

CAMP is excited to announce a new partnership with Carlos Buhler, one of North America's most prolific, perceptive, and accomplished alpine climbers and high-altitude mountaineers.

Carlos Buhler, an American originally from New York and Washington, now lives in Canmore, Alberta. During the 1980s and 90s Carlos was at the forefront of alpinism, and has continued to climb at a high level even while raising a family and becoming an "elder statesman" in the world of mountaineering.

We caught up with Carlos to try and absorb a little wisdom gained from his 4+ decades in the mountains, and the partnerships he's had during dozens of expeditions and trips abroad.

You are one of the most prolific and broadly successful Himalayan climbers in North America, and you've written: "Climbing in the Himalaya is really a study in interpersonal relations – not climbing," which insights into these relations have allowed you to be so successful? Why have others overlooked these insights?

I believe that people basically want to succeed. It doesn't really matter whether you are an outlaw, a gang leader, an entrepreneur, a politician, an athlete, or a drug dealer. If you give people a path to achieve satisfaction, to feel good about themselves, people will generally follow it. But it isn't easy to give people this path. I believe it is safe to say that most parents want to open this path to their children. However, most children run into difficulties and challenges very early in life and have to learn quickly to accept some sort of failure and pain. The ones that make it into adulthood with relatively intact mental and social skill sets are the lucky ones. But whatever the case, we sweep a lot of mental crap under the carpet. Basically, this baggage has a high likelihood of coming out, in one form or another, during an intense expedition.

I don't want to sound morose, or gloomy. It is normal to go through our lives keeping most of this stuff inside so that it doesn't affect our everyday lives. But climbing a big mountain will bring out the best and the worst in people. Interpersonal interactions on a trip is where all these personal agendas collide. I'm not pretending to be a psychotherapist. Hardly! But I recognize that what comes out of the people when the chips are down, when things get tough, is often coming from deep inside them. I've certainly seen this in myself. And I've not always been very happy with what I've seen.

Keeping this in mind during a team effort like climbing is important because very high motivation is the key ingredient for success. When teams fail to climb mountains, very often it's the result of a loss of motivation. Manage to keep the interpersonal relationships healthy and, most of the time, the climbers that are highly motivated will take care of the rest.

In today's world, alpinism is supported in the social media networks. What is your opinion of the new technology? What differences do you find among the climbers of today and those of yesterday?

The opportunity for connecting people, sharing information and disseminating knowledge is unprecedented in today's world. But along with the ability to offer knowhow and valuable insights among participants, is the ability to "spray" achievements and spread trends. While the lightning quick pace of the information age is empowering, it is almost intoxicating. Too much knowledge can be overwhelming, as well. From a social perspective, somehow I can feel both more accepted and more insecure at the same time.

So how do we survive in this new information rich environment? How do we prosper and protect ourselves at the same time? How do we employ a margin of error in our decision making and maintain a sense of independent thinking while living in a world where social media zealots are being rewarded by mass worshipping and an almost mythical following? Do we not want to be a part of the wave? We live in a climbing world with web based social networking. Among other things, it has opened up huge opportunities for bringing our sport into the public consciousness. With this visibility has come vast new opportunities for obtaining our goals, turning our passion into our career, and finding financial support that was unheard of two decades ago. But what is at the core of it all? Have people changed?

I believe climbers and explorers, as people, have not changed much over the years. However, their definition of personal achievement and what their community anticipates of them has indeed changed.

How should a young alpinist approach mountains in his/her early stages?

Be patient. It is impossible to communicate effectively to a young person the real length of a lifetime without early termination. I think the one thought I would give to young climbers is to

try to remember that it's all about longevity. Becoming known as a dead alpinist is not where you want to end up, if at all possible. I know this will fall on deaf ears. And that is human nature. If it were not for young people, we would not be moving forward as a species in any field. But there is some value in pointing out that a balance can be found between taking extraordinary risk in pursuit of achievement and finding satisfaction as a conservative, safe climber. I don't have the balance figured out. I still suffer from anguish over routes that I have not succeeded on or turned around on. But the amount of anguish? It is all individual, I suppose. Still, for every distinguished climber I have ever heard of, there are at least as many others I've heard of that have died while pursuing their passion.

As a Himalayan alpinist, what did mountains bring you on a personal level?

I found that I learned a great deal more by experiencing an event in raw nature, rather than by researching a problem in a controlled lab. This learning process continues today. The relationship is constantly evolving as a result of my development and evolution as a person. My transition, from a young, shy beginner, into a mature professional alpinist and eventually to an inspired enthusiast, is part of the relatively unavoidable journey through life (if one is lucky enough to avoid a bad outcome). At the present, I am mostly appreciating from the sidelines what is possible today. But it has been this rewarding journey, this process of evolution, that mountains brought me as an individual.

Many of your notable ascents took place during the final decade of Cold War, when Soviet-sponsored expeditionary groups were in some sense competing with westerners. How did their approach to alpine climbing compare to the strategies employed by North American and European climbers?

