

## 8,000-Meter Glory: Ballinger claims first descent of Manaslu

Contributed by Emma Lande

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An internationally certified guide, Ballinger is the founder and head guide of Lake Tahoe-based Alpenglow Expeditions. Manaslu was Ballinger's first 8,000-meter summit in 2008. His most recent ascent marks his tenth 8,000er and his fourth this year. This was also one of the first times an 8,000-meter peak was ski-guided, and Baranove was the first Russian to ski Manaslu.

There are three previous incomplete ski descents of Manaslu, but Ballinger claims his was the first complete descent. Austrians Peter Woergoetter and Sepp Millinger achieved the initial ski descent in 1981. The next did not occur until 2009, by British guide Guy Willet, closely followed by fellow Brit, Kenton Cool, in 2010. Ballinger says his descent is the only full descent on skis. He proclaims the previous ski descents initiated just below at the false summit and failed to ski some of the more technical sections of the mountain.

During Ballinger's three previous climbs up Manaslu, he dreamt of bringing his skis upon his return, believing it was a perfect mountain for a ski descent. When Baranove, contacted him wanting to attempt a ski descent, Ballinger jumped at the opportunity. In a post-expedition email, Ballinger said that Manaslu has "a super aesthetic line with a huge variety in terrain, and the potential to be skiable in its entirety."

To prepare, Ballinger and Baranove skied numerous days on Manaslu in September. Ballinger describes the skiing in his blog as "firm, edge-able conditions on steep terrain." On September 21, the mountain saw the first new snow of the season, improving the skiing, but significantly increasing avalanche danger. With the freshly fallen snow, the group had to postpone their initial summit attempt. Ballinger and Baranove set off from base camp on October 1 after the weather cleared, with sights on the summit. Four days later the two reached the summit at 8:45 a.m.

Ballinger decided to attempt to ski from the true summit, while Baranove descended to the plateau of the false summit just below to put on his skis. Ballinger constructed a platform on the summit cornice. "It was a hairy place to click in, even

clipped in to a rope," he says. He described his post atop Manaslu as "a wild place to be perched on skis--a knife-edge, corniced ridge with 8,000 feet of air below me." He then roped up for the initial descent down to the false summit, skiing a 55-degree slope covered in a sheet of ice. Throughout the remainder of the descent, Ballinger encountered an array of snow conditions and terrain: from steep technical skiing with firm snow, to more mellow slopes covered with slush.

As Ballinger discovered, skiing above 8,000 meters is not easy. "The effort of making turns with heavy packs on steep terrain in marginal snow is immense," he says. "I would set goals for myself of 20 or 25 turns, and it would be hard to meet that goal." He adds that weighing the risks in the high-consequence situation was taxing. "All the time, you are mentally at your limit," he reflects.

In order to navigate down the hazardous area from Camp 4 to Camp 3, Ballinger and Baranove received instructions via base camp. They skied a route far skiers right under the East Pinnacle that meandered through seracs and ice bulges. When they reached 6,100 meters, Ballinger set off a large slab avalanche. The slab nearly swept him and nearby climbers down a gully known as the Hourglass. Due to the heightened risk, the two decided to remove their skis and descend past the avalanche zone to 5,800 meters. While Ballinger failed to ski the Hourglass during the descent, he says he had skied it before and has therefore made the "complete," 3,200-meter descent. While Ballinger is off to guide Nepal's Ama Dablam, he writes, "Sergey and I are still processing the ski, and already making plans for the next adventure.

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