



AAC Publications

The General, East Face, Ilium

Russia, Chukotka Region, Bilibino, Chuvan Mountains

Somewhere above us the walls were making their presence felt, unfriendly and brooding in the impenetrable mist. Tantalizing photos of granite formations—the Commander and General—towering over the Siberian tundra had drawn us more than halfway around the world to far eastern Russia. Sooner or later we hoped to get at least a glimpse of them!

Bilibino boasts the smallest and most northerly nuclear power plant in the world. We were made welcome by our amiable Russian contact, Evgeny Turilov, and were relieved to find that, despite some confusion over permits, we were not to become guests of the Federal Security Service and would instead be staying in one of the brutalist-style, Soviet-era blocks of flats that make up the town.

Despite poor weather, we were keen to get going. After comically overloading two quad bikes with gear, it became apparent that I had drawn the short straw. Graham Dawson watched gleefully from the rear of a quad as I nervously clambered on the back of a battered Yamaha motorbike, held together with a thorough mummification of Sellotape. The white-knuckle ride through the mist along rough, disused mining tracks was punctuated in true Russian style with frequent beer stops and the occasional round of vodka and pickles. The following heavily loaded slog through boggy tundra was either made easier or much harder by the constant boozing, depending on which member of the party was asked. After long hours of marching we finally reached what would become our base camp, a fact that could only rightly be celebrated with more vodka and an array of dubious tinned meats and probable mollusks.

After a few days our cordial Russian cohort left us in the mist, with the assurance that the walls we had come to climb were up there somewhere. Luckily, as the feeling of isolation set in, the lingering clag lifted and we finally clapped eyes on our objectives. After enduring a frustrating day waiting for the rock to dry sufficiently, we set our sights on the east-facing side of the General. In barely warm enough temperatures we skirted icicles at the base and scrambled up an easy gully to the start of the steepness and what appeared to be a compelling and continuous crack system. Some offwidth grunting led to precarious tiptoeing up mostly verglas-free slabs, with just sufficient protection dug out of shallow, flaring seams. Some fine finger cracks, spiced with occasional, worryingly loose flakes, run-out “necky gardening,” and the occasional enjoyable and diverting move of 5c, led us to the summit. We named the route Ilium (285m, E4 5c), and a sense of momentum began to build as we eyed up other appealing lines.

The next day our hopes were somewhat dashed when we awoke to steadily falling snow and equally descending temperatures. A gradual improvement in the evening encouraged us to repeat the first three pitches (up to 7a) of the Australian line Basil Brush on the General (AAJ 2015) and fix 150m of static for a quick push the next day. Sadly, the unseasonable weather had other ideas, and winter decided to return early to Siberia.

After many days of sub-zero weather and tent-based boredom, we became disheartened as our supply of Scotch dwindled and the stir-craziness mounted. In between terrifying lightning storms, a band of hardy Russians emerged from the cloud and we overcame language barriers with the international fellowship found through discharging firearms and drinking medical-grade ethanol. These hard men promptly declared “season over” and bid a hasty retreat, leaving us dejected and somewhat nervous with a warning of nearby bear sightings. During the next lull in the storm, I

ascended our frozen lines to retrieve the kit. We lamented not bringing our ice tools to tackle the enticing Scottish mixed conditions now developing.

We made the decision to move our base camp to a lower elevation in a neighboring valley to the east, called Finger Crack Cirque, in search of climbable rock and fresh banter with a group of Aussies. A rare glimpse of the sun, some Antipodean encouragement, and west-facing walls shedding their snow encouraged another vertical foray. After 90m of entertaining climbing we reached an impasse in the shape of a finger crack that looked like it would offer an incredible E4 pitch if not chocked with ice and frozen moss. A fresh fall of snow saw us resort to drinking the "spirit" the Aussies had gifted us. The ensuing insanity caused by mixing pure ethanol with boiled Haribo gummy bears resulted in a catastrophic hangover hardly conducive to carrying 35kg loads for 12km out of the massif. As I stumbled along, barely keeping up the rear, the frequency of bear droppings and paw prints led me to reflect, with some trepidation, that if I were a bear I'd be focusing my attention on the tottering lame beast lagging far behind the rest of the pack.

After a comparatively civilized ride back to Bilibino in a 4WD, our international motley crew was treated to heartening displays of Russian hospitality. In between bouts of whipping with oak twigs and sweating out the last of the ethanol in a homemade banya, I began to reflect differently on our experience. The hubris involved in overcoming lonely summits seemed almost farcical in the light of all this camaraderie and touching cultural exchange. Despite the frustrating, unseasonable frosty weather, the human warmth and companionship we had encountered, and our shared resilience in the face of adversity on this expedition, had been worth the trip alone. We would like to thank the Jeremy Willson Charitable Trust for financial support in the form of a Mountain Exploration Grant.

Simon Smith, U.K.

Notes on permits for the Bilibino area. The correct permit procedure for entering the Chukotka autonomous region is somewhat murky. Teams in 2015 were informed they needed to get the permit ("propusk") from a tour agency, at least 30 days in advance (some officials recommended 90 days or more). However, efforts to contact the recommended agencies were unsuccessful. Instead, Gemma Woldendorp recommends contacting the Chukotka governor's office, whose website has a page (in English) with instructions for obtaining tourist permits.

Images



The east face of the General. From left to right: Wake up in Siberia (Auer-Larcher-Vanhee); Ilium (Dawson-Smith); Aupa! (Pou-Pou); From Zero to Hero (Auer-Larcher-Vanhee). All routes were established in 2015.



The Commander (left) and General after a storm.



Simon Smith on pitch one of Basil Brush (Fitzgerald-Warner, 2014), north face of the General.



Unclimbed rock walls of the massif—smaller than the main formations—seen from the main river valley during the walkout. On the far right is the east face of the Commander.



Bouldering in the valley below Finger Crack Cirque.



Simon Smith on pitch three of an attempted line in Finger Crack Cirque, shortly before reaching the ice-choked finger crack from which the team bailed.



Graham Dawson on the first ascent of Ilium, east face of the General.

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