed that Alaska, with Mt. McKinley leading the way, had all the highest peaks. But the second highest in North America is Mt. Logan in Canada, and in third place is Pico de Orizaba, south of the border.

Mt. McKinley, or Denali as it is sometimes called, was out of the question. At over 20,000 feet and so far north, that climb was fraught with life-threatening dangers. I had heard horror stories about expeditions caught in week long snowstorms with disastrous consequences on that mountain. My own two day hike in Denali National Park several summers earlier, during which I never was able to see any of the upper half of the mountain, reinforced my feeling that safety considerations ruled out an attempt to scale that peak.

So I pulled out my World Atlas and searched on the Internet for alternatives. To my surprise, I learned that Mexico boasts four or five volcanos, each higher than Whitney and all supposedly "walk-up" mountains, meaning reachable with nothing more than crampons and ice axes and no technical rock or ice climbing. My attention quickly gravitated to the largest and highest of the lot, Pico de Orizaba, with a summit at 18,851 feet – or 18,401 or 18,700 feet—depending on the particular source of the information.

Within days, I had amassed at least twenty website articles about climbing Orizaba, also known by its native name, Citlaltepetl—don't ask how that is pronounced. All the articles described the mountain as an excellent beginning step for high altitude climbers. The climb sounded so

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easy. No crevasses to worry about, No technical challenges, just a steady climb to the top. According to the web information, anyone in decent shape who owns an ice axe and crampons can do it. I actually believed this, and the fact that I had never worn crampons or held an ice axe before did not deter my interest in the least.

The next step was to find a trusted and equally adventuresome companion to go along for the hike. Hiking alone can be very dangerous, and climbing high peaks with someone who is not reliable, inexperienced, or is out of shape can be even more risky. My three brothers who climbed Whitney with me seemed to be reasonable candidates. However, two of them had some level of high altitude sickness—nausea and headaches—at 14,000 feet on Whitney, and they were not too thrilled about going higher. My oldest brother, Brent, who had done well on Whitney, had home leave only on alternating summers. Given that Orizaba must be climbed between November and March when the glacier is solid and avalanche risks are minimal, his participation was unlikely. So I looked outside the family.

Unfortunately, the second hardest part of climbing high altitude mountains is getting spousal permission. Several friends who normally love to hike and climb and are otherwise adventurous and in good shape sheepishly declined my invitations after speaking with their wives. The typical reaction from the fairer sex is, “You want to do what? You have small children, you know!” This is a powerful guilt trip which discourages most husbands and fathers from making climbs of a lifetime.

A simple piece of advice: if you want to climb the high mountains of the world, do it before you get married, if you can afford it. After marriage and kids, it’s too easy to feel guilty about leaving your family for a few weeks at a time or risking one’s life and leaving the kids fatherless. Of course, if one waits until the kids are grown, one is too old and decrepit to make it up the slope. The best alternative is to marry a wonderful woman like my wife, who may not like it, but does not stand in the way of my adventurous spirit. And then make sure you prepare, prepare, and prepare again, so as to minimize unnecessary risks, something which took several trips for me to fully understand.

In the end, Brent, then living in Cairo, came through. A well timed conference in Washington D.C. enabled him to travel back to the United

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States and extend the trip long enough to climb Mexican volcanos. The trip was scheduled for December, 2001, and in July, I mapped out a careful four month training schedule to physically prepare for the climb. This consisted of dietary changes to lose weight, strenuous hill work on the steep neighborhood street on weekday evenings, and six and seven mile runs twice on the weekends. The intensity of the workouts steadily increased as I approached the trip.

Unfortunately, the events of September 11, 2001, played havoc with the schedule. My brother's conference in D.C. was postponed and a medical emergency in his family rendered the original timetable impossible. The climb was re-scheduled for the last week of January 2002.

This was not a big problem, except that, mentally, I had focused on completing the climb before Christmas, and physically, I was reaching my peak condition at the end of November, hoping to ease up on the training just a bit before embarking. I had lost 18 pounds and my cardiovascular training was completed. Now I had to extend all the training and my diet through the holidays and for another six weeks. Worse yet, I had gone without cokes, candy bars, cookies, cake, french fries, chocolate, ice cream, and all my favorite junk food for four months and I was ready to binge! Trying to avoid such temptations through Christmas is almost impossible.

