

‘The Alpinist’ scales impressive heights

Written by By Glenn Kay For the Sun
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Rating: ««««

out of «««««

Running Time:
93 minutes

Universal Pictures and Roadside Attractions is releasing this documentary in theatres nationwide Sept. 10.

Back in 2018, a film crew photographed free-climber Alex Honnold’s attempt to scale El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. The movie was called, “Free Solo,” and it won an Academy Award for Best Documentary. As expected, it also brought more attention to a group of passionate eccentrics who risk their lives to reach the highest peaks in the world. “The Alpinist” follows another notable mountaineer named Marc-André Leclerc, telling his story and about his attempt to scale Torre Egger in Patagonia.

While the subject matter between the two films is similar, this is an equally impressive effort that goes into even greater detail about these individuals and their unusual obsession to reach incredible heights.

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As the film opens, we learn that despite being 23 and relatively new to the scene, Canadian Marc-André Leclerc has already made a name for himself in the climbing community. Even Alex Honnald sings the young man’s praises, noting his staggering abilities and jaw-dropping ascents which are not widely known. The crew follows Lerclerc for two years, noting his friendly, but quiet and modest demeanor as they try to figure out what drives him to continue in his pursuits.

Early on, the documentary filmmakers provide some intriguing background information about the origins of alpinists and the dangers involved (suggesting that nearly half of lifelong climbers have ultimately met their fate in the wild). They also admit that despite their best efforts, they weren’t able to glean exactly why these people feel compelled to do what they do. Leclerc himself turns out to be a tricky subject because of his camera-shy personality. He doesn’t use social media and appears awkward and uncomfortable talking about himself on camera.

This modesty actually makes the subject likable, even if the filmmakers struggle when he begins disappearing without them to take part in various solo ascents.

When the crew does manage to join Leclerc, they capture some extraordinary footage. The stunning locales are unique and interesting, ranging from Western Canada to the southern tip of South America. As the climber attempts more and more dramatic climbs, the film stuns viewers with overhead drone shots capturing Leclerc as he attempts to find his next step up in variable and constantly changing conditions. Following him on routine excursions, it becomes clear that he often improvises, picking a site and sometimes scaling rock, ice and even frozen water to reach the summits.

Given the information relayed about how potentially deadly each step may be, it makes the climbs even more intense.

For some, the sights alone may be worth the price of admission, but there’s some extra food for thought as well. While the filmmakers seem determined not to impose their own feelings on the perilous profession, plenty of issues arise as they detail the recent rise of interest in the sport. Over the past decade or so, what was once an obscure occupation has become hugely popular. Climbers now post photos and videos of their mountaineering accomplishments on social media, resulting in massive numbers of followers and even corporate sponsorships.

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While not explicitly stated, the facts suggest an unintentional push for enthusiasts to take on even more challenging feats to impress their sponsors/fanbase.

The film doesn't go into great detail on this particular issue, as Leclerc focuses on avoiding the limelight and the influences of those around him, and instead tries to stay true to his own sense of adventure. However, the subtext is present, as are some grim truths as the film reaches its conclusion. "The Alpinist" is a bit of a late arrival in the mountaineering film genre and could go into even greater detail on some of the themes that it briefly raises, but it does serve as a beautifully shot and compelling tribute to a remarkable individual.

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