



C6 MOUNTAINEERING

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Mountaineering, per se, is not often the main aim of an overseas youth expedition, given the necessarily limited experience of the young members (and even the leaders). Living in a mountain environment, whether polar or desert or tropical, and hiking through mountains, even ascending non-technical peaks, is another matter altogether (and is dealt with in other sections of this website manual). However, there is no problem in the concept of a youth mountaineering expedition overseas, provided that all in the team are fit, well-trained, and sufficiently experienced. Leadership brings its normal responsibilities, accentuated by the dangers of mountain climbing as opposed to trekking in the mountains. Large ambitions should be tempered by reality, modified by the depth of experience and expertise of the leader team and the young members. There is no room in youth expeditioning for “firsts” for their own sake – the first to climb a particular mountain, the youngest ever to climb a particular mountain, the highest ever reached by a youth expedition, and the like. Any expedition plan based on such concepts is suspect right from the beginning, with the stated aim of the expedition threatening to overwhelm the essential aim of all youth expeditions, which is personal development through adventurous activity in a wild and remote environment.

The idea of mountaineering as the chief aim and occupation of an expedition probably will come from the leader team, and it is important that leader aspiration does not overwhelm youth ability. The mountain objectives should be planned to be within the known capability of the young members; what is their mountain experience, have they climbed in the big ranges of the UK, have they done much alpine work, what rock climbing grades have they achieved, how good is their ropework, how well are they known to acclimatize? The acclimatization and training phases of an expedition may well push the boundaries higher than they were in the UK, but it is wise and prudent to plan conservatively and achieve correspondingly greater. At times, however, it may be the ambitions of youth that persuade leaders to embark on an expedition which takes the participants away from the British hills (which is where their experience has been gained and their skills honed), and such ambitions should be recognized and admired, even if the dreams of youth have to be modified by the sagacity of age (or rather, experience).

The leader team should be chosen according to its technical ability in relation to the expedition’s objective, its mountaineering experience (especially in the mountainous area chosen), and its ability to train and lead younger less experienced charges. A top mountaineer may be useless in this last aspect. There is little to be gained from very experienced mountaineers with their own ambitions taking charge of inexperienced young members and dragging them up routes which really are beyond their capabilities. It is much more satisfactory for everyone if easier routes are selected which the young members can tackle confidently themselves, in a leadership role, with overall supervision provided by the experienced leaders. Young people visiting a high mountain area for the first time are often intimidated enough, without being subjected additionally to difficult climbing at the top end (or beyond) of their capabilities. It is much better to climb an easy or moderate peak and get to the top than to spend a frustrating time failing to climb a severe north face, whatever the kudos that might bring. While mountain guides may be hired in the chosen location, it would be foolhardy for an expedition leader team entirely to rely on such people, whatever their

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qualifications, for it is the UK leader who holds the “duty of care” for his / her young charges. The ratio of experienced / qualified leaders to young members would appear to need to be somewhat greater than the norm for a youth expedition based on trekking and fieldwork, probably at the level of 1 : 3, or even 1 : 2 (one to a rope), dependent on the level of experience of the young members and the expected difficulties of the routes to be undertaken. Remember also that some countries may have stringent legislation about the level of qualification needed to lead young people in the mountains and onto glaciers, particularly if some of the young people are from the host country itself; it is incumbent on the UK leaders to research this information and to comply with it; The British Mountaineering Council (www.thebmc.co.uk) may well be in a position to advise.

If technical climbing is to be part of the expedition, and if the young members are expecting to be in a lead position with other young members on their rope, then it is imperative that this is made entirely clear in the risk assessment to the parents and guardians of all the expedition young members before parental consent for participation is sought and gained. Qualified and experienced adult leaders are expected to lead; if young members are to lead at any time (save in an emergency), however well supervised, then this is an additional risk which should form part of the informed consent of parents. Young members leading with adult leaders on the rope is fine; the adults can assess the risk themselves.

