

Are You Tough Enough?

Mountain guide. Backcountry ranger. Smokejumper.

Every backpacker dreams of a glory job in the outdoors.

Senior Editor **Shannon Davis** heads to Mt. Rainier—and a grueling tryout with premier guide operation RMI—to find out what it takes to make the grade.

Plus: Rate your skills and fitness with the tests for eight more hard-duty professions.



+ Win BACKPACKER's Tough-Guy Challenge! p. 82

Illustration by Jacob Thomas

In theory,

double-plastic mountaineering boots make crappy running shoes. In practice, I can certify that they're actually much worse. The hard outer shells come up to near mid-calf and are as rigid as barn siding. The thick inner linings are rated to -30°F. These qualities make them perfect for snowy, steep, frigid terrain—but for running up a muddy fire road while carrying a 30-pound pack? Only if you desire the gait of Frankenstein and the precision footwork of a cow. My shins bang against the stiffened tongues. My heels slip. Other runners—the guys I'm competing against, who were smart enough to pack something besides doubles—pass me with antelope ease.

It's mid-morning on a 45°F March day in perpetually misty Ashford, Washington (population 293), just outside the southwest entrance of Mt. Rainier National Park. I'm here to go toe to crampon-compatible toe with nine other aspiring mountain guides who have been invited to a tryout with Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. (RMI), one of the country's largest, best-known, and most-respected guide companies. We've all paid our own way to this one-shot trial, but only a couple of us will get hired as guides. The rest will have to find alternative summer work—something notably less badass, to be sure. The way this three-mile run—a key component of our fitness assessment—is going,

I'm worried that I've already been relegated to the latter.

But consider the former: *mountain guide!* What backpacker worth his weight in ice axes hasn't fantasized about one of the toughest, most dangerous, and most glory-drenched paychecks in the outdoors?¹ Jobs like this—think backcountry ranger, Outward Bound instructor, wildlife biologist, and other Gore-Tex-collar careers—give you unfettered access to an exclusive brand of adventure that's off-limits to the general public. But it's not a simple VIP pass: You have to *earn* the keys to the kingdom by proving fitness, technical know-how, charisma, and those intangibles that separate the leaders from the rest. Maybe my peers and I will never be tested like the Greatest Generation, but that doesn't mean we can't reach the highest level of competency, confidence, and self-reliance. Make the cut, and you see more, go farther, get deeper, and do it *all the freakin' time*.

For some of us, the desire to join that exclusive club is so strong we start wondering: Do I have what it takes? That fire was lit in my belly after summiting Mt. Rainier a couple of years ago on a climb with JanSport employees. Casey Grom (a senior RMI guide and two-time Everest summitter)



Backcountry ranger

Job description Simply put, get paid to be a backpacker. OK, that's too simple. Rangers do explore sprawling wilderness areas on foot, but it's not all peakbagging and meadow naps. On patrol, you'll check on visitors' safety and lawfulness, perform trail maintenance, join search-and-rescue efforts, and more. (Get an insider's take on the job at backpacker.com/ranger.) According to Patti Schwind, who worked six seasons as a wilderness ranger in Idaho, "You need superior strength and stamina for all hiking conditions. Rangers typically go on a 10-day hitch, alone, and hike up to 15 miles daily."

Entrance exam A backcountry ranger carries a 65-pound pack full of heavy tools, such as an axe, shovel, pulaski, saw, and wrench. The following test is designed to gauge your ability to carry that pack and perform routine tasks. You can take a one-minute rest between exercises, but to pass, you must finish it all within three hours.

- Walk 5 miles at a 5% incline on a treadmill with a 50-pound pack, in 90 minutes or less.
- Dig a 10-foot-long trench that is 2 feet wide and 2 feet deep.
- Push/roll a 30-pound boulder for 50 feet.

pulled me aside and said, "Hey, if that BACKPACKER gig of yours ever stops doing it for you, you could easily come out here and guide." It was a siren. A top RMI guide was telling me that I could be an RMI guide. I could climb this beast every day and lead countless people on a trip that could very well be the high point of their lives. I could do that. Totally.

If I can pick up the damn pace.

