



## AAC Publications

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### **Jam Band**

Free Climbing in Baffin Island's Stewart Valley

**I STILL REMEMBER when I first saw the Asgard Jamming film.** It was 2009, in Lecco, a presentation by Nico Favresse and Sean Villanueva. For me it was revolutionary: These guys were climbing in great style on an amazing wall in a beautiful and remote place—Baffin Island—and, incredibly, they were having a lot of fun, laughing and playing musical instruments.

In the environment where I grew up, under the influence of the Ragni di Lecco (the historic “Lecco Spiders” climbing group) in northern Italy, alpinism and expeditions have always been very serious business. In their movies or lectures, the great alpinists tended to emphasize the suffering and drama of their climbs—there was never any space for jokes. Asgard Jamming opened my eyes. The Belgians were risking their lives and tackling “impossible” challenges, but they didn’t rattle on about numbers or danger. Their amazing images did the talking for them. This became my ideal of the “perfect” expedition—the adventure I would like to live.

Since then I’ve been lucky to climb in many places around the world: Patagonia, the Karakoram, the Himalaya, Greenland, Mexico. Over time I began to realize that every expedition could be “perfect” as long as it had three equally important ingredients: 1) a beautiful wall to free climb; 2) an experience beyond the technical challenge of climbing, taking me out of my comfort zone; and 3) a group of compatible friends—strong, determined, but also a lot of fun.

As I thought over my options for 2016, after many hours of browsing the Internet, it seemed that Baffin Island, and more precisely the remote Stewart Valley, would be the ideal place for my next expedition. When I proposed this idea to my friends Luca Schiera and Matteo “Giga” De Zaiacomo, they accepted without question. Like me, Luca and Giga are members of the new generation of Ragni di Lecco. In the past few years, Luca has been one of my best partners for serious adventures, and I knew I could trust him 100 percent. Giga was only 22 years old, but the three of us had already done a major expedition together, attempting a new route on Bhagirathi IV in India.

And then came a huge stroke of good fortune. Since that inspiring lecture in 2009, I had stayed in touch with Nico and Sean; we’d even done some climbs together in Italy. Now I learned that they also planned to climb in the Stewart Valley in the summer of 2016. “What do you think of joining forces and going together?” Nico asked me. The answer was obvious!

Nico and Sean played on a higher level than us, but we shared the same goal and the same expedition philosophy, and we liked each other. There was only one problem: I couldn’t play any musical instrument! For the Italian team, Giga could play violin and Luca played guitar, but I would have to add learning an instrument to my “to do” list. I opted for the Jew’s harp, thinking it might be the simplest to learn.

**WE ARRIVED in Clyde River, Nunavut, on June 3.** The temperature was exactly 0°C, and it looked like full winter—the land was completely white and frozen. We needed only one day to organize our gear, and on June 5 we were ready to start our 180-kilometer ski tour to the Stewart Valley, towing sledges behind us.

When you ski over the frozen sea, pulling a sledge for 30 to 35 kilometers a day, the perception of time is relative: Sometimes you get caught in your thoughts and ski for a couple of hours without even realizing it; other times you keep looking at your watch and the time never moves. In the last few months I'd been completely dedicated to climbing—and learning to play the Jew's harp—and did not do any specific training for skiing. I struggled to keep up with the others and began setting intermediate goals, never looking at my watch until I had reached them. Given 24 hours of daylight, we chose to wake in early afternoon, start skiing in the evening, and keep going until 3, 4, or 5 a.m.; it was easier to slide over the frozen snow with the lower temperatures at night. Our daily routine was interrupted only by playing music, which seemed to happen pretty much everywhere and anytime!

After six days we reached our first destination: the Walker Arm of Sam Ford Fjord. Here we also found the food and gear stash that a local guy had carried in a few days in advance by snowmobile. Given that we planned a 60-day expedition, we opted for this solution instead of a completely "fair means" expedition. Maybe if we were stronger we could have brought everything on our sledges. There is always room for improvement.

Northwest buttress of Walker Citadel. (1) Down the Slope Without a Ski. (2) E Poi Boh.

After all those days moving only horizontally, the sight of the huge rock faces of Walker Citadel, Beluga Spire, and Polar Sun Spire suddenly awakened our dormant climbers' instinct. And though our main goal was to climb in the Stewart Valley, we felt like having an appetizer. On June 13 we divided in two parties and went for alpine-style ascents of the northwest side of Walker Citadel, well to the right of all the existing routes, including the two that Nico, Sean, and their partners had climbed two summers earlier (AAJ 2015). My first contact with the rock didn't meet expectations—the granite was not great, with many loose blocks. After an initial hard section, the line Giga and I chose got easier and easier. We started simul-climbing and ended up on an easy ridge. At that point the weather worsened, with high winds. We were about 200 meters from the end of the ridge, and since the remaining climb didn't look great and we had no idea how to descend from the summit, we decided to head down immediately, following the line of the ridge. We arrived back at base camp about 24 hours after starting, with mixed feelings about rock climbing on Baffin Island.

A few hours later, Luca, Nico, and Sean also returned to base camp. Their line had proved to be better, and despite the weather they pushed on to the summit of Walker Citadel, after a 1,000-meter, 5.12a first ascent. They descended a snow couloir on the south side of the mountain and circled back to camp, 32 hours after leaving, tired but happy.

After a couple of days of recovery, we began our move into the Stewart Valley. Our next camp was about 12 kilometers away, and ferrying all the food and the equipment required multiple trips; luckily, the lake that fills much of the Stewart Valley was still well frozen, so we could use our sledges to pull the bags across the ice. Here the rock looked better and the walls were steeper. This valley was going to be our home for an entire month, and I couldn't wait to put my hands on the rock.

**ALTHOUGH THERE were several amazing rock faces nearby, we all agreed that the huge west side of Great Sail Peak was the most attractive**, and that our goal should be the first free ascent of this 1,000-meter-plus wall. We thought it would be cool to do it as a team of five, in big-wall style, climbing together and playing music along the way. Given my poor performances with the Jew's harp, I'd been asked to sing during our daily concerts, and I fell back on well-known Italian songs like "Bella Ciao," the WW II resistance tune, or "Fratelli d'Italia," the Italian national anthem.

We spent a couple of days climbing and fixing the first part of the wall, mostly following the 1998 American route, with some variations, in changeable and quite cold weather. Seven pitches up, we reached the enormous ledge system that crosses the face. We had found some real climbing—up to

7a+/b—but compared with what we saw above it felt like a warmup. The face already had two routes: the American route Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash (Catto-Child- Lowe-Ogden-Synnott-Wiltsie, 1998) and the Russian route Rubicon (Davy-Klenov-Odintsov- Rozov-Ruchkin, 2002). For us, it was not really important where those two lines went; they were both impressive lines, but opened in a very different style from ours. [Both routes were completed in the spring, when very cold temperatures more or less mandate traditional aid climbing. Few parties had explored the summertime climbing potential in Baffin's eastern fjords until 2014, when separate Belgian-American and Canadian teams made numerous and rapid free ascents in Sam Ford Fjord.] We were looking for a good line where redpointing the hardest pitches might be required. A discontinuous crack system just 15 meters right of the Russian route seemed to offer a promising start.

After the first pitch, which followed a 65-meter splitter crack, we got directly into the business. For four days, we alternated teams as we moved upward. Since we could count on 24 hours of daylight, we could climb through the night. Some pitches were opened with a mix of free and aid climbing, often on micro-nuts and Peckers, but we never felt the need to place bolts. On the fifth day, Sean and Nico redpointed the three hardest pitches (about 5.12d). Since we had climbed about 350 meters above the big ledge and didn't have any more rope to fix, we decided it was time to leave the comfort of the ledge and start life in the portaledges.

Snow started to fall, but luckily we were hanging under the steeper part of the wall, so the wind-blown snow barely touched us. On day seven the weather remained bad and we relaxed, recovered, and played some music. Nico was working on a new tune:

Matteo was climbing all night long

Then Giga was climbing all night long

Then Luca was climbing all night long

Then Sean was climbing all night long

Then I was climbing all night long.

Weeeeeee have climbed...

We have climbed Great Sail Peak!

During the storm, we discussed what to do next. Since the line we were following ended in a blank, overhanging wall, the logical solution was to traverse left to the Russian route, which followed an obvious system of dihedrals and cracks. Our plan was to launch a summit bid as soon as the weather improved.

In the afternoon of the eighth day on the wall, we left our portaledge camp. The climbing on the upper wall was simply amazing. We followed the Russian route for seven or eight pitches, with some free variations. Free climbing near the top of such a huge wall, under the midnight sun, felt like living in a parallel universe. After climbing all night, at 5 a.m. on the fourth of July, my 32nd birthday, we all stood on the summit of Great Sail Peak, having completed the Coconut Connection (1,050m, 5.12d). What a birthday present!

**AFTER WE HAD rappelled the route back to the big ledge, we realized that we still had three days of food and stable weather.** Soon we were discussing what may sound like a crazy plan: Why don't we split in two teams and try to climb the wall again, by another two new routes? Two big corner systems, in the center and on the left of the wall, were still untouched, and both seemed to have

continuous crack systems that would favor fast, alpine-style progression.

