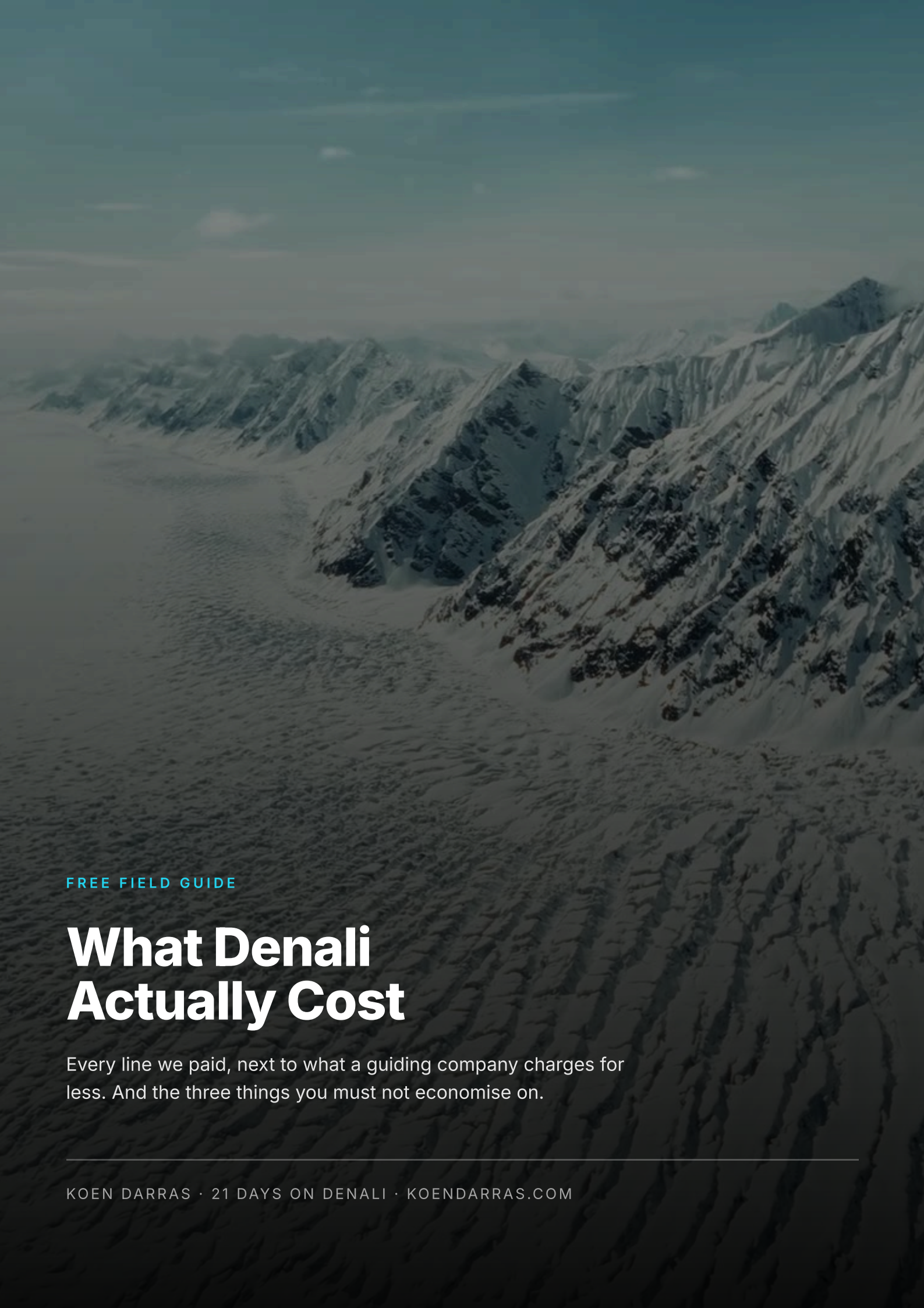




FREE FIELD GUIDE

What Denali Actually Cost

Every line we paid, next to what a guiding company charges for less. And the three things you must not economise on.

KOEN DARRAS · 21 DAYS ON DENALI · KOENDARRAS.COM

This is not an estimate. It is what one person paid on a six person expedition to Denali in May 2025, taken straight from our budget sheet. The point is not the total. The point is which lines you can move and which you cannot.

SELF ORGANISED

\$2,717

2,214 on the ground, plus 53 tax, plus the 2026 climbing fee of 450. Includes hotel nights, shuttle, rental car and all meals off the mountain.

GUIDED, 2026 PRICES

\$9,800 to \$19,000

Plus the climbing fee, the shuttle, lodging in Talkeetna, meals off the mountain and your lunch food. Those are excluded from every operator we checked.

Both columns leave out the same three things, and you should know that before you compare them to anything. Neither our 2,717 nor a guided price includes your flight to Anchorage, your personal clothing and climbing gear, or your insurance. Quoting a climb without those is standard in this world and there is nothing dishonest about it, as long as nobody mistakes it for the finished sum. Because they sit outside both columns at the same price, the gap between the two barely moves when you add them.

