



AAC Publications

Mt. Bute, west face, Foweraker-Serl, first free ascent

Canada, Waddington Range

I first became aware of Mt. Bute several years ago, when a team of three climbers from Squamish succeeded in establishing a monstrous 50-pitch ridge climb: School of Rock (Kay-Martinello-Sinnes, AAJ 2010). After their trip they noted the free-climbing possibilities on the west face.

The west face was first climbed in 1986 by Greg Foweraker and Don Serl; it received a second ascent three days later by Fred Beckey, Kit Lewis, and Jim Nelson. Since then, the line had seen one repeat, in 2010 by a Canadian team, who tried to free the line but were thwarted by a wet July snowstorm; nevertheless, they described the west face as better than Half Dome or Lotus Flower Tower. [Most recently, in 2011, Jim Martinello and Dean Potter, along with Mikey Schaefer, free-climbed the west face during a National Geographic-funded expedition, following a line that starts on the Foweraker-Serl route and then continues further to the left.]

Inspired by these efforts, Madaleine Sorkin and I flew into Mt. Bute in mid-August, landing on a tiny spot in the glacial moraine below the west face. After scoping the route and deciding to bring ice axes and puffy jackets, but no stove or bivy gear, we set alarms for early the following morning. After a short glacial crossing, Madaleine led the first block, which featured some run-out corners and poorly protected, closed-off seams, linked by unlikely face traverses that prevented several near dead-ends. I then took us up a major corner system in the middle of the route, climbing world-class granite, with good protection, and enough wide climbing to keep us warm as the weather began to deteriorate. After climbing three-quarters of the route, we had yet to see pitons or slings from the pendulums used by prior teams.

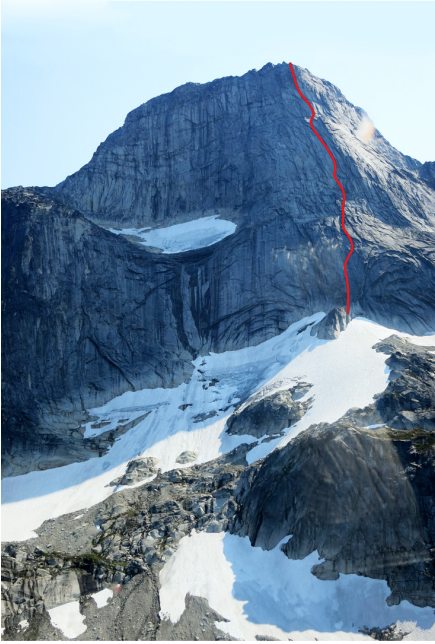
Madaleine took the lead again below a steep, thin corner, which we hoped was the original line. She onsighted the pitch (5.11+/5.12-), and then I swung through and led up more steep 5.11 terrain, finding amazing face holds up an overhang between the two corner systems where other teams had previously pendulumed to switch corners; higher up, I clipped an old piton from a previous ascent. A couple more pitches got us to the summit via excellent 5.10 terrain, and we topped out amid rapidly deteriorating conditions.

Despite having ice axes, we opted to forego the unknown glacial descent in the dark and building cloud layer, and rappelled the route instead. We spent that night in a perfect bivy cave on the face that had been used by the first ascent team. It began raining as soon as we tossed our rappel ropes the following morning, and it proceeded to rain for the better part of the next week.

After enduring many tent-bound days, we hiked out the Galleon Creek drainage to the west, aiming for saltwater at the head of Bute Inlet. (Don Serl calls this a "legendary bushwhack.") After two days we stumbled onto a trail that led us to Homathko Camp, an outpost at the mouth of the Homathko River, where we were fed and hosted by homesteaders Chuck and Sheron Burchhill. They radioed for a floatplane, and we were back in Campbell River by noon.

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Images



The west face of Mt. Bute, showing the Foweraker-Serl route, which was free-climbed by Blake Herrington and Madaleine Sorkin at 5.11+/5.12-. The Martinello-Potter route climbs a line left of the one shown.



Madaleine Sorkin leading up a steep corner.



Madaleine Sorkin following a steep corner.



Madaleine Sorkin following a picture perfect corner high on Mt. Bute.

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