On July 7, Luca and I started to climb the big corner system on the left, following nice cracks, with several offwidths and chimneys. On what might be the crux pitch, I tried to avoid a wide section—bigger than a number six cam—by laybacking. I slipped and fell until I was caught by a tipped-out number six. The rope snagged a flake, and when I came to a stop I was staring at the exposed white soul of the rope. Spicy times! Fortunately, I found a smarter solution to redpoint this pitch.

The weather was deteriorating, but Luca and I decided to keep climbing and rush toward the top, before the conditions could become even worse. On the morning of July 8, we found ourselves again on the summit of Great Sail Peak, only four days after our first visit—this time wrapped in clouds and fog. We rappelled the Coconut Connection and returned to find Giga at the ledge camp, 24 hours after we'd left him. Giga had dislocated his shoulder near the top of Coconut Connection and had been forced to wait while we climbed.

Meanwhile, Nico and Sean had found a king line in the central corner, with mostly continuous, Yosemite-style cracks. One hundred meters below the summit, the storm forced them to improvise a bivy and wait for better conditions. After about eight hours of shivering, their patience paid off and the sunshine came back, allowing them to free the last, crucial link of their 700-meter 5.12a climb: a 30-meter unprotectable slab. Thirty-six hours after leaving, they too were back on the big ledge. Our food was all gone. Now it really was time to descend to base camp.

**THE WALLS opposite Great Sail Peak have several features between 400 and 700 meters high, many of them still unclimbed.** We felt we couldn't leave without checking out this side of the valley, so Luca and Nico went for a new route on Copier Pinnacle, the pyramid just in front of our base camp, while Sean and I went for a rounded, dome-like wall that we baptized the Tree of Wisdom. Both routes followed obvious crack systems, with several offwidth sections. High on our route, the mountain played a little joke on Sean and me when the crack system we'd been following for 500 meters ended in a desperate blank slab, just 20 meters shy of the summit. Since we weren't carrying a bolt kit, our only option was to rappel for 120 meters, swing to the left to reach a parallel chimney system and follow this to the top.

After almost 50 days together, the full band played a last concert in the Stewart Valley. Nico and Sean, of course, were our undisputed leaders, but I like to think that during all this time the Italian players also learned something about music and were a little less out of tune. Our songs echoed from Great Sail and the surrounding walls, and apart from rabbits, mice, and maybe polar bears, the only creatures listening were a Canadian-American trio who had arrived in the valley soon after us and were now working on their own new routes on Great Sail Peak.

Summer had arrived at the 71st parallel; the snow had given way to grass and the ice to open water. Our plan was for the three Ragni di Lecco to head back to Clyde River by a more direct path, cutting overland; we would alternate navigation by packraft with hiking on foot. Nico and Sean would wait at least another week for the arrival of the French sailboat Maewan, aboard which they would continue toward the famed Northwest Passage. Before leaving the Stewart Valley, they opened an impressive and intimidating route on the Citadel, which they described as the hardest wide climb they had ever done: "a feast of wet and mossy slots, chimneys, and offwidths—a masterpiece for any wide-crack addict with a slight love for masochism." I was glad I was not with them—it sounded like a nightmare.

After a quick start toward Clyde River in perfect weather, we three Italians waited out a storm at Walker Arm for three days and then reached Eglinton Fjord two days later. We decided to take a day off to scramble to the top of Eglinton Tower and enjoy the beautiful panorama. But soon after this climb, almost simultaneously, my left knee and Giga's left ankle both started hurting really badly—it was clear we were suffering from too much walking with heavy bags. With more than 100

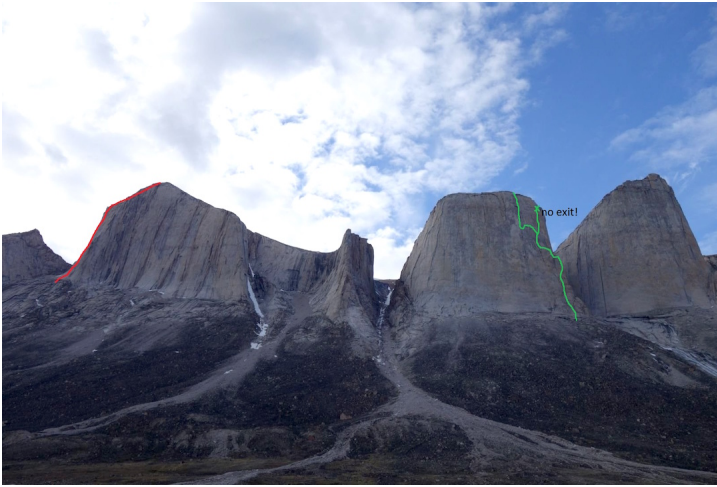
kilometers still to go before reaching Clyde River, we hoped to rely on our packrafts and move mostly over water, but while dragging the boats over ice both Giga and Luca's rafts were shredded. Now we were forced to stumble across the tundra in clouds of mosquitoes. When I hit the concrete road in Clyde River, eight days after leaving Walker Arm, my knee locked up completely. Luca had to carry my backpack for the last kilometer into the village.