Over the holidays, despite my efforts to strictly adhere to my regimen, I quickly gained five pounds back. Fortunately, I had three weeks to salvage my condition. I intensified my workouts once again through the chilly evenings in January. I knew that on summit day, I would need every bit of leg strength and endurance I could muster. I had to have a strong base on which to draw when the going got tough. Meanwhile, my neighbors thought I was truly crazy, running up and down the steep street in the freezing cold in the middle of the dark winter nights.

The flight from Mexico City to Puebla, Mexico took less than an hour, but the scenery was breathtaking. As we left the runway in Mexico City, the nearby snow covered peaks of two volcanos, familiarly known as Popo and Ixta, dominated the skyline to the east. Popo, at over 17,000 feet, was still smouldering from a recent eruption that closed that mountain to all climbers indefinitely. Due to the heat of the eruption,

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most of the snow on that peak had disappeared. Ixta, pronounced “Ista”, is also over 17,000 feet and resembles a woman laying on her back, covered from head to toe in snow and glaciers. Many climbers use Ixta as a preliminary acclimatization trek before tackling Orizaba. However, my brother and I opted to acclimatize on another volcano close to Puebla called La Malinche.

As we approached Puebla, La Malinche loomed over the airport like a sentinel, its long lower slopes covered in evergreens and its sharp central peak glistening in the late afternoon sun. We had been told that there would be very little snow on La Malinche, but even from the airport tarmac, the entire peak looked snow-capped. Apparently, our 14,600 foot “tune up” might pose a bigger challenge than we had anticipated. Yet our driver assured us that we would not need crampons to climb the mountain. “Everyone climbs it in sneakers.”

At 6:00 A.M., after a restless night in a little cabin at a State Park at the base of the mountain (altitude 10,000 feet), we started up a 3 mile paved road to the trail head for La Malinche in our sneakers. The forest was somewhat eerie in the dark and the temperature was well below freezing. I noticed the perspiration in my hair was frosting over. However, by the time we reached the trail head, or what we thought was the trail head, the sun was rising and the temperature was slowly climbing. This also described our movements as we adjusted to the altitude—slowly climbing.

The trail led us up through a thick forest, with patches of snow scattered among the trees. As we ascended, the snow patches multiplied and soon we were working our way around the snow and crossing short sections of ice. Then, without warning, the trail disappeared and we were instantly lost. Several unsuccessful efforts to locate a trail ensued. But we could see the central peak through the trees above us and decided to just keep climbing up through the snow and pines, struggling over fallen trees and erosion ditches and trying not to fall on the slippery ice patches.

“Just keep going,” I said to myself. “This is just the tune-up, for crying out loud.”

A half hour later, we heard human voices ahead of us, and quickly found ourselves following three Mexican youth who seemed to know their way up the mountain. Miraculously, the trail once again appeared

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and soon we came to a large grassy clearing with a large stream flowing down the right side fed by the snow fields above.

“Holy shit,” I said out loud as I looked at the peak in front of us. The entire central volcanic peak loomed 2000 feet above us, covered from east to west in snow.

I looked down at my Nike Air sneakers, which had served me well so far, but which now seemed a tad inadequate for the rest of the climb. I assured my brother that I was told we would not need anything more than sneakers to climb this mountain, but my words were not delivered with much confidence. However, I looked at the footwear of the Mexican climbers gathered in the field next to us and no one had anything much more gripping than a pair of tattered Keds.

Gazing up at the mountain, I focused on a thin brown line that snaked through the snowy slopes up to a “shoulder” on the right side of the peak at what was probably about 14,000 feet. As I stared upwards, I began to see dark specks slowly moving up the brown line—30 or 40 specks in all. Obviously, we were not the first climbers that day.

Minutes later, Brent and I were well on our way towards the bottom of the brown line, which turned out to be a narrow, steep trail of loose scree through the snow fields on the side of the mountain.

After a mere three steps into the scree, I was gasping for breath. Like climbing sand dunes, it was two steps forward and one slip back. The dark brown sand and small black volcanic rocks provided no solid footing. Our exertion level immediately tripled, and suddenly, the altitude, now at approximately 12,500 feet, began taking its toll.

