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Portlanders ready for mountain trek

■ The group will attempt to tackle K2, the world's second-tallest peak

By Terry Richard
The Associated Press

PORTLAND — Every morning for more than a month, Jeff Alzner poked his head outside his tent and marveled at one of the most imposing mountain views on the planet.

A Portland landscaper, Alzner was in Pakistan's Karakoram Range to climb Broad Peak, the world's 12th-highest mountain.

A few miles north, an even bigger giant soars more than two miles in pyramidal splendor above the tent city that sprawls on the Godwin-Austen Glacier during Himalayan climbing season.

That mountain is K2, which at 28,267 feet, is the second-highest peak on Earth. During that summer of 1995, Alzner spent five weeks climbing 26,400-foot Broad Peak, but it was K2 that haunted his dreams when he returned to Portland.

He decided that, one day, he would return to Asia to attempt the summit that mountaineers prize even more highly than Mount Everest.

That day is approaching. Alzner will leave in two months on an expedition he calls K2000: The American North Ridge Expedition.

"I always thought K2 was too hard or too high," said Alzner, who has put together the most ambitious mountaineering expedition ever organized in Oregon. "When you're there and you're looking at K2, you can't help but want to climb it."

To plan the K2 expedition, Alzner, 41, teamed with Wayne Wallace, 36, a Portland construction worker and one of the most accomplished technical climbers ever to come from Oregon.

Alzner brings high-altitude experience, while Wallace offers superb technical skills for climbing high-angle rock and ice.

Together they enticed 11 friends to join the expedition (each ponied up \$5,000) and began courting sponsors to help cover the estimated \$235,000 cost.

The team includes one other Portlander, Drew Hansen, 30, who will lead the expedition's environmental cleanup and will be making his first trip to Asia.

Other members come from California, Colorado, Alaska and Connecticut. Together they bring impressive credentials on Asia's high mountains, arctic climbing in Alaska and big-wall ice and rock climbing in California, Canada and Chile. Two of the climbers are physicians.

Heidi Howkins, 32, a former Oregonian who lives in Ridgefield, Conn., is the only one of the group who manages a living as a professional mountaineer.

The petite 120-pounder will attempt to become the first American woman (and the sixth overall) to climb K2.

Alzner's expedition will not be a return voyage for him up Pakistan's Baltoro and Godwin-Austen glaciers to the Abruzzi Ridge, the standard route on K2's south side and the least difficult approach to the mountain.

Instead, he selected the rarely visited North Ridge route on the Chinese side of the mountain, where the approach includes a 70-mile march alongside camels that carry the expedition's gear, plus

another week spent ferrying loads up the K2 Glacier to base camp.

The expedition will be in the field so long that it will bring in live sheep for fresh meat and plant a vegetable garden where the camels' trek ends.

Although long and difficult, the North Ridge route is considered the safest on K2 because it doesn't have the extreme danger of rock-fall and avalanches that plagues the mountain's other routes.

The climb will be in lightweight expedition style, without the aid of supplemental oxygen or high-altitude porters.

"The only way I could assemble a team of really good climbers was to go to the North Ridge," Alzner said. "Everybody else goes to the south side, and I knew the climbers I wanted wouldn't be interested in going there."

Why did Alzner choose K2 instead of Mount Everest, which, after all, is nearly 800 feet higher?

"It's like an old saying," Alzner said. "When you see some of the people who are going to heaven, it makes you want to go somewhere else. Everest doesn't do anything for me."

To reach the north side of K2, team members will leave May 18 for Islamabad, Pakistan, where they will hire trucks for the three-day drive on the Karakoram Highway to the Chinese border.

After clearing border formalities, they'll drive four more days into China, traveling through the ancient Silk Road city of Kashgar.

When the trucks reach road's end, about 75 camels, all famously ill-tempered according to members of past expeditions, will take a week to transport supplies 70 miles closer to K2. Team members will ride the camels only during river crossings.

"From where the camels dump the supplies, you still have to carry everything 17 miles up the glacier to base camp," Burgess said.

If everything goes according to plan, the camels will drop supplies June 7 and the expedition will be cut off from the world until the camels return in late August.

A Chinese team will be climbing the same route this summer in an attempt to plant its country's flag atop K2 for the first time. Two teams working together is expected to improve both of their chances of reaching the summit.

Coming down alive, which can be even more difficult than reaching the top, is the ultimate achievement on K2.

Barely two months before departure, the team is scrambling to put together a documentary film deal, to attract more sponsors and to raise funds locally by selling T-shirts — all typical last-minute details for major expeditions.

Alzner says he's prepared to mortgage his Southwest Portland house, if it's the only way to complete the financing.

"I'm to the point in my climbing career," he said, "where I either have to make it pay off or I need to quit. What I'm doing now takes such a commitment that I don't have time to run my business."

Bob McGown, Oregon correspondent for the American Alpine Club, says he thinks he knows why K2 has a way of making climbers do seemingly irrational things.

"If you climb K2, it's pretty much the paramount of a climber's career," he said. "When you've climbed K2, you've done it."