

# The Twins

## North (3730 metres), South (3580), West (3360) and Tower (3640)

**Location:** At the northwest end of the Columbia Icefields, with spectacular views of two of the Canadian Rockies' signature peaks – Mount Columbia and Mount Alberta

**Dates:** – June 12-15, 2002

The call from Nancy, as usual, comes at the last minute. "There's a high pressure system hitting the Columbia Icefields for the next three days. Can you leave tomorrow?"

After waiting the last three springs for a high-pressure system, I'm certainly not going to say no, especially as Twin's Tower is the last of the 11,000-foot peaks I have to climb in the Canadian Rockies. Part of the bargain, though, is to also climb the South and West Twins, as Nancy has not been up any of them. It's been 14 years since I first climbed the North and South Twins and looked in horror at the exposed ridge on Twin's Tower, so it's fitting that I'm coming back to this spectacular area to finish my quest.

### Wednesday, June 12

After hastily packing, I leave Calgary at 4 a.m., meet Nancy at 5 in Canmore and together we reach the Icefields (6,500 feet) just before 8 a.m. Unfortunately, the road down to the parking lot is closed for repairs, so we have an extra 10-minute walk to start our trip, around 8:30. The good news is the cold, wet spring has left ski-able snow all the way down to the toe of the Athabasca Glacier.

With one sled in tow, we trudge up the lower glacier, roping up beneath the first icefall below Snow Dome and scampering across the most exposed bit in just over five minutes. We lug heavy packs, with four days of food, up the ramp, then redistribute the weight so that one person is pulling a heavily-laden sled and the other a 30-pound pack. As we slowly move above the top of the Athabasca Glacier, a party of three skiers bound for Mount Columbia appears out of nowhere and catches up with us. Are we that out of shape, we wonder? It turns out they caught a ride halfway up the glacier on the snow coach route and have only been skiing about an hour.

After detouring slightly off course towards Columbia, we round the corner on Snow Dome, traversing right to pass above a big, open crevasse. As forecast, the sun is hot and intense (high 20s in Jasper). The heat, combined with the lack of both sleep and recent exercise plus the 3,000 feet already gained, saps our energy. Finally, in late afternoon, I plead for a nap break. Thirty minutes of dozing on an ensolite pad revives me enough for the long, relatively flat trudge over to our intended campsite at the Stutfield Col. At one rest stop, Nancy says the col is less than two kilometres away. My GPS, however, says more than four and, unfortunately, it doesn't lie, so we put our heads down and finish the interminable last traverse about 8:30 p.m., 12 hours after we started.

We throw up my three-season Roadrunner tent just above the col, at 10,700 feet. It's a stunning campsite, with the fractured east face of North Twin and the connecting ribbon of ridge up Twin's Tower in front of us. Just to the right is the snow-plastered east face of Mount Alberta, and the mere sight of this daunting route we climbed late last summer is enough to make our sphincters tighten. There is not a breath of breeze, and we eat dinner after 9 p.m. in just our light polypro underwear.



Shirt-sleeved twilight camping at 10,700-foot Stutfield Col

### Thursday, June 13

We sleep in till 7, and don't get going till after 8:30 on a rare cloudless day over the Twins, which are notorious for attracting even the slightest hint of bad weather. We are soon switchbacking up the hard but moderate-angled slopes of the North Twin, somewhat following the cramponed steps of three snowshoers, who we'd seen coming down off Mount Kitchener the day before. Just below the summit of North Twin, we see them descending. They are three guys from Guelph who came to the Icefields at the last minute, when their Russian visa, and plans to climb Elbrus, fell through.

The upper ridge on the North Twin has changed since I was last here in 1988, and we have to swing first right and then left (now on foot, below cornices) to reach the top, in less than two hours from our camp. The view of the Tower is no less daunting than it was 14 years ago – the right side of the ridge dropping thousands of feet towards the highway and the left dipping towards a cliff then falling a similar distance, out of sight, towards the Athabasca Valley.

The descent from the North Twin to the Twins Tower col turns out to be the crux. Whereas Forbes and Roman walked down snow 10 years ago, we front point down much of the way on ice, steering around a few thinly-covered crevasses that threaten our passage. With the hinged toe of my telemark boots and my long alpine axe, the front pointing is painstaking – Nancy puts in a couple of screws on one stretch and at one point lends me her second, technical tool.

After about two hours, we finally reach the col. The ridge up Twin's Tower, which has looked steep, narrow and intimidating from even a few hundred metres away, turns out to be a few feet wide, with good, soft snow for kicking steps. Though we bury an ice axe at the end of each rope length for a belay, I hardly notice the exposure. And thus after four short rope lengths and at around 2:30 p.m., I'm finally standing on the summit of my last 11,000-foot peak.