The young members should be selected strictly according to known and proven mountaineering ability (unless the objectives are selected once the team has been recruited, and adjusted accordingly). It is essential that the mountain leaders know at first hand the capabilities of their charges. The optimum case, perhaps, is when teachers / youth leaders from a school / youth organization themselves make up the leader team and have led climbing and mountaineering ventures and training expeditions with the prospective expedition young members over the previous two or three years. Through this they will get to know the strengths and weaknesses of each young member (and perhaps of themselves and other members of the leader team). It cannot be expected of young members who have never before worn crampons or used ice axes to tackle remote, steep and crevassed glaciers with the serious intent of reaching the top of a technical peak. The training should be done in winter in the Scottish Highlands rather than in situ in the expedition area where there may be poor back up if mistakes are made; or the expedition should limit its' aspirations to the straightforward and attainable, rather than the romantic and improbable. There is much to do and accomplish in the British Isles before moving further afield to climb mountains, in whatever season. Richard Gilbert, who led the Ampleforth College Kolahoi Expedition (the first schoolboy party to mountaineer in the Himalayas) wrote in his conclusion to the expedition report: *Our adventure was over. It would be too easy to say that the expedition members left the U.K. as boys and returned as mountaineers for the boys were already mountaineers, otherwise they could not have climbed Kolahoi.*

The location choice is wide – Alps, Pyrenees, Himalayas, Andes, Rockies, Caucasus, Tatra, Pamirs, Karakoram, Southern Alps, Patagonia, Alaska, Appalachians, Mackenzie, Brooks, Kolyma, Altai, Barisan, Kimberleys, Tibesti, Atlas, Carpathians, Scandinavian – the list goes on and on; arctic or tropical or desert; rock or snow and ice; near or far ranges. Do not forget that some of the authorities in which these ranges exist demand permits for ascending some mountains, as well as obtaining visas to enter the country; here advice can be taken from The British Mountaineering Council (www.thebmc.co.uk) or the Alpine Club (www.alpine-club.org.uk). Most countries now have national Mountaineering Associations / Clubs from whom up-to-date information can be obtained,

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and there is a wealth of published material – expedition reports, expedition books, and mountaineering literature in general – much of which is held by the Expedition Advisory Centre [*‘Geography Outdoors’*] at the Royal Geographical Society (www.rgs.org). From all this material, the leaders can select a location which meets the sensible aspirations of the party. Richard Gilbert, again: *For us a modest peak in the Himalaya would provide a great challenge. Our experience was necessarily limited, as is the case with all school parties, and the margin of safety would have to be wide. The mountain must not be too high or too inaccessible, yet it should provide us with an approach march through the foothills, several glacier camps and some serious climbing – the three ingredients of all Himalaya expeditions.*

Acclimatisation to the expedition area before attempting summits is vital, even if the expedition is not intending to go high enough to create altitude problems. For those aiming high, YET Good Practice in Altitude Acclimatisation for Youth Expeditions is available on the Publications page of the YET website (www.theyet.org). If the expedition is travelling to areas where climate and food are strange to the UK experience, then acclimatization becomes even more important. Often such acclimatization to the area takes place in the walk-in to the base camp from the road head, and this serves the double purpose of gaining some fitness, and well as allowing for the necessary adjustment from the UK to the expedition area. Of course, fitness ought to have been gained before the expedition, through a carefully structured programme, but nobody fails to benefit from a few extra days of hard walking and carrying. If the walk-in is long and over a few days, then the use of porters for the heavy equipment is encouraged, since the team must not be exhausted by the time it reaches its basecamp; however, if the walk-in is short, then good fitness and team spirit can be gained by the expedition itself portering the expedition goods from road-head to basecamp in an organized shuttle procedure. Care must be taken, however, to ensure that the young members do not over-strain in these first days; energy may be there, but stamina needs to be developed. In some countries it may be obligatory to hire porters, guides, and liaison officers; this needs to be researched in advance (probably through that country’s national mountaineering authority) and arrangements made.

The weather will be a constant factor in mountaineering. The sensible youth expedition leader will choose a location and time of year where and when the weather is expected to be favourable, even if the eventuality is different. Because any one peak may be out of condition for the whole duration of the expedition, it is wise for the expedition to go to a mountain area and climb those peaks which are in condition, accessible, and within the capabilities of the team, rather than placing all eggs in the one basket by nominating one particular summit as the objective of the expedition. Great success may still be enjoyed if the former option is taken, rather than the latter, for failing to reach that particular summit might lead the expedition to be described as a failure, despite the excellent work in youth development that has taken place. Furthermore, it will prevent the expedition leadership being persuaded into an ill-advised attempt on “the” peak in poor weather conditions, given the time constraints (normally less than a month in the field) of a youth expedition. Careful research is necessary to choose a mountain area which suits the expedition’s objectives at the time of year available to the expedition members. An expedition with just the one objective, in this case mountaineering, can be entirely subject to weather conditions, and this is a valid and strong argument to ensure that other activities (such as field science projects or mountain country backpacking trips) form part of an established alternative programme, thought out and planned before the expedition departs these shores.

