



AAC Publications

Lurking Tower, southeast buttress, New Dog Old Tricks

Canada, Baffin Island, Sam Ford Fjord

In May, Jonas Haag and I made the first ascent of Lurking Tower over 13 days by the route New Dog, Old Tricks (3,000', VI 5.11 C3+). This was my sixth trip to Baffin Island and my partner's first big wall—ever.

I first went to Baffin 17 years ago. It is where my true love of expeditions and big-wall first ascents began. This magical Arctic land planted the seed of passion, obsession, and, admittedly, addiction that has led me to every continent and the most remote areas of the planet on over 55 expeditions now.

I had planned to go alone—as I often do. But then I got a random call from a good friend of mine from Sweden, Jonas Haag. I had already secured my tickets to Baffin, and the trip was less than two weeks away. In the months prior, Jonas had expressed interest about getting into big-wall climbing, yet had never attempted one. I said to Jonas, “Hey man, you should just go to Baffin with me. Get some intense big-wall experience—*fast!*” He had some knowledge from cragging and such, and had been up Denali, as well as Cotopaxi and Antisana in Ecuador, so he had a good idea about enjoying expedition mayhem. He called me the next day after somehow getting a month off of work. *Baffin bound!*

Before long we were sitting in a *qamutiq* (Inuit sled) behind a snowmobile, gliding over the frozen ocean on the way to Sam Ford Fjord. I had never seen so many polar bear tracks in Sam Ford Fjord before. Our goal was to go into Sam Ford Fjord and look for the best line we could find. It was not necessarily about the formation, as it sometimes can be—we were going to reconnoiter as many walls as possible and focus on finding a line that any obsessed climber would be organically drawn to. After cruising around the fjord for many hours on snowmobiles, scoping with binoculars, we found our destination: a beautiful tower on the northeast side of the Walker Arm. I had stared at this tower from the other side of the fjord for more than a month in 1998 when Josh Helling, Russell Mitrovich, and I climbed the Mahayana Wall on the Walker Citadel (AAJ 1999).

When we arrived at the base of the tower by snowmobile, I immediately saw two possible lines. We unloaded our haul bags and set up base camp below. The following day we studied a line on the southeast buttress and the more we looked the more aweing it became. Almost half of the route looked to be comprised of thin, splitter cracks up golden granite and the rest of mysterious, red-granite corners—some of these corners would end up providing journeys through mottled sections of mayhem, up black-and-white, narwhal-skin-colored rock.

I got to lead every pitch and haul the bags. Jonas learned to jug and clean, which is no easy task—along with the hundreds of variables that go along with a huge first ascent on a sub-zero, Arctic first ascent. I was blown away by Jonas' work, psyche, and commitment. After a week on the wall, climbing capsule style with two portaledge camps, we fixed ropes high and then blasted to the summit in a 35-hour push. A total of 17 pitches led us to an easy hike to the summit. We climbed the route hammerless and all clean, which was really pretty cool for a first ascent on an Arctic wall. (I did place some anchor bolts.) Plus, there were only about five pitches of Russian roulette rock climbing on loose flakes; for the most part, the rest was splitter dream cracks.

Difficulties? I had a terrible rockfall experience when I lightly tapped on a big flake and it suddenly came off, pinning me against the wall. The flake weighed at least 300 pounds. It was hyper madness!

It took everything I had to lift the flake and drop it below me. Luckily, it did not hit the ropes below or Jonas. Horizontal crux of the trip? We saw two huge male polar bears, one not far from our base camp and another just a few miles away. On the ground, we slept with a loaded rifle hoping for the best. On our way out, we learned a bear had ambushed two Inuit hunters north of us and they'd barely survived. One hunter had been dragged out of the tent with his head in a polar bear's jaws.

– Mike Libeck, USA

Images



(1) New Dog Old Tricks (Haag-Libecki, May 2014). (2) Up the Creek Without a Paddle (Ditto-Villanueva, August 2014)



A polar bear, not far from the climbers' base camp. They slept with a loaded gun in their tent and were motivated to get up on the wall.



Jonas Haag jugging up the new 17-pitch route on the southeast face of Lurking Tower.



Jonas Haag studies up inside the portaledge with "Year of the Horse" supplies at his feet. Libeck says, "No suffer ponies up here, no suffering, just joy."



Suffering through some Arctic temperatures on the wall.

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