Each spring, RMI staffs up for the coming

season, filling holes in the 74-guide staff. Out of hundreds of applicants, 40 are invited to one of four daylong tryouts. Out of those, 10 will make the final cut. Our instructions: Pack sunglasses, gloves, boots, crampons, an ice axe, food, a climbing pack, and crevasse-rescue equipment, and be ready to demonstrate proficiency in the following skills: avalanche forecasting, crampon use, snow and ice anchors, pressure breathing, wilderness medicine, knots/slings/ropes, cold-weather injuries, crevasse rescue, mountain weather, Leave No Trace ethics, outdoor equipment selection and use, high-altitude illness, belaying,

ice-axe arrest, client care, rest-stepping, glacier travel, setting a pace, step-kicking, transceiver searches, fixed-line use, and navigation and routefinding. In other words: This is a tryout, not a class; you better show up as a capable, well-rounded mountaineer.

I have a pretty solid foundation in alpine skills, thanks to five years of travels as a BACKPACKER staffer (including summits of Mt. McKinley, Rainier, and ice-capped peaks in Switzerland and New Zealand)—plus previous lives as a Wind Rivers-obsessed climber with an address that matched my license plate number and as an outdoor-pursuits program coordinator at a private school in Arizona. (To be clear, I'm not quitting my day job for the chance at a part-time, seasonal slot on Rainier, but my boss gave me the thumbs-up to moonlight as an RMI guide, if I qualify.)

I arrive in the Summit Haus at RMI's compound two minutes early, and the room is already packed with nervous, milling recruits. At 32, I'm one of the oldest. It's as quiet and tense as a finals week library, and I immediately make it a point to break the ice and get people talking.² Supervisors Paul Maier (more than 300 Rainier summits) and Alex Van Steen (who has summited Rainier by 20 different routes, including a solo of one of the hardest, Liberty

Smokejumper

Job description Risk your life to fight wildfires in the most extreme conditions and locations imaginable. Smokejumpers up the danger by parachuting into remote backcountry hotspots. After leaping from the plane, you retrieve your gear (up to 110 pounds of supplies per person), dig fire lines or fell trees from dawn to dusk, and often hike out 10 miles after the job is done. Tip: Don't get your chute caught in a 150-foot-tall ponderosa on the way down. Expect to take the following test on the first day of training.

Entrance exam

- + 1.5-mile run in 10:35 or less
- + Minimum of 7 pull-ups
- + 45 sit-ups in 1 minute
- + 25 push-ups in 1 minute
- + Dig 99 feet of 3-foot-wide fire line in light grass within an hour.
- + Pack 110 pounds on level terrain for 3 miles in 90 minutes or less.
- + Prerequisite: To qualify for smokejumper school, you need at least one year of employment with an established wildland firefighting unit (see right).

Ridge) enter a minute later, and we gather around a foot-thick table hewn from a huge western red cedar.

"Welcome. This is a day where we will get to know you," says Van Steen. "We use a small-group setting because it allows us to assess intangibles that we can't glean from your climbing resumé. How confident are you? How do you work within a group? Can you speak in front of a crowd?"

Maier issues our first task: "Introduce yourselves, and remember that this is your first chance to sell yourself. Tell us about your strengths, identify your

best quality, and say why we should hire you. You each have two minutes." So much for putting us at ease.

Answers range from the brown-nosey ("I'm a natural leader—and I'm all about safety, too") to the obvious ("I'm a strong climber") to the downright puzzling ("I can tell what people are thinking before they even say anything").

I go last, which I worry will be a disadvantage as other candidates, one after the other, claim potential answers. But at the last minute, I see how to make it an advantage. "I usually try to go first in these situations, but this

➔ Wildland firefighter

Job description Wage war at the front lines of wilderness fire patrol. Hand crews, helitack (chopper) crews, airtankers, rappellers, and smokejumpers all contribute. And don't be deceived by the relatively painless formal test. According to Murry Taylor, who fought fires for 27 seasons and once worked 14-hour days for 56 days straight, "It is a very physically demanding job where you learn how to live with pain."

Entrance exam

- + Pack test: Hike 3 miles over level terrain carrying a 45-pound pack. It must be completed within 45 minutes.

made me think a little bit harder, which is good," I say. "My best quality is that I'm laid-back. That may seem like an odd one to pick, since it doesn't take much practice—or even any energy. But it lends a comfortable leadership style, which is valuable when things get intense. I'm the calm in a storm—and that's why you should hire me."³

It goes over well. Maier (bad cop to Van Steen's good) even repeats it later in the day. But my momentum is cut short by our next task: a three-mile trail run with a loaded pack, designed to immediately—and publicly—reveal who is fit and who isn't. And I only brought double-plastic mountaineering boots that weigh more than two pounds apiece.