There was nothing we could do but slog up and up. Rest whenever necessary. Watch helplessly as the young Mexican lads push ahead, seemingly oblivious to the altitude. They were leaving us literally in the dust. But upward we marched, one step at a time, dragging our tired legs up the unstable slope as it got steeper and steeper. As my brother started to lag behind, I found myself taking longer and longer rests to keep contact with him. We were going to make it to the top together, or not at all.

“How ya doin’, Brent?” I yelled down to him after reaching a convenient, large rock on which to sit almost two-thirds up the brown streak.

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“Okay,” he gasped back. “Slow and steady. I’m seven years older than you, you know.”

“Yeah, but you look older than that today,” I teased him. “How are the legs?”

“Tired, but I think I can make it up to the shoulder. We’ll take a long rest there.”

“Agreed.” I needed a break too, and I was relieved that my brother was still optimistic about pushing on up the mountain.

As I slowly worked my way up the final section of scree, my thighs and calves burned with each step. I flashed back to an exercise video I once watched in which the instructor, a beefed up stud with an European accent, constantly encouraged his viewers to “feel the burn.” I’d like him to “feel the burn” of the La Malinche scree torture.

Plodding step by agonizing step, I finally reached the “shoulder” and looked to my left across the thirty-five degree snow slope. Beyond it on the horizon, I could see the faint outline of Pico de Orizaba, almost eighty miles away, its Jamapa Glacier at the top majestically gleaming in the morning sunlight, I couldn’t help but stop and stare at the sight of the huge volcanic shape. A photograph did not do it justice, but I snapped a shot or two to document the view and began wondering how in the hell we were going to climb that monster.

The “shoulder” was not as flat as it looked from below. In reality, it was a steep slope of hard grey ash and crushed rock leading up to an even steeper boulder field filled with large rocks and snow. Though the sun was now glaring down on us, the “shoulder” was totally unprotected and the wind whipped across the ridge. I had stripped down as I worked my way up the scree, but now I quickly covered up with every layer I had and then pulled out my Gore-Tex shell, gloves and a woolen hat. It was also time for us to enjoy a few bites of candy bar and meat sticks to replenish our energy.

However, rather than a taking the luxury of a long rest, we quickly realized that we would freeze if we didn’t keep moving. Soon we were crawling on all fours straight up from one boulder to the other, trying to avoid the ice and snow nestled in between the cracks. We watched several Latinos slide precariously as they moved too quickly. Fortunately, we were in no hurry, so we took our time negotiating the terrain, making

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sure we had good hand and foot grips before hoisting ourselves up the rocks. I felt like a spider climbing a wall.

Soon we saw the climbers ahead of us disappear from view. The summit looked close now—just ahead—maybe 200 feet above us. All my tiredness dissolved as I felt the anticipation of reaching the top. I pressed forward, pulling up with my arms and breathing hard until I stood on a level patch of rocks at the top of the boulder filled ridge. The summit—yes, the lower summit!

Beyond the ridge across another boulder field and up an angled stretch of very steep snow was the true summit.

“Shit,” I said to myself as my brother scrambled up behind me.

“Are you kidding me?” he said as he realized we had reached a false summit.

“Well, it’s not that much further, “ I said, “but no way am I gonna cross that snow in my sneakers.”

Just then I saw several climbers working their way up along some rocks bordering the left side of the steep snow section.

“This way Brent,” I said, as I headed in that direction.

But my brother walked ahead, aiming directly for the naked snow slope.

“Brent, it’s safer this way, ” I warned, pointing towards the rocks on the left. But my brother, his judgment perhaps affected by the altitude or fatigue, continued straight ahead.

I stopped, frozen in place, as Brent stepped slowly onto the 45 degree snow slope. If he slipped, there was nothing to stop him from sliding down and over a cliff into the rocks several hundred feet below. He had no ice axe or hiking pole to dig in or act as an anchor.

He carefully placed each step into the shoe marks of previous climbers and worked his way across, pausing several times to adjust his balance. I held my breath nervously until he reached the other side, then I hurriedly scrambled up the rocks on the “safe” route to join him just below the summit.

“No problem,” he said nonchalantly.

“You’re a dumb ass!” I responded.

Moments later, we scrambled up a fifteen to twenty foot high section of rock and pulled ourselves up onto the real summit.