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Given the lack of experience of the team, it may well be best to select a base camp area from which summit ascents (and return) can be made within a mountain day, however long; then the actual summit, and indeed the summiters, can be selected according to prevailing fitness, and the team can steadily increase its aspirations with the experience gained. Any summit that requires bivouacs may be deemed to be beyond the capabilities of a youth expedition, unless the members have been trained in these skills (most likely in a previous season in the Alps). This choice of a base camp from which forays can be made (even lengthy ones, perhaps, entailing a day or two backpacking to the foot of a peak climbable in a day) makes allowance for differing levels of energy of the members through an expedition period, and allows those exhausted, indisposed, or even ill, to recoup energies and fitness by a couple of days at base while others occupy themselves profitably.

A mountaineering expedition will be well equipped, it goes without saying, with all the technical equipment necessary for the routes expected. Here an important point is that equipment should be well tried and tested, with each individual owning and taking care of his / her own climbing harness, helmet, boots, crampons (which will fit perfectly!), axes, and the like. Hiring such equipment in the expedition area may be more economic, perhaps, than the cost of freighting, but then the expedition runs the risk that some of it may be ill-fitting (and so dangerous), and certainly the young members need to have the confidence of using equipment fitting perfectly and well-accustomed in use.

On a mountain, danger is ever present, and young members lack mountain experience. Malcolm Slesser once wrote: *I believe that young climbers survive largely through luck. Awareness cannot be taught. It really comes through experience. I recall so many brilliant climbers, now dead, who died young, some not even in the mountains. Theirs was a sort of recklessness, based upon inexperience, with its roots in an inability to know when they were in danger. But survive that early stage and one learns awareness. Of course, we all need luck. I am conscious of being lucky to be alive, yet I have not had one tenth of the hazardous climbing that many others have had. Too many people imagine that safety is synonymous with good equipment, lots of pitons and slings. You cannot really buy safety, it is a state of mind, in which every danger is sensed and evaluated. It is a sense which, when awakened, seldom becomes dormant. It is a sense which makes one man wait until the freeze comes, while another crosses a dangerous slope. The slope may not avalanche, but only the experienced and aware know the risk that was being run. Risk, of course, is another thing. Sometimes the enterprise calls for risk. But I would a hundred times rather embark upon a calculated risk with an aware climber than with one who blithely takes all risks, having failed to evaluate them. The reason being that you are usually roped to your companion. When he falls you may go to. And falling rocks and avalanching snow are no respecters of mountaineering conventions.*

The above may be thought to be a little on the conservative side, inhibiting those who wish to give young people their head and challenge them to real endeavour. A safe and responsible youth mountain expedition will provide those memories and experiences which will carry through into adulthood – it is important that youth expeditions are run in such a way as to ensure that all members progress through to adulthood, and some young people who have enjoyed a successful expedition will be encouraged to develop their skills and experience and go on to adult expeditions. Let calculated risks to gain the summit (and glory) be the province of such adult expeditions. *We live and learn, and big mountains are stern teachers*, wrote Bill Tillman; the important point is to live

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as well as learn. Most mountaineers will agree with Geoffrey Winthrop Young: *Mountains are good adventure. They change little enough in their attributes and charm, for us who consider them permanent. To their changelessness they owe the power of 'renewing our youth' whenever we are again among them. The same appearance, the same atmosphere, reproduce always the same feelings in us. We return at each sight of them to the self which first saw them, regardless of any change in ourselves. To this too they owe their comfortableness, their power, when we are among them, of making us see all other events of life in the right proportion. It is upon their changelessness that we rely to give us back ourselves. That which is unalterable in them answers to that which remains unaltered in us, and restores it to its importance for us.* Young members of a successful mountain expedition will maintain such memories throughout their lives and benefit from returning to the mountains in adult life.

But all mountain leaders, whether of youth expeditions or not, will echo Edward Whymper: *Remember that courage and strength are naught without prudence, and that a momentary negligence may destroy the happiness of a lifetime. Do nothing in haste; look well to each step and from the beginning think what may be the end.*

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