On my second lap, my goal becomes simply not to be the worst. And I'm not, clomping in ahead of three people.⁴

The rest of the day consists of five more tests (see "So You Wanna Be a Mountain Guide," page 78). Making the RMI roster wasn't always the result of such a formatted approach, though. When RMI hired Ed Viesturs in 1981, he was one of two or three who got picked out of a group of five candidates that showed up. Essentially, good climbers were trained to be good guides.

"But as our tryout became popular, we needed to refine it," RMI co-owner Peter Whittaker tells me later. "We came up with a weekend tryout that all 40 candidates would attend. On the first day, I'd start by asking two questions. First, 'Do you like climbing?' Everyone



Gurkha soldier

Job description Scare the bejesus out of your enemies. The original Gurkha regiment was established in 1815 by the British, after they'd declared war on Nepal but couldn't defeat a band of fierce holdouts in Gorkha. Lesson: If you can't beat 'em, recruit 'em. The Nepalese soldiers quickly developed a reputation for unmatched bravery and ruthlessness, fighting by the motto "Better to die than be a coward" while wielding an 18-inch curved blade, called a *kukri*, that "once drawn must taste blood." During the Great Indian Mutiny of 1857, a mere rumor that the Gurkhas had joined

the revolution in the Indian town of Simla sent enemy soldiers fleeing. In September of last year, a single Gurkha on leave in India took on a band of 40 train robbers—and won.

Entrance exam

- + Half-mile run in 2:45 or less *and* a 1.5-mile run in less than 9:40
- + 12 pull-ups (palms-toward-you grasp)
- + As many sit-ups as you can do in 2 minutes (70 minimum)
- + Hike a 3-mile course gaining 1,500 feet, while carrying 55 pounds of stone in a *doko* (a woven basket with a strap, or tump line, that rests on the forehead) in 48 minutes or less.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRETT AFFRONTI (GURKHA SOLDIER); JOHN MACCONNEL (SMOKEJUMPER)

Wildlife biologist

Job description Spend quality time with life-list animals. Yes, you better know your way around a lab, but you also have to get around the backcountry. And sometimes you have to do it fast. Like when you're in Alaska, chasing down a caribou fawn to radio-collar it. Or how's this for a rush: Tranquilize a brown bear, drag it out of the brush, collect a tissue sample, and release it (always making sure the grizzly is pointed the right way when it wakes up, one bear researcher notes). Kim Titus, chief wildlife scientist for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, says, "You have to be comfortable in remote locations, be fit, and have good judgment in high-stress situations."

Entrance exam

- **General fitness:** Hike 2 miles over rolling terrain with a 30-pound pack in 40 minutes.
- **Brown-bear dragging drill:** The average male brown bear weighs 500 to 900 pounds. Drag 300 pounds (use friends as ballast) on a common snow sled for 20 feet across dirt or grass.
- **Fawn-collaring drill:** A caribou's top speed is 48 mph, but fawns run quite a bit slower. Have a friend boot a football (so it bounces along the ground, inside-kick style), then sprint to retrieve it. You should cover roughly 50 yards in 10 seconds.
- **Flora and fauna quiz:** Identify by sight, smell, sound, scat. Quickly now: grizzly or black bear?

says, 'Heck yeah, I live for it.' But when I ask the second question, 'Do you like people?' there would be a pause. Mountain guiding is a job in which you really need to like people—you are tied to folks who are not as fit or experienced as you. So it's paramount to find guides who genuinely like people." They'd also have candidates speak in front of the entire group to gauge their presentation skills. On the second day, applicants ran from Paradise Visitor Center to Panorama

Point (a popular dayhike for mere mortals, gaining 800 feet in 1.5 miles). "This wasn't a way to rank the top runners," says Whittaker, "but rather a way to see who struggled."

