



AAC Publications

Upernavik region, Sarqarssuaq Fjord, Drowning in a Sea of Light

West Greenland

Lee Roberts, Dave Rudkin, and I left the U.K. on July 24. Three days and four plane rides later, we arrived in Upernavik, where we were met by our local contact, Nikolas Sorenson. Our freight was delayed, so it wasn't until July 30 that we were dropped off at the head of Sarqarssuaq Fjord on the south side of Qaersorssuaq island, ca 30km from Upernavik (see map [AAJ 2011](#)).

The campsite was perfect: It was sheltered from most wind directions, and had good water and an abundant supply of driftwood. However, there was also a lot of plastic, which we cleaned up and burnt; the camp was left in a much cleaner state than on our arrival. We had hired a rifle from our host as a safety precaution should we come across any bears or rabid foxes. Bullets were purchased from the local supermarket, and we carried out a short rifle training session, discovering the gun to be defective and quite dangerous to use. Fortunately, the only wildlife we came across was very hospitable Arctic foxes.

Our main objective lay on the large cliffs above the east side of the fjord, and after a short approach, which proved awkward due to boulderfields, we scoped a crack system. Before returning for a closer look, we climbed on a crag close to base camp (on which I had climbed in 2010), putting up a six-pitch route, Heroes of Hotness, at British E3 6a. The third pitch was stunning.

We now tackled our main objective, climbing three pitches to the top of a pinnacle, where we had a close examination of the crack system above. It looked good. Lee aided a pitch at C1 and fixed a rope; we thought this might go free at around E6. We returned to camp to collect more gear. We had no satellite phone for weather forecasts but decided to go for it next day.

Regaining our high point, Dave led what proved to be the crux at E5 6b, the climbing and rock quality on this pitch being excellent. A few more rope lengths, including a good pitch at E3 led by Lee, brought us to easier-angled ground with many loose blocks, forcing us to second with rucksack and haul bag. The cloud had thickened all day, and as we reached a ledge it began to rain. We had waterproofs but no bivouac kit and tried to sit it out. We were more than 400m up the route and knew a rappel retreat would be difficult and dangerous. However, once we started to get wet, we realized we would quickly get very cold, so decided to go down. The next five hours were terrifying. Trashing our 80m static rope early on, we were forced to use the 60m, which took longer. We eventually got back to camp at 9 a.m., having been on the go for 24 hours.

Compared to my previous trips in this area, the weather had so far proved significantly less stable. We walked to a high point on the island, where we had line of sight with Upernavik and, using a mobile phone, got a weather forecast that predicted a few clear days before the return of bad weather. We decided to go lightweight for one more attempt.

On August 9 we reascended our ropes carefully, and then led through in blocks to our high point. Above the ledge I led a loose pitch at E3, continued for a couple more pitches, and then Lee took over, leading to the top via a final headwall with great rock and protection (E2). It had been a 12-hour push, and we were rewarded by stunning views and a memorable walk down. We named our route Drowning in a Sea of Light (800m, 20 pitches, E5 6b C1). Apart from pitch four (30m), all were climbed free and on sight with no bolts or pegs.

Unseasonable rain characterized the rest of our trip, but we did manage another six-pitch route, Palmolive (E1 5a), on the same smaller cliff close to base camp. We would like to thank the British Mountaineering Council, Welsh Sports Association, Alpine Club, and Gino Watkins Memorial Fund for their financial backing.

Olly Sanders, UK

Editor's note: Climbing in this area may be restricted at times because of regulations protecting nesting seabirds. Follow [this link](#) for more information.

Images



Looking south down Sarqarssuaq Fjord to the 800-meter line of Drowning in a Sea of Light.

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