Though there's a big smile on my face, I don't feel elation so much as quiet satisfaction at finally achieving a goal that began 20 years ago, got going in earnest 14 years ago on these same peaks and slowly came to a close over the past five years. As usual, I'm more focused on getting safely down the ridge and back up to the summit of North Twin. So after a few quick summit shots, we beat a hasty retreat down the softening snow of the ridge. The climb back up the North Twin goes much faster than the descent, and we're on top a little after 5 p.m. We start skiing down its slopes roped up, but after a few tangled falls, we abandon the rope for some pretty nice turns down the slushy slopes. We're back at camp a little after 6 and toast our success with a nip or two of scotch.



Narrow summit ridge on Twins Tower from summit of North Twin

### Friday, June 14

Up around six on another cloudless day and away just after 7:30, headed for the West and South Twins. After traversing on a bench along the lower slopes of North Twin, we take our skins off and skitter down across the rock-hard slope, well aware that a slip would lead to a 1,500-foot slide, perhaps over a small rock band. As we stop to carefully turn around, first one and then both of Nancy's skis come off (still attached to her boots by the safety straps). It's too difficult to slip back into the Dynafit bindings on this slope, so she gingerly puts her crampons on and carefully walks across while I zip across on my skis.

At the bottom of the slope, the skis are abandoned, and we do a rising traverse to a col between the West and South Twins. While many consider the West Twin not to be a peak, its east face is steep (about 45 degrees) and long (maybe 200 metres) enough to earn our respect. We kick deep steps in rapidly-softening snow, traversing right to get past the bergschrund, and then steeply up to the north ridge. A few minutes of walking and we're on the summit, which offers tremendous views of the South Twin and, to the north, of the North Twin, Twin's Tower and Alberta.

Eager to get down before the snow gets any softer, we head over to the South Twin, cramponing up the north slopes to gain the narrow summit ridge, which we bypass slightly below and to the right. At a couple of places, it's exposed - especially just before the summit, where a green lake with floating ice chunks lies thousands of feet below. We belay from dubiously buried ice axes, but the soft snow readily accepts kicked steps and deeply-planted ice axe shafts, and soon we're standing on the small summit, marvelling at the view of Columbia's steep north ridge.

Nancy has now climbed all four Twins and just has six 11,000ers to go, which she'll no doubt finish in record time. She's very happy but also very tired. It's all downhill to our skis, which we put on to delicately traverse back up the exposed slope, which happily is now sufficiently softened to kick a good track across. Again, it's been a full day as we arrive back at our camp in late afternoon.

We brew up some soup, pack up and around 6:30 set off on our retreat, hoping to traverse far enough towards Snow Dome to make quick work of getting down past the icfall the next morning. Nancy, though, is feeling ill (prolonged elevation, sun exposure, bad food?) and we stop at 8:30 to set up our last camp and eat a quick meal. She can only sip hot chocolate and keeps a plastic grocery bag at the ready for retching but instead drifts off to sleep.

### Saturday, June 15

Up around 7. The skies have clouded over and a dark wall of cloud looms over the Twins. Nancy, though, feels better, and we're soon underway. The visibility drops and graupel falls, but we can still see our old tracks, and soon the weather relents. Finally, we can take our skins off and I keep Nancy in stitches as I drag the sled, which bounces high over little icy ridges and does a couple of complete rolls. Eventually, we put everything except the empty sled on our backs and make fast turns down the snow gully leading to the top of the Athabasca Glacier. The ramp is hard work on tele skis but is soon over, and we quickly snowplow through the chunks of ice that have fallen off the icefall over the past few days. Suddenly, we're out of danger and can take the rope off and make lazy turns down the much-diminished snow to the glacier's terminus. By late morning, we're doing the last irksome trudge up the closed road to our car. Beer and burgers beckon in Canmore.



Nancy below summit of Twins Tower, North Twin in background

### **GPS Waypoints from Athabasca Glacier to Stutfield Col**

(Note: Road at toe of Athabasca Glacier is 6,520 feet)  
(top of Athabasca Glacier) – 810800 – elevation 8,730 feet

- (south of Snow Dome) – 790793 – elev. 9,500
- (ssw of Snow Dome) – 777804 – elev. 10,470
- (west of Snow Dome) – 770816 – elev. 10,640
- (northwest of Snow Dome) – 761826 – elev. 10,470
- (due east of South Twin) – 740840 – elev. 10,840
- (camp above Stutfield Col) – 723858 – elev. 10,680