The Russian style of competitive climbing was a category of climbing developed in a culture where money was tight and only the best climbers were given the chance to travel to the high ranges in the Soviet Union (in those days, the Caucasus, the Tien Shan, and the Pamir). European, Asian and American climbers were recreational climbers for the most part. They also had choices, where their Soviet counterparts did not. Thus, the Soviets developed a style of climbing in the larger mountains that was quite goal oriented; of approaching a difficult mountain with a necessity for completing the project. They didn't go to these big mountain objectives with a romantic vision of self-fulfillment and spiritual growth. They climbed for fun in other venues, where there wasn't so much on the line. To understand this in our society, we have a similar approach when it comes to professional sports like basketball, hockey, football,

and baseball. These Soviet climbing teams were oriented like our professional teams are: It was business, and a very serious one at that. Thus, the best way to “win” was to be seriously organized and adopt a “centrally-planned and more bureaucratic approach” as we say. It is not that way any longer in Russian climbing. But the past has not been forgotten by a new generation of Russian climbers.

What do most visiting ice climbers need to know about Canmore that is often overlooked? Where do the locals go for food after climbing, and where do they climb that isn't widely known?

The Alpine Club of Canada offers great accommodations with food storage refrigerators and cooking facilities at their clubhouse in Canmore at very reasonable prices. There are several Hosteling International youth hostels in Banff and Lake Louise. These offer decent accommodations at reasonable prices. Food is a very personal choice. My favorites include the Summit Cafe for breakfast and The Spice Hut (Indian Food) for dinner in Canmore.

A visiting climber should try and experience each of the regions that make up the “Rockies Ice Experience”; the Kananaskis, the Ghost, the Bow Valley, Mt. Stanley Headwall, the Field area and the Icefields parkway. In an attempt to not leave anything out, I am sure I’ll do just that! But in essence, one could say there are a dozen “hit list” climbs of a reasonable grade (Grade IV and V) that deserve attention: Professor’s Gully, Louise Falls, Bourgeau Left, Super Bock, Murchison Falls, Polar Circus, Whiteman Falls, Hydrophobia, and The Sorcerer, are all high quality, accessible, multi pitch climbs. Add to these the Sea of Vapors, Nemesis, Terminator, Curtain Call, Weeping Pillar, French Reality and Kitty Hawk and you’ll have a great deal of appreciation for what the range offers.

There are dozens of other high quality routes to keep you begging for more: Gibraltar Wall, Bourgeau Right, Takakkaw Falls, Amadeus, Coire Dubh Intégrale, Moonlight, Bow Falls, Oh le Tabernac, Ice Nine, Whoa Whoa Capitaine, Shooting Star, Sinister Street, Virtual Reality, Fang and Fist, Cold Choice, Helmet Falls, Pilsner Pillar, Carlsberg Column, French Maid, Lacy Gibbet, Marion Falls, Fearful Symmetry, and Rainbow Serpent. Not one of these is a bad climb! Now, with mixed climbs throughout this area, the hit list is almost endless.

Climbers must pay attention to avalanche conditions and ice formations here in the Canadian Rockies. To an especially high degree, one must be vigilant about finding out what has happened before and then during their visit. All too often, climbers and skiers arrive here with great excitement, only to be surprised by difficult and complicated-to-predict conditions. I cannot stress enough the importance of checking the website at www.avalanche.ca or calling the Banff Park Warden office to check on up-to-the-moment avalanche conditions. We lose far too many climbers and skiers to take this lightly. For example, all sort of terrain traps on approaches and over/under climbs catch people off guard here. Even locals! And some of these climbers are experienced people, who have a lot of mileage. We still get caught! Find out what has happened over the past month before arriving and plan accordingly. Big drops in temperatures put enormous stress on ice pillars for a few days. Let the ice adjust. Big rises in temperatures (our chinooks here) tend to rapidly settle a snowpack that has remained relatively unthreatening for many weeks. There can be lots of avalanche activity during these cycles. Play it safe!

In addition to difficult high-altitude climbs such as K2, Kangchenjunga, and Everest, you pioneered early free ascents of still impressive water ice lines such as Pilsner Pillar and Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test. Have changes in climbing hardware been more impactful for shorter, technically difficult climbs, or for high altitude expeditions which involve more total gear but also a greater level of human complexity? Is there a particular equipment advance (going leashless? Monopoint crampons? Wiregates?) with which you felt a distinct leap in standards became possible?

While there is no denying the leaps of equipment design for alpinism and very technical ice and rock climbing, there is still no end to the advances in sight. People are still developing new and significant gear designs every year.

Technically, the biggest improvements have to do with protection. Our limits 40 years ago were not progression upwards on ice or stone, but finding and placing protection to limit progression downwards! Modern ice screws and other gadgets, like lightweight cams, are vastly superior. They are simple, light and easy to place with one hand. This is a huge difference!

Another major area of revolutionary improvement occurred with lighting. The luminosity of a tiny, modern headlamp is truly extraordinary! In addition, the weight has been reduced very significantly, the burn time with a set of AAA batteries is quite amazing, and the price is low. I remember being so impressed

with the new headlamps that I took a small, high powered example to show my old friend, the legendary “father” of high altitude medicine, Dr. Charles Houston, at his home in Vermont. From his struggles on K2 in 1938 until the invention of LED headlamps, there were a lot of advancements in high altitude mountaineering. His *own* additions to the body of knowledge surrounding high altitude physiology were some of the most significant. However, the advancement in lighting was one I wanted to show him personally. They have enabled a whole new style and approach to climbing.