Most guides stop there and leave you to guess. Section 05 does not: we went and checked what those three actually cost in 2026, so you can finish the sum yourself.

THE CORE QUESTION

Are you paying for safety, or are you paying for someone else's logistics?

Every line we paid

LINE	USD	TYPE	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Talkeetna Air, glacier flight	675	FIXED	Fixed. No way around it, and the guided price includes this too.
Tax on the flight	53	FIXED	
Walmart, food for 21 days plus a reserve	500	SHARED	Bought in Anchorage on arrival. Anchorage has everything, Talkeetna has less and costs more.
Walmart, second run	223	SHARED	Bulk, split across the team.
Airbnb Anchorage, 4 nights	238	CHOICE	Your call. Fewer nights, bigger group, lower number.
Food in Anchorage and Talkeetna	200	CHOICE	A guided trip does not cover this either.
Satellite phone	88	SHARED	Shared. On your own this costs a multiple.
Shuttle Anchorage to Talkeetna, return	85	FIXED	Standard price. Not in the guided package.
Rental car and fuel	65	SHARED	250 split by four.
Talkeetna Inn, 1 night	48	CHOICE	Not in the guided package either.
Basecamp fee	40	FIXED	
White gas, 1 gallon (3.8 L) for 21 days	25	FIXED	Lower than almost anyone expects. Bought at basecamp on the glacier.
Denali Park entrance	15	FIXED	
Sled rental	10	CHOICE	Through the air taxi. Elsewhere you pay 30 a day.
Trail wands, split across the team	2	SHARED	Shared down to almost nothing.
Rock talkies	0	CHOICE	Borrowed. Ask before you buy.
Total on the ground, without the tax line	2,214		Plus the 53 tax above, plus the 450 climbing fee = 2,717. Per person, six person team, May 2025.

One line is missing from this table on purpose: a cameraman at 678 dollars. That was ours because we were filming. For a normal climb it disappears.

01 Costs come in three kinds

Once you sort the lines this way, the whole picture changes.

- ☐ **Fixed.** The glacier flight, the climbing fee, the park entrance, the basecamp fee. Nobody escapes these, and a guiding company pays exactly the same amounts you would.
- ☐ **Shared.** The car, the satellite phone, the wands, group gear and fuel. These collapse as the team grows, and this is where most of the difference lives.
- ☐ **Choice.** Hotel nights, buying against renting, meals off the mountain. This is the part you control completely.

Anyone who tells you Denali costs fifteen thousand is quoting someone else's fixed costs, plus their margin, plus the choices they made for you.

02 The team is the discount

Look at what splitting did to four of those lines.

- ☐ Rental car and fuel: 250 divided by four is 65 each.
- ☐ Trail wands: one set, split across the team, is 2 each.
- ☐ Satellite phone: 88 each instead of the full rental.
- ☐ Group gear, tents, stoves and fuel: one set for the team.

Going alone does not only remove the discount. It removes the safety system. On a glacier your team is not company, it is the reason a crevasse fall ends with a rope holding you.

03 The six lines nobody warns you about

These are the ones that appear once you are already in Alaska.

- ☐ Basecamp fee, 40
- ☐ Trail wands, small but mandatory
- ☐ Sled rental, 10 through the air taxi against 30 a day elsewhere
- ☐ Fuel, 25 for a gallon that lasted 21 days
- ☐ Shuttle to Talkeetna and back, 85
- ☐ Park entrance, 15

04 Buy it there, do not carry it

Food came to about 500 dollars per person at Walmart in Anchorage, plus a second run of 223 for personal food. We planned 28 breakfasts, 28 lunches and 25 dinners as ordinary food up to the camp at 4,300 m (14,000 ft): hash browns with cheese, granola, pancakes, noodles, bagels, bread with peanut butter, frozen paratha. Above that camp, freeze dried meals.

No scales. We fixed the dishes and counted how often each one came back. That is the whole system, and it is the reason the food budget held. The white gas you buy at basecamp: it is not allowed on the small plane that flies climbers in.

Where you must not save

A guide that only makes things cheaper is a dangerous guide. Three of them are worth more than everything you save.

- ☐ **Insurance that actually covers you.** Standard travel policies do not cover rescue at altitude. Read the exclusion, not the brochure.
- ☐ **Rescue gear you have practised with.** Carrying it without training is a false sense of safety. We put two hours of rescue drill into the preparation days for a reason.
- ☐ **Boots and crampons that match.** The B rating is not a detail. You find out on the glacier, and by then it is a problem you cannot solve.

05 The three lines that are yours

These are the ones no expedition report can price for you, because they depend on where you live and what is already in your cupboard. Here is the market in August 2026, so you have a real number instead of a shrug.

