



AAC Publications

Fastness Peak, East Face, Solo Winter Ascent by New Route

New Zealand, Southern Alps

Fastness Peak (2,383m) dominates the skyline above Ruth Flat in the Mt. Aspiring region. The east face is a forbidding wall of compact schist streaked with ice runnels. The first winter ascent was made in 1997 by Clinton Beavan, Al Uren, and Al Wood, who established Storming the Barbican (16 pitches, VI 6) over two days. This face has been largely neglected since that climb, especially during the cold winter months; however, Guy McKinnon made a bold first solo ascent along the original 1990 Sveticic-Dickson Route (IV 5) in the austral summer of 2014.

The East Face of Fastness Peak (2,383m). (1) Storming the Barbican (16 pitches, VI 6, Beavan-Uren-Wood, 1997). (2) Sveticic-Dickson Route (IV 5, 1990). (3) Dare Route (700m, VI 6, 2016). Photo by Danilo Hegg

I'm not exactly sure how my idea to make a solo winter attempt on the face was hatched. It wasn't until I chatted with Al Uren in mid-July that the notion really took hold. Looking back, I should have paid more attention to Al when he asked if I was planning to take skis or snowshoes for the approach up Rainbow Stream. At the time I laughed off the idea: I can't ski to save myself on the best of days and the valley is only around 5km long. How hard could it be? After more than six hours of wading through knee- to waist-deep snow, and one rather cold and unpleasant bivy, I had the answer! I had set out from Queenstown on August 5 with an improving weather forecast. In fact, it would snow almost continuously for the next two days, but the promise of improvement kept me going.

In the morning, as I dropped off the toe of the east ridge toward the foot of the face, I began to question myself. Fleeting glimpses through the swirling cloud revealed the lower face to be banked with loose snow. The main central gullies flowed with a continuous stream of spindrift, but broken ground to the right seemed to hold less snow. After a harrowing traverse, the conditions began to improve and the deep snow quickly turned to ice and rock.

I had chosen a line right of center on the face, leading to the north ridge, to the right of the two existing routes. Climbing the first ice step, I slowly gained confidence. The terrain above was unknown, but the deep-set apprehension that had gripped me on the snow slopes began to recede. As the day progressed, I belayed myself through steep ice and mixed cruxes and free-soloed the rest. The climb was sustained, primarily on thin alpine ice and névé runnels that linked through a series of blank rock steps.

As dusk fell the persistent cloud cover slowly broke and I made my way through the final hurdle to gain the snow slopes below the upper north ridge. The weather was finally fulfilling the promise of the original forecast—a case of too little too late. Darkness overtook me as I labored through the deep snow, robbing me of the opportunity to enjoy the view from the ridge crest. [Editor's note: Dare's unnamed 700m route went at VI 6 or WI5 M5 A1.] A long, cold traverse over the foresummit, followed by an arduous descent of the east ridge into a swirling mist of wind-driven snow, reinforced how wild the New Zealand mountains can be. The climb pushed me close to my limits, and I had little left as I finally collapsed into my bivy at the head of Rainbow Stream. Never has a damp and partially frozen sleeping bag felt so warm and inviting.

The following afternoon I had a fortuitous meeting with Al Uren, and we discussed the merits of various approach tactics over cold beers at the historic Cardrona Hotel. We laughed at the struggles I

had endured while breaking trail, discussed the hardships of solo climbs, and swapped stories about our experiences on the face. He recounted the adventures of its first winter ascent nearly two decades before, when he and his partners had shivered for a night without food or shelter before shaking off the numbing cold to tackle the crux ice pitch below the summit. Despite the hardships, he said, it was the fond memories that shone through. The feeling of savoring the first light of dawn as the sun slowly crested the horizon and cast aside the night's chill. The thrill of stepping into the unknown on an isolated face in the depths of winter. Al and I had in some ways shared an adventure. Yet our climbs also stand apart in the unique memories that we each have, and this paradox will make the journey special to me.

Twenty years is a long time between visits, but it does cause the experience to become that much sweeter. I hope the face won't lie neglected for another 20 years.

Ben Dare, New Zealand

Images



Looking up at the crux ice pitch on the 2016 route on Fastness Peak.



Ben Dare on top of the north ridge of Fastness Peak after soloing the east face.



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