The broad themes of today's trial are similar, though some portions are more technical. The glacier-travel scenario, for example, is a do-or-die opportunity to demonstrate rope skills, crevasse-rescue technique, leadership, and teamwork. Van Steen tosses a rope, several pickets, and a few

ice hammers and avalanche probes at our feet. There is a moment of hesitation from the group, and I see an opportunity to gain some positive attention.⁵ I grab the rope and start setting it up for a four-person rope team, talking through the process. "I'm going to place knots for us to tie into at about 25- to 30-foot intervals. Let's divvy the pickets and probes evenly amongst ourselves." Once we're all tied in, we head out onto the "glacier" (otherwise known as



River raft guide

Job description Safely captain rafts on half-day, full-day, or multiday trips on rivers throughout the country—while looking debonair, dispensing natural history factoids, and spinning entertaining stories that keep clients tipping well. Rookies usually run class I to III water, moving up to class IV and V after a few years. Some commercial guide companies offer instructional schools where prospective guides learn knots, how to read rapids, and how to handle complex rescue scenarios. Eric Young, owner of Sawatch Rescue in Buena Vista, Colorado, says, “Most guides need at least three to four weeks of formal training before their first run. But more importantly, a good raft guide needs to develop people skills.”

Entrance exam

+ Grab a 5-foot length of cord and tie a bowline, alpine butterfly, fisherman’s (single and double), water, figure eight, and finally a square knot all within one minute.

the staff parking lot). I’m in the lead, and Van Steen calls out terrain cues. “Approaching a crevasse.” I probe to see where the edge is. “Weak snow bridge.” I turn our team uphill. Van Steen makes notes on his clipboard. Then he shouts: “Shannon takes a crevasse fall!” The team self-arrests and starts to stage a rescue. “James takes a crevasse fall!” Our efforts become chaotic. Van Steen stops the scenario, and we debrief.

“Look up here,” he says, raising a pen above his head. “Keeping your eyes up here, tell me how many of your partners have their harnesses doubled back.” None of us had checked. It was the first of many mistakes, and he generously harshes on just enough details to make his point: The goal here isn’t to make us feel incompetent, but rather to open our eyes to how thorough a guide needs to be, and to see how we act under stress.

“Shannon,” he says. “If you were leading this training scenario, what would you say to everyone right now?”

“Well, I’d say that even though we each might feel pretty bummed with how things went, this is probably one of the most valuable days of training we’ll have, because we have a lot to analyze and learn from. I’d pick one thing that I could have done better and say how I’d change it next time. Then I’d ask each of us to do the same.”⁶

After another round of rope work and public speaking, plus a private interview, we’re done at 5 p.m. Maier and Van Steen thank us for making the trip to Ashford (one candidate came all the way from North Carolina), and say they’ll make their decisions soon. “If you don’t hear from us, you didn’t get the job.”

A few of us exchange numbers, and a parade of 4x4s, Subarus, and economy rentals rips out of the gravel lot. I meet an old friend, a seasonal park ranger, to fly-fish the Yakima River (I catch an auspiciously vibrant 14-inch rainbow).

Three days later, I receive an email: “Welcome aboard! We feel you would be an excellent addition to our team at Rainier Mountaineering, Inc. Congratulations! We are excited to work with you.”



- + Hit a target from 20 feet with a throw bag. One try.
- + Practice your delivery until this joke is funny: “A raft guide walks into a bar and says, ‘Give me a beer a whiskey.’ The bartender gets a beer and a whiskey, and the guide says, ‘No, I said a beer a whiskey.’ The bartender looks confused, and the guide explains, ‘My raft flipped, and I lost all my oars.’”



Outward Bound instructor

Job description

Outward Bound courses emphasize wilderness skills, character development, social and environmental responsibility, and leadership. Instructors need a blend of technical know-how and sophisticated people skills. Suellen Sack, Outward Bound’s Minnesota director, says, “Your fitness must be above and beyond your students. You can be tired at the end of the day, but you can never be at the edge of your own limits.” Instructor John Vonk adds: “You’re the

guide, the teacher, the mediator, the chef, and sometimes the doctor.”

Entrance exam

- + Hike 5 miles with a 50-pound pack, then drop your pack and run 3 miles within 35 minutes.
- + Construct a bandage and splint from a T-shirt, a bandana, socks, and a RidgeRest—within 2 minutes.
- + Grab three friends who have never been hiking and plan a 5- to 10-mile dayhike with them. Teach them how to lead sections of the trek.

