



AAC Publications

Wohlthat Mountains, Bertha's Tower, Gammie Hannah's Tower

Antarctica, Queen Maud Land

If there was one thing that defined and controlled this trip—like a psychotic maestro conducting a death-metal- rock-and-roll orchestra—it was the unrelenting wind: fierce, biting, destroying, hypothermic- hammering, schedule-delaying, katabatic wind.

Our trip took place from November 1–December 24. Antarctic winds delayed our flight from Cape Town with the Russian company Antarctic Logistics Center International, leaving us stuck in South Africa for a week. Then, on arrival at Novolazarevskaya, the Russian base in Queen Maud Land, we were told we could be delayed up to 10 days more. Fortunately, a pilot was willing to fly in risky conditions, with the caveat that wind or lack of visibility might make it impossible to land near the mountains. This flight on a Basler 76 was the most expensive part of our expedition. If it did not succeed, we could not afford to take another. Fortunately, after around two hours in the air, Keith Ladzinski, Cory Richards, Freddie Wilkinson, and I landed safely at 71.890409° S, 13.555481°.

Our first goal was to circumnavigate our chosen island of granite towers in a previously unclimbed eastern part of the Wohlthat Mountains. We spent five days on this ski tour, looking for routes to climb. When we returned to base camp, we found our circular-walled shelter half filled with snow from the spindrift, and two tents destroyed. We moved camp closer to the rock towers for additional protection.

For the next two weeks we endured relentless, numbing wind. While trying to avoid frostbite, we shuttled loads and climbed and fixed ropes to a high camp 350m up a massive, ominous rock tower. We then ascended to our high point with enough food and supplies for at least seven days. After spending the next five days working from a portaledge camp, we reached the summit.

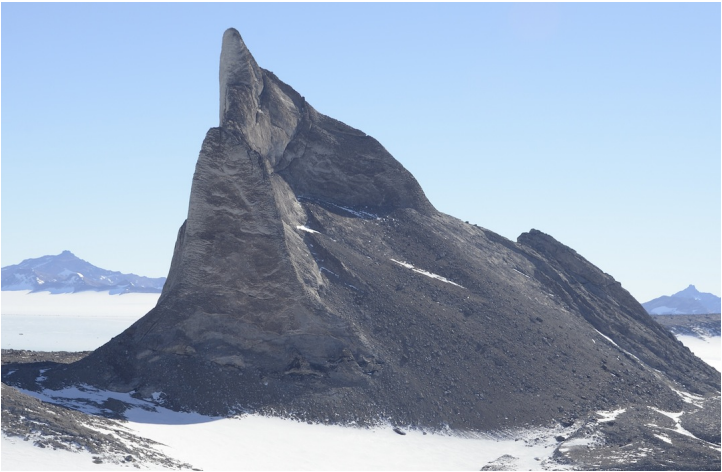
We had climbed through sculptured mazes of stone flames and waves. It sometimes seemed we were on a skyscraper of petrified Swiss cheese. At one point I found myself climbing over an expanse of orange and white quartz crystals, using the jewels and gemstones for hand and foot holds. We named the summit Bertha's Tower, and graded the ca 600m route VI 5.11 R A3+. Bertha was my grandmother, and she always told me, "The time is now!" She thoroughly supported my choice to pursue a life of climbing and adventure.

We had enough time to climb one more stunning tower. It was a classic ridge up the back of a ship's prow, and took only 12 hours camp-to-camp. We named it Grammie Hannah's Tower, this time after Freddie's grandmother. The ca 600m route was 5.6.

My previous two trips to Queen Maud Land, in 2003 and 2005, were simply stepping stones to this incredible challenge of wind, cold, and some of the wildest rock formations I could imagine. Huge thanks goes to National Geographic, the Copp-Dash Inspire Award, and the Polartec Challenge Grant for helping make this trip possible. However, we would not have stepped out the door without the time and energy from countless other people.

Mike Libeck, AAC

Images



The "ship's prow" of ca 600m Grammie Hannah's Tower. The first-ascent party ascended the right skyline.



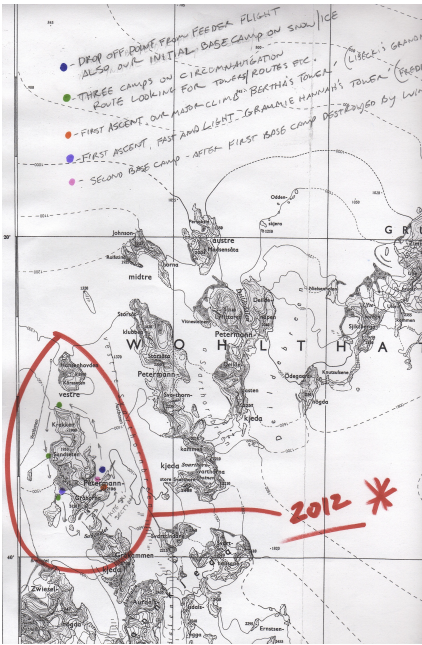
The first-ascent route (600m, VI 5.11 R A3+) up Bertha's Tower.



Mike Libecki and Freddie Wilkinson work through bizarre rock formations on the first ascent of Bertha's Tower.



Camp on Bertha.



Map of 2012 camps and ascents.

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