

3 The West Buttress Route

3·8 Summit day

Time (average)	8-16 hours
Altitude gained	950 metres (3115 feet)
Grade	easy gradients, but challenging altitude & temperature
Terrain	gentle snow and ice, but very exposed in places
Summary	a dangerous traverse followed by a straight walk up the mountain, finishing off with an amazing traverse across the exposed ridge all the way to the summit

Today you will climb above the huge massif and see wonderful views of Alaska in all directions. Despite being only 4 km each way, this will be one of the hardest days of your life.

Leave camp, aiming for the bottom-left part of the rocky triangle due east. Pass underneath the rocks and traverse in an almost straight line to just above Denali Pass (5545 m). This section is not very steep, but it's the most dangerous part of the mountain. Falls have been common, especially during descent, many with fatal results. Nowadays the section has been secured by the guides and rangers with pickets and carabiners, so you can clip in your rope for a running belay. Bring some pickets yourself, in case the fixed ones are missing or buried.



Climbing the huge cornice on the summit ridge



At Denali Pass, turn right and go straight (south) just a few dozen metres left (east) of the ridge. Experienced climbers leave their ropes at the Pass, picking them up on the way down. Before doing likewise, remember that you still face the summit ridge, a very exposed section. Assess your strength and experience honestly, and if in doubt, keep the ropes with you.

You will pass some rock sections soon after the pass, but mainly the track is on solid snow. Continue up until you see some rocks on your left, roughly at 5900 m and in the same line as the Archdeacon's Tower, a large protruding rock due east. Turn slightly left here by changing your course to south-east, passing the rocks just on their south side. Continue south-east across a small plateau until you drop down onto a much larger plateau, aptly nicknamed the Football Field.

Leaving High Camp en route to Denali Pass



Strangely enough the track might stand proud above the plateau as the compacted snow erodes more slowly than the loose snow that surrounds it. Cross the plateau heading south-east, and aim for the right side of the summit ridge, named Kahiltna Horn. Some climbers go straight to the middle of the summit ridge from the bottom of the final slope known as Pig Hill, but this is steeper and therefore more dangerous. Instead, follow the switchbacks up the right hand side of the steep slope until you reach the Horn at 6133 m. This is where the famous Cassin Ridge ends. The views are endless.

Now you face only one last section: the summit ridge. Stay on the ridge, or just to its left side, as the south side is much steeper and there might be cornices. The last 400 m takes you over thin and exposed tracks and some minor humps to the end: the Summit of North America, 6194 m above sea level.

Above Denali Pass, towards Archdeacon's Tower and the summit ridge





The summit itself is wide enough for a few people to stand on simultaneously, but be careful when removing your pack, especially when taking those coveted photographs. Even in the best weather it will be -30 degrees or colder, so your fingers are very vulnerable. Keep an eye on the weather and return immediately if there is any sign of approaching bad weather. It's a long haul before you reach camp again.

The author (right) with friend Ron Doorackers on the summit of Denali

