



AAC Publications

The Chinese Puzzle Wall: Hidden Dragon

Canada, British Columbia, North Cascades

Marc-André Leclerc first pointed out the Chinese Puzzle Wall to me three years ago, as we climbed the Northeast Buttress of Slesse Mountain. Across the Nesakwatch Creek valley, on the south side of the west buttress of South Illusion Peak, was a diamond-shaped outcrop of steep, white granite. Why hadn't this beautiful 500m wall, just an hour's hike from the trailhead, seen an ascent?

Described that way, it sounds like a pleasant walk in the park. But from our vantage, we had no perception of the height or the characteristics of the rock. I would later learn that, within the small community of climbers who actually knew about the wall, it had a formidable reputation. It is almost entirely overhanging, with huge, looming blocks the size of grand pianos suspended by unknown forces. The Chinese Puzzle Wall is aptly named.

The wall has had five known attempts. In 1986 and '87, Nick Jones, Bill Noble, and Kirt Sellers made two unsuccessful ground-up attempts on a line near the middle of the wall they called the Warlock. Then, in 1994, Fred Beckey, Mark Maffe, and Steve Must tried to climb the wall, but were stymied after the first two pitches. In 2000, Michael Crapo and Ben Demenech got a few pitches up and bailed due to loose blocks. Finally, Tone McLane and Dan Tetzlaff made an attempt in 2008 but took a scary gear-ripping fall on pitch one and bailed.

In August, Marc and I hiked our gear up the steep and forested slope to the base of the wall and spent a total of eight days establishing its first complete route.

Our first pitch led us to a ledge wide enough to walk on without being tied in. To avoid loose blocks in the dark corner of pitch two, we traversed a hollow, razor-thin flake that linked from the next corner system to the right back into our line, 15m higher. We then cleaned the dangerous blocks on rappel to open the direct corner line.

As we continued up, we had to establish nearly every pitch by aid, just to clean out the moss-filled cracks so typical of the Pacific Northwest. While one of us cleaned on a fixed line, the other aid-soloed new terrain above. In this manner, we divided and conquered, each of us ending up with dirt-plastered faces. After establishing a few pitches, we would rappel down, free climb back to our high point, then bump our camp higher up the wall.

By day three we made it to the "Mirage Corner," which appeared black from below and white from above due to a lichen that only grew on the underside of the textured granite. I spent all afternoon aiding and preparing this pitch. We were about halfway up the wall and had greatly underestimated the amount of cleaning that would be required to establish an all-free line, so we bailed to resupply and return in a few days.

Upon return we climbed back to our high point. The Mirage was ready for the lead. The crux was fiddling in gear, almost blindly, into the undulating flare while laybacking the slopey edge. Pumped out of my mind and just a few meters from the top, I ran it out in desperation. It was useless, as my hands peeled away from the crack and I took a mega-whipper. During the fall the rope jammed into the crack and suffered a severe core shot, leaving Marc and I with two options: Bail and return with a new rope or continue for a few more days and be careful about the damaged line. We opted for the latter. Climbing the next pitch, we heard a deep rumble. Across the valley, the pocket glacier on Mt. Slesse was sliding. Thousands of tons of ice cascaded into the cirque below. The remarkable sight reminded

us of the power of the mountains.

Over the next five days we continued up more beautiful corners in the same relentless style. On day seven we finished cleaning the route and hiked to the ridge crest. On the eighth day, we free climbed the final pitches. We then rappelled the entire face on our dangerously core-shot rope while carrying our haul bag and ledge. Using a hand drill, we equipped the route with bolted rappel stations at every other belay. (We used a single nut for the first rap from the top of the face.) The 11-pitch route, Hidden Dragon, is sustained at 5.12b. We also equipped two variation pitches that go at 5.12c.

Hidden Dragon follows continuous corners flowing gracefully around the giant roofs throughout the face. It is the first route on the wall, and there is potential to establish more lines in a similar, ground-up style. The rock quality was excellent, and the climbing was incredible. We are confident this will become a popular wall in the future.

– Brette Harrington, USA

Images



The approximate line of Hidden Dragon (11 pitches, 5.12b), the first route up the Chinese Puzzle Wall, on the west side of the Illusion Peaks in British Columbia's North Cascades.



Marc-André Leclerc following pitch two of Hidden Dragon on the Chinese Puzzle Wall.



Brette Harrington on the sharp end on the sixth pitch of Hidden Dragon, the first complete route on the Chinese Puzzle Wall.



Brette Harrington jugging fixed lines while cleaning pitch eight of Hidden Dragon on the Chinese Puzzle Wall.



The Chinese Puzzle wall, below North Illusion Peak (left) and South Illusion Peak, photographed from near Pocket Peak, south of Slesse Mountain.



The Chinese Puzzle Wall



Brette Harrington follows the Mirage Corner, one of the key pitches on Hidden Dragon.

Article Details

Author	Brette Harrington
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	91
Page	0
Copyright Date	2017
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions