

## Mountainous Memoirs

By George Loewenstein

*APS Fellow George Loewenstein, Carnegie Mellon University, was an avid mountain climber "until I had kids and couldn't tolerate the risk." The Observer asked him about his most memorable climb.*

Maybe in 1986, when I almost killed my wife, Donna, on Mt. Assiniboine in the Canadian Rockies.

It was one of the last days of a holiday and we'd been weathered out of climb after climb.

At 4 a.m. in a hut just below the peak, we gathered with several other climbers for the final ascent. The others took one look at the weather and headed back down. But frustrated by not being able to do any decent ascents, I insisted to Donna that we should go despite the iffy weather.

Thanks to an excellent guidebook we were able to ascend the ridge in a white-out, but going down, we lost the route and ended up on the nearly vertical north face in a snowstorm that turned into a virtually continuous avalanche sweeping down and over us.

I was short-roping my wife and kicking steps and we were rappelling off things we shouldn't have trusted, like blocks of ice sticking out of the slope. Donna kept saying, "I don't want to rappel off that thing, I don't think it's going to hold." And I'd say, angrily, "Don't worry, it's going to hold. Clip in and go or we're going to be in trouble." I didn't want to say "die," though I was convinced we were going to.

We were getting more and more tense and ticked off at one another, when she suddenly said, "We're going to die, aren't we? I don't want us to die angry at each other." That cleared the air between us, if not the snow that kept hammering down on us.

Further down, her crampon detached from her boot and went hurtling into thin air, which totally freaked us out because we both expected we would be next — not to mention the difficulty of descending minus a crampon.

We finally made it back to shelter at 1 a.m. after a long frustrating search in the still-falling snow that simply reflected our flashlight beam back at us. Our friends were angry at me for putting Donna at risk, but Donna said it was a great experience and wasn't bothered at all.

I think the adventures we've had have helped strengthen the bond between us. Maybe that's another function of travel. The stresses of travel reveal inner character like nothing else. I've always been impressed with my wife's amazing fortitude when things get difficult, which happened with great regularity when we climbed together.

*Editor's Note: Donna, if you read this, we'd like to hear your version.*

### See Also:

[Vacation: Not What Your Remember](#)

[A Vacation Really Out of This World](#)



**Snowy Peaks:** A cold **George Loewenstein** stands atop a peak in the Canadian Rockies.