Sherpa

Job description Scamper up and down Mt. Everest like a squirrel on its home oak. Sherpas come from Nepal's Khumbu region, and their name has become synonymous with Everest fixers. Western climbing teams hire them to build basecamp (some have stone-hut kitchens and latrines) and organize the schlepping of nearly 8,000 pounds of gear. Then they accompany clients to the summit while carrying extra oxygen bottles. Sherpas routinely cover 10 times the distance (while ferrying loads) as their clients. The pay? \$7 per day plus bonuses for gear ferries, summiting, and retrieving oxygen bottles.

Entrance exam

- + Live at 13,000 feet year-round.
- + Fix ladders and ropes while employer "acclimatizes."
- + Run dozens of loads to high camps.
- + Summit K2, the world's most dangerous peak, descend, then climb it again to rescue two climbers, as Pemba Sherpa did in 2008.



I'm quick-stepping up the Muir Snowfield

with a 55-pound guide load on my back—and the extreme effort is making me dizzy. The freakish fitness required of this profession has become painfully apparent. It's three months later, and I'm back for a week of intensive new-guide training with four other first-year newbies. We're within eyesight of Anvil Rock at 9,584 feet, three-quarters of the way from Paradise to Camp Muir. I do the math: We covered the 4,184 feet in only two hours and 10 minutes. Not a human pace. I could use a break.

Just five minutes. I have to ask Maier to take five. *I can't.* I need to—my thigh is cramping. *I can't ask!* Can I get tossed for getting tired? My mind runs in circles as sweat pours off my face. It's a cloudless, breeze-free day in June, and the UV rays reflect off the snow like microwaves. My sunscreen is long gone, and my neck and forearms

are burning. My stomach twists with the desire for a Clif Bar—or anything—so long as it's chased with a full Nalgene of cold water. And—oh God!—do I need to poop, too? I have to ask for a break. *Dude! You. Cannot. Ask.?*

Our forced march at Maier's pace is tough, to be sure (later, I overhear him say to another veteran guide, "I'm trying to break these guys"), but I should be doing way better. What's wrong with me? Had I become complacent after acing the tryout? To train, I'd focused on running, which has always given me the best rate of return when I need to get in shape, pronto. So I ran about 35 miles a week in Colorado's heavenly spring conditions. To take my mind off the fact that I now may be noticeably limping, I list my training plan's shortcomings: No varied terrain! Nothing but bluebird weather! No snow! No heavy pack! *No pack!* (I repeat

So You Wanna Be a Mountain Guide...

Tryout tips from an RMI veteran

Introduction "We look for natural and confident communicators to work with our customers," says guide supervisor Paul Maier. "This ability is usually revealed—or not—when candidates are asked to introduce and describe themselves to the group, the same group they're competing against for a job."

Run "A check of base fitness—and willingness to suffer. Don't finish last; Ashford is only at 2,778 feet."

Glacier travel scenario "This is a test of fundamental skills. Is your knowledge theoretical or practical? Who takes the lead? We also look at who follows and whether that person speaks up if something isn't done right."

Multipitch climbing scenario "If you get tangled up when switching leads or setting up your rap line, you might need to spend a bit more time on the rock and ice."

Public speaking "We analyze your people skills—and how well you listen to others. RMI's greatest asset is our guide staff—and our guide staff's greatest asset is its ability to communicate effectively with customers. We listen to how applicants present themselves; how is their physical presence, are they articulate, sociable, and can they get their message across? All of the technical ability in the world is worth little to guides if they lack the ability to connect with their customers. We can teach hard skills, but soft skills are much slower to develop."

Written test "A chance to shine on a range of topics: avalanche awareness, navigation, guiding scenarios. You may have finished mid-pack on the run, but you can still impress with your knowledge of snow crystal metamorphism."

Private interview "We ask focused questions to determine if the applicant looks like a good fit. There is not one 'type' of person we are looking for, but the RMI guides who have stood the test of time, like Ed Viesturs, Dave Hahn, and Brent Okita, do have one thing in common: They are the nicest badasses you will ever meet."

that one for emphasis—how many times have we printed, in this very magazine, how important it is to train with a loaded pack?)

