



AAC Publications

Mt. Suter, South Face

New Zealand, Earl Mountains

Viewed from the Milford road, Mt. Suter (2,094m) is all but indiscernible. Standing among a cluster of peaks, it appears as nothing more than a small dot on the horizon, easily lost into the array of surrounding summits. From the Falls Creek drainage, however, it presents a completely different spectacle. Rearing abruptly out of the small glacial lake that feeds Falls Creek, an unbroken 800m to 1,000m cirque wall stands guard over the head of the valley. And dominating the center of this wall is Mt. Suter.

The bulk of Suter's south face thrusts proud of the main wall to form a prominent buttress of compact granite. Dark and foreboding, it is streaked with a series of discontinuous ice smears that offer little in the way of an obvious line. At second glance, however, the eye is drawn involuntarily to the left side of the buttress. Filling the deeply recessed corner abutting the main cirque wall, and snaking down the full height of the face, is a continuous white ribbon of ice.

On July 19, in the inky blackness of a midwinter pre-dawn, Stephen Skelton and I stumbled through the broken moraine field that litters the valley floor. Hopping from boulder to boulder, we approached the base of the wall and set out on an attempt to make the first ascent of the face. Twenty pitches and 18 hours later, again in darkness, we topped out.

The climb offered some of the best alpine ice conditions I have ever encountered and kept us guessing until the very final pitch. Starting up from the large avalanche-debris fan at the base of the face, we climbed nine pitches of moderate terrain before entering the prominent corner system. From here the angle increased as we climbed 11 pitches of sustained ice at WI3 to WI5 in the depths of the recess. These included a harrowing horizontal traverse on thin, vertical ice onto the main face when the corner blanked out after the 16th pitch, and a 30m runout on Patagonia-esque steep, unconsolidated snow to reach the ridgeline. We gave it VI, 6 (WI5) for a Darrans winter grade.

We bivied in a shoulder-width niche in the rock just above the face. In the morning, after completing the final few pitches to the summit, we hurriedly started down. This proved to be an adventure itself, taking a further 15 hours to complete the 6km traverse of the east ridge and descend 1,700m back into the Hollyford Valley.

Ben Dare, New Zealand

Editor's note: The author has published a longer narrative of this adventure at the [New Zealand Alpine Team website](#).

Images



Starting the second pitch of the upper corner on Mt. Suter.



Nearing the end of the corner system. The climbers would be forced onto a thin veneer of ice to the right to escape the face.



Setting out into the darkness on pitch 18.



Looking down the east ridge of Suter. The descent along this 6 km ridge took 15 hours.



The line of the first ascent on the south face of Mt. Suter. The route required 20 pitches and 18 hours of climbing.

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