

How to Choose a Mountain Guide

By Charles Sherwood

(author of *Seven Climbs: Finding the finest climb on each continent*)

I first met Mark Seaton in 1993. We have climbed together, often two or three times a year, ever since – in ski boots, in mountaineering boots and crampons, and in rock shoes – from the Alps to Africa. We have shared some unforgettable experiences from the Old Man of Hoy and a traverse of the Matterhorn to the North Face of the Eiger and a traverse of Mt. Kenya.

Mark has unquestionably been my ‘chief guide’ over those years, but I have used others too, especially in more distant parts. So, how do you choose a guide? I am assuming things like basic competence, evidenced by qualifications and experience. But what other factors should you take into account?

First, I would suggest, temperament. When we met, Mark was a young guide with considerable ambition. But that ambition included becoming an old guide. With a lovely wife and three daughters, Mark had no plans to get killed – a fate that sadly befalls all too many guides. I, on the other hand, have always been more from the ‘go for it, come what may’ school of outdoor adventure. I too, however, have a wife (equally lovely) and three children and I did recognise that in a guide I needed an element of prudent caution.

Second, personality. A climbing partnership is an intimate one. The new fashion of ‘social distancing’ is not easy on a portaledge, or at a tight bivouac, or trapped in a refuge for days on end. It is important you like each other! In Mark’s case, his devotion to client service extends even to bedtime stories. He is the author after all of the children’s series, *Mark the Mountain Guide*.

Third, type of climbing. This is more relevant in North America, where guides tend to be much more specialised: backcountry skiing versus ice climbing versus rock climbing. In Europe there is more of a tradition of multiple competence. Nonetheless, even there, you want to be sure that you and your guide enjoy broadly the same kind of climbing. If one of you wants to go cragging at the side of the road and the other is hell-bent on the North Face of the Aiguille Blanche, then it is not going to work.

Finally, there is an important element of geography in all this: do you go for a truly local guide or what I might call an expedition guide, i.e., a guide who climbs all over a region like the Alps and perhaps even further afield? The local guide has attractions. There is the cultural affinity and, of course, you will never get lost. But there are downsides. The local guide is unlikely to be excited about a route he or she is climbing for the fiftieth time. This is often cited as a problem with those Zermatt guides that focus almost exclusively on the Matterhorn. Some, at least, are rather disengaged, choosing to eat, sleep and socialise separately from their clients. The alternative is to tie up with a guide who is as keen as you to explore new climbs and new countries. This means getting lost – I guarantee it – but it also brings a shared excitement and even a shared sense of responsibility. You are a team trying to crack this problem together. Most of the more ambitious climbs that I have done with Mark have been of this kind: climbs such as the Nant Blanc Face on the Verte in France, the Comicci Route on the North Face of the Cima Grande in Italy, the Biancagrät on Piz Bernina in Switzerland, and the Pallavicini Couloir on the Grossglockner in Austria. These routes have been as new to him as they were to me. Somehow that makes for a different and rather more fraternal experience. It is the kind of experience that turns a guide into a lifelong friend.

Be wary though, because this climbing thing comes with a health warning: it can prove addictive. It was as I descended from the Eiger with Mark after four extraordinary days on the mountain that I set my heart on a project that was to take me a further decade: to find an Eiger on each continent, in short, the finest seven climbs in the world. This challenge would take me from the Alps on to the Himalaya, Yosemite, the Andes, Kenya, New Zealand and South Georgia. It is described in my book, *Seven Climbs*.

If you are interested in finding out more about Mark Seaton, explore his website at:

<http://www.markseaton.com/>