Just when I'm sure my limp has become painfully visible, Maier makes a 90-degree turn off our nose-to-butt slog and throws his pack down for a breather. Hallelujah. (The other newbies and I later joke about how we were all gassed at the same moment, but none of us would say a word.) I take a seat on my pack and bite into

an energy bar. I knock back water. The thigh cramp recedes. I re-up sunscreen and realize an opportunity.

"Hey Paul, I imagine clients are pretty curious about all the peaks we can see from up here. What's that one?"

"Mt. Adams. 12,276 feet."

"Ah, right. Second highest in the state. How about that one?"

"St. Helens. Was 9,677 feet. Now 8,365 feet."

"I hear there are 30-inch trout in Spirit Lake, but you can't fish there."

And so on. I stall until we've discussed the Tatoosh Range, distant and hazy Mt. Hood, some immediate landmarks like Moon Rocks, and even the gray-crowned rosy finch, the songbird plying us for crumbs.

We make it to Camp Muir in another 20 mostly pain-free minutes and break for lunch.

This humbling hike occurs on day four of orientation week for new guides. We've already completed a two-day class to become Leave No Trace trainers (a certification mandated by the park service). And we've received a crash course on how RMI's various climbing programs work and the hard and soft skills expected of an associate guide (my official job title).

"The top three areas we'll focus on this week are navigating the Muir Snowfield, client interaction, and rescue techniques," Maier announced at the beginning of the week, as we gathered in the Guide Lounge, where instructors meet every morning to discuss forecasts and route conditions around a pot of bitter coffee. "Don't think you have to master everything instantly. The tryout process is over, and you've been hired. We know that you all come with different skills and will progress at various speeds."

But from the new guide's perspective, everything is a test. And on day three of training, weather served up the perfect challenge. First graupel, then spitting rain, make the ideal conditions for demonstrating an ability to remain cheery⁸ while mucking about in slush as we study single-rescuer crevasse extrication and how to pass a knot through a haul system. Both skills are benchmarks all new guides need to pass in a timed test before they're allowed to "spin" a client—that is, to accompany someone back to Camp Muir or Paradise, generally due to altitude or cold or fatigue.

In addition to mastering key skills, we get a primer on the job's backbreaking dirty work: digging tent platforms on the Cowlitz Glacier, shoveling out buried latrines, cooking, snow melting,

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Navy SEAL

Job description Kill and capture bad guys—while surviving the loneliest, remotest, most dangerous environments on the planet. The SEALs (Sea, Air, and Land Forces) were established in 1962 to deliver "highly specialized warfare capabilities" in a range of conditions—from oceans to mountains to jungles. These soldiers depend on legendary navigation, wilderness, and hunting skills—honed in training regimens so fierce that historically only 25 percent of applicants graduate—to carry out reconnaissance, counterterrorism, and foreign internal defense missions.

Entrance exam

To be a candidate, you must first pass SEAL Prep School. And to be considered for prep school, you must pass this screening test. Just meeting the minimum isn't a good sign.

- + Swim 500 yards in less than 12:30
- + Rest 10 minutes
- + 42 push-ups within 2 minutes
- + Rest 2 minutes
- + 50 sit-ups within 2 minutes
- + Rest 2 minutes
- + 6 pull-ups (no time limit)
- + Rest 10 minutes
- + 1.5-mile run within 11 minutes

ILLUSTRATION BY JACOB THOMAS; RESEARCH (JOBS) BY LAURA BINKS AND ADAM MADER

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dishwashing, and other camp chores. Then we descend to congratulatory pizza and beer. “You are ready to get to work,” says Maier. “The schedule comes out tomorrow.”

When I meet my first client, he instantly throws me a tough question—tough for a new guide, at least. “So, how many times have you climbed Mt. Rainier?” asks the commercial pilot from Arizona. “Fewer than 500,” I say with a wink. “Which is how many summits George Dunn has [page 52].” I adroitly avoid a direct answer but still provide noteworthy information that makes me look in the know.⁹

It’s September, and for my first trip I’m teamed up with senior guides Seth Waterfall and Jake Beren and associate guides Geoff Schellens, Andy Bond, and Garrett Stevens. We’re leading a six-day Expedition Skills Seminar, during which clients attempt a summit climb and learn advanced mountaineering skills to pursue bigger peaks on their own. Our 14 clients range in age from 29 to 62. The forecast is for three days of blue skies, light winds, and summit temps in the 20s—then three days of crap.