Your flight

Brussels to Anchorage and back in May came out between **850 and 1,100 dollars** when we checked, two stops, no overnight. Amsterdam or Frankfurt usually run about a hundred under that and a small regional airport a hundred over. From the US west coast it is closer to 400 to 700. May is shoulder season for Alaska, which helps, but the climbing window is narrow and every climber books into the same weeks, so book early rather than clever.

Your insurance

This is the line most people get wrong, because a normal travel policy stops working at roughly the altitude where Denali starts. An annual membership with evacuation cover starts around **375 dollars**. For cover that actually performs an extraction on Denali you are looking at a full membership plus a high altitude package on top, which lands near **1,244 dollars**.

That is a wide gap, and this is one of the places where the cheap option is the wrong option. A helicopter evacuation off Denali, Aconcagua or Kilimanjaro runs into the tens of thousands. Read the altitude exclusion in the policy document itself, not the summary page, and check whether climbing without a guide changes anything. Some policies quietly say it does.

Your gear, and the choice underneath it

This is the biggest of the three and the one with the widest spread, because there are two entirely different ways to solve it.

ROUTE	USD	WHAT YOU GET, AND WHAT YOU DO NOT
Rent the hard gear in Alaska	516	Double boots 50 a week, crampons 40, ice axe 32, snowshoes 50, over three weeks. Two catches: the shop works first come first served and takes no advance reservations except for ski gear, and nobody there rents sleeping bags. You cannot plan this from home and assume your size will be waiting.
Hire a full kit in Europe and fly with it	1,240	Boots, sleeping bag, down jacket, shells, crampons, axe, pads and pack, quoted for fourteen days. A Denali trip keeps you away for nearly thirty, so ask for the real price for your dates before you budget this line.
What you have to buy either way	500	Socks, base layers, liner gloves, sunglasses that fit your face, headlamp, bottles, thermos, first aid. Nobody rents the things that touch your skin.
Buy the whole kit new	5,250 to 8,300	Double boots 900 to 1,300, an expedition sleeping bag 800 to 1,200, down parka 450 to 700, shells 600 to 900, plus pads, pack, crampons,

ROUTE	USD	WHAT YOU GET, AND WHAT YOU DO NOT
		axe, mitts, goggles and snowshoes.
From nothing, renting	1,740	Against roughly 6,700 if you buy the same kit new.

Rental rates from Alaska Mountaineering & Hiking in Anchorage, Denali Mountain Works in Talkeetna and Expedition Kit Hire in the UK. Retail anchors: a Scarpa Phantom 6000 HD at 1,299 and an expedition down bag from 929. All checked August 2026. **Renting is not automatically the smart answer.** It is cheaper for the trip and more expensive over a life of them, because at the end you own nothing. If Denali is one entry on a longer list, buying the big three well, boots, bag and parka, is money you spend once. If it is a single objective you have been saving years for, rent, and put the difference into the insurance line above.

So what does it come to

Someone starting from zero, renting what can be rented and buying proper cover: about **5,970 dollars** to stand on the summit of North America, all in. The same climb with a guide service, once you add the same flight, the same gear and the same insurance to their fee: **14,500 to 23,700**. The difference is between 8,500 and 17,700 dollars, and it is stable. Add gear or take it away and both totals move by exactly the same amount. What you are actually buying with that money is not safety. It is somebody else making the phone calls.

The honest summary

Denali is not expensive. Buying someone else's organisation is.



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The Must-Have Denali Field Notes

The breakdown gives you the number. The Field Notes tell you what to do with it.

- ✓ **How many months you still need.** Four tests with honest pass marks turn your current fitness into a date, then an eight month training plan you can run next to a job.
- ✓ **Every one of the 17 cost lines, worked out.** Buy or rent per item, the order you pay in so pulling out does not cost you everything, and the two policy clauses that decide whether an unguided team is insured.
- ✓ **Where to start, and in what order.** The timeline worked back from your departure date: which permit first, which skills to practise before you fly, and the team rules that have to exist before anyone is tired.

Plus the other insights that prepare you to push your limits further: the three purchases that were worth double, the three that were wasted money, and the ten decisions that kept it at \$2,717.

GET THE FIELD NOTES · €29

Founding price until 30 November, then €39. One month, full refund.
koendarras.com/denali-fieldbook

More, free. The full film of those 21 days: youtube.com/watch?v=jbCXFFQ-yBU. The 46 questions we wish someone had asked us before we left: koendarras.com/denali-checklist. Everything from this expedition on one page: koendarras.com/denali. Preparing for something big yourself? Reply to the welcome email and tell me what it is. I read them.

Amounts are per person from a six person expedition in May 2025, in US dollars, and are what we paid rather than what you will pay, minus the cameraman. The 2,717 is what it costs on the ground in Alaska and excludes international flight, personal gear and insurance, as does every guided price quoted here. Flight, insurance and rental figures in section 05 are market ranges checked in August 2026, not our receipts. The 2026 NPS mountaineering fee of 450 dollars and the guided price range were checked against public sources in August 2026. This is not technical mountaineering instruction. Use qualified guides, official route information, medical advice and local regulations for real expeditions.