

Back-talk with Mike Marolt - High Altitude Turns on China's Mustagh Ata

Contributed by Aimee Furber
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Backcountry: We hear that you just skied Mustagh Ata. Can you tell us a little bit about your experiences there?

Mike Marolt: Mustagh Ata is in a really unique part of the world. The Himalaya, the Karakoram, the Pamirs, and a couple other really major mountain ranges all come together. Mustagh Ata is kind of the hub of these great ranges, and you get up on it and you can see peak Lenin over in the Pamirs. You look in the other direction and see K2, Broad Peak, Gasherbrum—all places that we've climbed before.

BC: What was your favorite part about the climb?

MM: The skiing. It's a really good peak to ski. We had some really good, short extreme pitches in the icefall. It's just a monster of a mountain. The majority of the mountain is not extreme, outside of the altitude, but just really great skiing.

BC: We saw from your trip report that you guys had a little bit of interesting weather at the top.

MM: Yeah, we didn't quite make it all the way to the top. We got all the way to, I don't know, 45 minutes from the top. Even with wands, whiteout conditions come in, and it's hard to see them. We followed wands as far as the summit plateau, where it leads in so many different directions that we just literally didn't know which way to go.

BC: Have you ever used oxygen? Did you take any on this trip?

MM: No, no. For us—we grew up here in the Elks [Mountains] of Colorado. You know, oxygen, it's not that we have a machismo going about it or that we're purists or anything like that, it just doesn't enter into the thought pattern. It's go and climb the mountain on its terms, and if you can't finish the mountain because of that factor, you give it the best that you can. On Everest in 2003, there were people going to the summit with oxygen and porters. Without oxygen it was just too cold, it was a limiting factor, and we didn't summit on that trip. It's just the way we choose to do it. It's not the right way or

the wrong way. It's just for personal reasons: that's the way we choose to do it.

BC: You mentioned skiing in Colorado. Did you start ski mountaineering there?

MM: I'm fifth generation here in Aspen. My dad was an Olympic skier, so was my uncle actually. So skiing has just been in the blood for a long, long time. We have really great mountains here to ski during the winter, and in the spring we have corn skiing and hard snow skiing in the backcountry that is second to none.

We started here just going out with dad. When we were old enough we could drive ourselves out to the peaks and then climb and ski. It's just something that we grew up doing. We never really, like today's extreme skiers, counted first ascents. It was very unorganized, very uncalculated—just a great way to spend our free time as we were growing up.

BC: How did you get started skiing the bigger mountains?

MM: It's just a natural progression. You start out skiing the peaks around here. We went up and did some peaks, Rainier and stuff like that. Then we did about a dozen expeditions into Alaska, including Denali, and all over the Wrangell/St. Elias range. We spent a bunch of years doing stuff in those peaks. Every year we'd go up and do a couple of peaks. Then we did about a half dozen expeditions to about 12 peaks throughout South America and just gradually spent a lifetime progressing into bigger peaks.

Eventually in '97 we made our first expedition to 8,000 meters—Broad Peak in Pakistan. Learned a lot on that trip. Then in 2000, we skied the central peak on Shishapangma. In between it's been more trips to South America. We skied the volcanoes in Ecuador, skied all over Peru, and all over Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia. Mustagh Ata was a training climb for an upcoming trip to Cho Oyu and Everest.

BC: So, what do you do in your free time besides ski?

MM: Raise two kids.

BC: How old are they?

MM: Talulah is four and a half and Flora is two. They're both adopted from China so it's another connection. I've got a soft spot for China.

BC: You mention in your trip report that sometimes it's hard to be away from your family.

MM: That's the hardest part. We're out there having fun climbing and skiing, and my wife supports that. With the kid factor it definitely has forced us—we've chosen—to crank it down a couple of notches. We've been doing this for the past 20 years, so we're all on the same page without really having to communicate it. I think that plays a huge role in our success, because nobody feels uncomfortable making a conservative decision.

You learn over time, I think it's the experience factor, that old saying, "there are old climbers and there are bold climbers, but no old, bold climbers." I think climbers realize as they get older that patience is the key to success.

BC: Is there anything else you want to add for our readers?

MM: I think you gotta pay your dues when you are high altitude skiing—you can't rush it. We're really fortunate where we're established as business people. I'm a CPA and all my buddies have careers, and we don't do this as professional athletes. We're not getting paid to do this. We're doing it because, it sounds trite, but for the love of the game.

You see a lot of young people out there not only in high altitude, but in extreme skiing in general, fighting for the sponsorships. When you mix money with dangerous activities you get a level of excitement that exceeds the norm. Kodak courage is not necessarily a great thing.