It’s only day one, but I’m already suffering a crisis of faith. Sure, I’m wearing the RMI uniform, but do I really belong? My colleagues all guide or ski patrol full-time. Waterfall has summited Everest and notched first ascents in Antarctica. The hard truth is that I spend most of my weekdays staring at a computer screen. BACKPACKER editors are easily the most active in the magazine world—show me others who get outside 75-plus days a year in the backcountry, and I’ll send you a sixer of Rainier beer¹⁰—but someone still has to put out each issue. That’s us. And it can require long hours riding the desk. I had drastically improved my training since melting down on the Muir march (go to backpacker.com/guidetraining to

see my six-week regimen), but I wasn’t living the alpine life like this crew. So, I think about something Maier said during our training week: “During much of your first season, the biggest contribution you can make is on client care.”

So instead of sitting with the guides on the shuttle bus, I grab a seat next to a balding, chubby client from Ohio. He’s wearing a brand-new pair of Everest-ready La Sportiva Olympus Mons boots, and his hobby is highpointing, or climbing the tallest peak in each state, something I did for BACKPACKER in 2004. We chat favorites.

As we start our trek from Paradise to Camp Muir, I learn clients’ names, professions, and hometowns. We talk about gear, climbing, travel, and family. This also helps participants maintain an easy pace—thus avoiding first-day burnout—since they have to maintain air to chat.¹¹ I instruct people on rest-stepping and pressure breathing. I model good break behavior: “I’m going to take a seat on my pack to save my legs. Then I’m going to get a bite—about 200 calories or so is a goal for every stop—and I’ll wash it down with about half of my Nalgene since we’ll have four breaks on our way to Muir, and I have two bottles.” The easier stuff. When we move again, I lead while the senior guides counsel stragglers who don’t think they’re going to make it, and radio the office to discuss bailout options. The harder stuff.

At Muir, I busy myself bringing clients hot water and getting gear organized. Waterfall has the guides huddle up to discuss a change to the standard schedule: “With this forecast, we should try to summit the day after tomorrow. Otherwise, we won’t have a chance.”

The following morning, we teach cramponing, ice-axe use, and how to travel on a rope team. In the afternoon, we rope up and go for a training hike across the Cowlitz Glacier. On the return, Highpointer trips and breaks a bone in his hand. He’s able to hike

back, but is crushed that he won’t be climbing with us.

At 2 a.m. the next morning, we’re roped up and moving. It’s in the 20s and calm, and I quickly learn the difference between being a climber and being a guide: I can’t trust the 600 pounds of people I’m tied to. This makes me hyper-aware and very proactive (“Watch your spacing!” “Tighten that coil!” “Get that parka on!”). We make the summit crater by 8 a.m. after a pleasantly uneventful climb (though the cloud-chain wisping past high break was among the prettiest I’ve ever seen). Several of us sign the register and hike to Columbia Crest, the official highpoint. The guys on my rope team want a picture with their guide (gratifying), then ask their guide to take pictures of them as they ham in pose after pose (finger-numbing). Before we rope up for the descent, I swipe the pencil I signed the register with as a memento for Highpointer. (Unethical, perhaps, but there were plenty.¹²)

Weather deteriorates as we work our way down Disappointment Cleaver, and within 20 minutes of returning to Camp Muir, a squall engulfs the mountain.

I find Highpointer. “I wish you had been with us, so I picked up something for you on the summit. It’s yours on loan. It belongs on top, so you should bring it back to sign in on your next attempt.” A tear runs down his cheek, and I know I’ve done my job. But no time to dwell. A good guide never rests.¹³ I need to go boil water. ❌



Maier told him to quit his day job, but Davis will forgo guiding this summer to take another dream gig: first-time father.

PHOTO BY KALEY KURCHINSKI

GUIDE TIPS ⁹ Don’t lie, but be prepared to answer this inevitable question without undermining your client’s confidence. ¹⁰ Save precious tip money by buying a sub-\$5 sixer of Rainier tallboys from Suver’s General Store in Ashford, after a climb. ¹¹ Books don’t teach tricks like this pace-controlling maneuver, but senior guides are full of them. Learn from the vets. ¹² Guides are brash and bend rules sometimes. ¹³ Almost literally. In the RMI training manual, it says: “RMI guides rise first and go to bed last.”