To My Dear Mountain Guests,

Many people hire guides/instructors because, statistically, we do a good job keeping ourselves and our guests reasonably safe in beautiful but inherently dangerous places. Still, every guest signs a waiver and, when asked, says they have read and understood that guides can’t guarantee his or her safety. But I want to go deeper than a legal waiver here. All of us intellectually understand that the mountains are inherently dangerous and accidents will happen, but look at the odds and think, “Won’t happen to me!” And most of the time we’re right. The odds are forever in our favour. Until they’re not. I’ve spent decades in the mountains, and had three serious accidents directly in my groups in all that time. Pretty good odds, no? But, to my guest who got hit in the arm by a rock while I was guiding her, and to my partner who I dropped a rock on, that record means very little. I also reviewed the avalanche forecasting where, the next day, an amazing woman who was very close with my family and deeply loved by hers died. I didn’t think any of those outcomes would happen, but they did.

**So, if I can and do get surprised regularly by the mountains, how am I going to keep you and us safe?**

**I can’t. If we go into the mountains we are taking a larger than “daily life” risk. The only way to totally avoid that is to not go.**

I mean this. I really can’t keep us—you or me—completely safe. That’s my painfully learned truth after thousands of personal and professional days out in the mountains. Days sometimes end badly, even with the best practices and motivations. I’ve lost 25 plus friends to the mountains, and worked on multiple bad accidents and fatalities. These people weren’t stupid or cavalier. They, the mountains and gravity simply did what they do, and that was that. Do you honestly know and believe this? Or are you just relying on the odds and a guide? Because, long term, the mountains will destroy all of us who go there. Many guides and guests won’t agree, and I can respect that as I once thought it too.

Humans are never omniscient in their understanding, and the mountains are infinitely complex. Put those two factors together and, even with the best systems, intentions, training, and mental approach, there will be bad outcomes. We are tiny soft creatures in a magic but very hard world of ice, snow and stone.

I visit and guide the mountains with the understanding of both the absolute joy and the deepest pain the mountains can bring. I am not abdicating my responsibility as a guide when I acknowledge the above. I am taking total ownership of what I really think it means to go into the mountains as a guide or guest, and letting you know my view as clearly as I can. I hope this knowledge makes me a better guide for you, and my words have a truth you can feel in your bones as I do.

I will do my best to keep us in the good statistics column while doing beautiful things. But we won’t “manage” mountain risk as no one manages mountains. We will use our inherently flawed understanding of the environment and ourselves to favour the outcomes we want. And I know I’ll get it wrong sometimes. Strangely, I believe accepting my own failability helps make good decisions for both of us.

Still thinking of hiring me? Damn, you’re brave! OK, here’s some more notes on how we might approach our time in the mountains together:

1. My primary goal is to get back at the end of the day with you. It isn’t to push for the top, it’s to come home. If we don’t make the summit that’s OK if we come home and can have more great summits together in the future. **Our lives are worth more than any one day or objective.** Living is fun! I run away from hazard and toward life a lot.
2. We’re in this together, literally. While I’ve possibly had more days out, I routinely miss things or make errors you might catch. You will see things I don’t. I value your opinion, and guests/partners have saved my day or life many times. **If your Spidey sense or third eye or whatever is flashing, even a little, then please, please, speak up**! If nothing else it’ll be a good opportunity to discuss a situation or sign, thank you.
3. **I’ll also ask you for your goals and risk perspective so we’re aligned**, and so we choose appropriate objectives together. Discussion about this is critical. I’ll outline expected primary hazards to you, and verbalize our approach to those hazards before and during the day. If you’re uncomfortable please let me know, we’ll talk, and if unresolved we will cheerfully leave.
4. Avalanches, lightning, rockfall, bears, falling trees (recent terrible fatal accident) it’s a long list so I’ll stick to the immediate hazards, and how we’ll mitigate them. Most of the time I won’t go super deep into these hazards, but say something like, “We’re going into avalanche terrain as discussed. I think it’s reasonable or I wouldn’t go, but I don’t want to be on the climb after 14:00 when the sun hits it, so we’ll need to be down by then. Thoughts?” I won’t necessarily talk about the ATES scale or return intervals or the November 1st rain crust unless you’re interested. And a slide could happen at 10:00, 14:00 or never. I’m making a judgement and feel it’s solid or I wouldn’t go into the terrain myself (see #1 above), or with you. **But it’s just a judgement, not an absolute**. I simply can’t understand or explain every potential hazard we’re facing in detail or we’d never leave the parking lot. I do seriously love questions and talking about hazards throughout the day!
5. **I build our days around you**. Having our “best” day means both you and I are honest about our skill, fitness, risk perspectives and stoke. If I don’t think I can give you a really great day, or our risk tolerances are fundamentally different, I’ll happily recommend other guides as I often do. What you say is confidential with me.
6. My decisions aren’t always purely rational. **If I call a day or situation it may have nothing to do with you or the obvious conditions**, I’m just listening to something I maybe can’t even explain but know to trust from decades in the mountains. If I can’t explain it in a way that satisfies you I’ll happily refund your money and buy you a beer/Red Bull when we’re down safe.
7. When guides fall or get avalanched, and I know many who have, they often need help from you. So, **I need you to be able to initiate a rescue if I get hurt**. I’ve been lucky so far, but we’ll go over how to do it until you’re comfortable with the practices. I know several guides who are alive because of their guests. Thank you.
8. If I take you, your dad, sister, brother, son or spouse out I am one hundred percent going to treat and value each as my own. I set different risk tolerances based on our discussion, your age, experience and skill. And **I’ll think of your family when guiding you**. Because if it goes wrong I may be looking them in the eyes, and have. But you also need to understand that the mountains don’t respect “family” at all, and that people make errors. Always.
9. With hindsight every accident is preventable, but most good guides and long-term climbers/pilots/paddlers have had “surprise” accidents. I’ve been “right” or had good outcomes many thousands of times, but the mountain’s infinite combination dials will spin in ways I’ve never seen before. To believe otherwise is a trap of naïveté and arrogance I’d like to avoid. **By starting our day with an honest look at risk together I hope to finish it on the right side of those risks for both of us.**
10. Your philosophy here. **Let’s talk about how you view the mountains and life, and build the best day we can around what we can do together.** Yeah!

If the above makes sense then I am looking forward to getting out with you and having the best day we possibly can! Let’s talk, figure out a great day, and get fired up for the amazing places we can go to, and come home from, together!

Thank you,

Will Gadd