



AAC Publications

Great Walls of China (5,186m), north top (ca 5,120m), Double Trouble

China, Xinjiang, Western Kokshaal-too

From July 27 to August 25, Vincent van Beek, Vincent Perrin, Bas van der Ploeg, Bas and Saskia van der Smeede, and I visited the western sector of the Western Kokshaal-too. Following the usual approach through Kyrgyzstan, we reached the unnamed glacier south of Kyzyl Asker. Our goal was to establish rock routes on the ca 700m east face of the Great Walls of China, where previously only two ice routes had been climbed (AAJ 2005 and 2012). Unlike other expeditions, we managed to drive to base camp without any problems, and established advanced base on the glacier after 10 days of load-carrying and exploring.

During sunny spells we were able to choose several lines and fix the first pitches, but daily afternoon snow showers made any serious attempts impossible. We were forced to wait a few boring days in our small tents until the weather improved. Once we got a text via our satellite phone promising a good weather window, we split into three parties and set off for our respective lines. We anticipated climbing for four days, and had therefore brought a portaledge and two haul bags per team. Vincent Perrin and I tried a line on the main wall, with Bas and Saskia attempting another a few hundred meters to the left. Bas van der Ploeg and Vincent van Beek were much farther left, on the tower left of the main face (a little right of the two ice routes).

Unfortunately, Saskia was hit by rockfall, and although not seriously injured, was unable to continue. At the same time, Vincent and I were struggling with wet rock and serious aid (A2/3). Our line turned out to be exposed to icefall, and when we couldn't find a safe spot for the portaledge, we retreated. Van Beek and van der Ploeg made much better progress, but eventually had to abandon their climb when they ran out of water and found they needed bigger cams to progress.

A little later, while Perrin, van der Smeede, and I were on the glacier, seeing how the other pair was progressing, we scoped a snow and ice line on the north face. We were only able to find three ice screws among our big-wall gear, so we decided to bring a big beak as an extra piece of ice protection.

On August 16, the weather was still very good, with clear and cold conditions, and it felt great to climb in alpine style after struggling with aid. However, the higher we climbed, the more difficult it became: Solid black ice was hidden under the white cover. Vincent led the first technical pitch, which involved 10m of 80°; higher, Bas had the opportunity to lead another fine section of AI3+. Although the final bit was not steep, we kept belaying, since snow conditions were tricky. The wind had created huge vertical cornices in a way I had never seen before. The closer we got to the top, the more loose and dangerous was the snow. We couldn't see if we had reached the exact high point of the long horizontal ridge, but quickly agreed it was too dangerous to swim any further. Although happy with our success, we were now worried about descending 800m with a single 60m big-wall rope, rappelling from Abalakov anchors. It would be a long descent.

We named the route Double Trouble (800m, TD- AI4) after our tricky ascent/descent and the usual stomach problems climbers experience during an expedition. The overall difficulty and quality were comparable with the Swiss Route on Les Courtes in the Mont Blanc Massif. Back at base camp we realized that we had finished at the northernmost top; the main summit lies more to the south.

Images



The north top of the Great Walls of China with Double Trouble.



Bas van der Smeede climbing the AI3+ pitch on Double Trouble.



The first attempt to climb the main rock wall on the east face of the Great Walls of China. A picture of these extensive granite walls appears in AAJ 2012.

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