We'd free-climbed big walls, I was definitely far out of my comfort zone, and my friends had been everything I'd hoped. Maybe this really was the perfect expedition. As the saying goes, "It doesn't always have to be fun to be fun!"

**Summary:** First ascents in Walker Arm and the Stewart Valley of Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada, including the first free ascent of the ca 1,050-meter west-northwest face of Great Sail Peak, by Matteo Della Bordella, Matteo De Zaiacomo, and Luca Schiera (Italy) and Nicolas Favresse and Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll (Belgium), June-July 2016. See "The Climbs" for descriptions of all routes.

**About the Author:** Born in 1984, Matteo Della Bordella lives in Varese, Italy, and has been a member of the Ragni di Lecco since 2006. In February 2017, he and two other Ragni climbers completed the first ascent of the east face of Cerro Murallón in Patagonia.

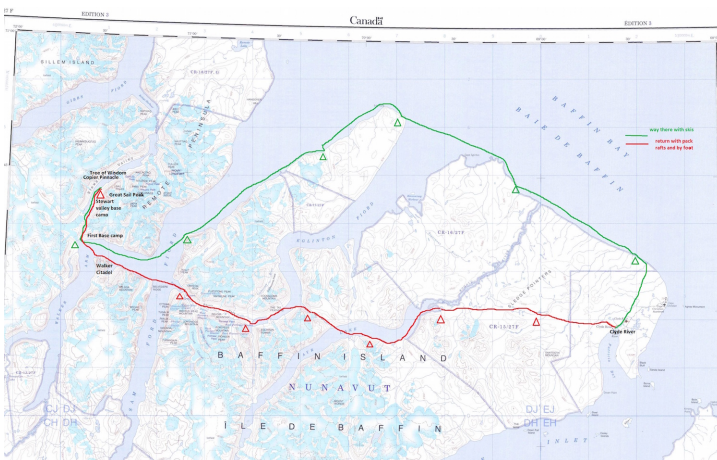
## Images



Red line: 24 Hour Round Trip Camp to Camp (600m, 5.11d) on Copier Pinnacle. Green line: The Seed of Madness (600m, 5.11d A0 pendulum) on the Tree of Life.



Matteo Della Bordella climbing pitch 18 of Coconut Connection. The free route linked portions of both original aid routes on the wall plus about 300 meters of new ground.



Green line: The full team's route to Stewart Valley. Red line: The Italians' overland return to Clyde River. The Belgian climbers continued their journey by sailboat.



After six days of skiing with sleds, the team arrives in Sam Ford Fjord, eager to climb. The most prominent sunlit wall is the north face of Kiguti.



Matteo De Zaiacommo climbing pitch 10 of Coconut Connection, the first all-free route up the west-northwest face of Great Sail Peak.



Nico Favresse chilling in the portaledge on Great Sail Peak.



Sean Villanueva leads pitch 21 of Coconut Connection on Great Sail Peak.



By mid-July, summer had arrived at the 71st parallel—but just barely. As they began their return journey toward Clyde River, the Italians paddled packrafts through the slush covering the Stewart Valley's big lake.



Northwest buttress of Walker Citadel. (1) Down the Slope Without a Ski. (2) E Poi Boh.





The Belgian route Catacomb on the Citadel.



The west-northwest face of Great Sail Peak, showing the three Belgian-Italian routes from 2016. (1) Mascalzone Latino. (2) The Northwest Passage. (3) Coconut Connection. Other routes on the face not shown.



Hiking past Ayr Lake on day five of the trek back to Clyde River.

## THE CLIMBS

### WALKER ARM

**Walker Citadel: Down the Slope Without a Ski** (1,000m, 5.12a). Left side of northwest buttress. Descent by snow couloir on south side. Favresse-Schiera-Villanueva, June 14-15

**Walker Citadel: E Poi Boh, attempt on northwest buttress** (800m, 5.11d) De Zaiacomo-Della Bordella, June 14

### STEWART VALLEY

**Great Sail Peak, Coconut Connection** (1,050m, 5.12d). Free link-up including sections of Rum, Sodomy, and the Lash (1998), Rubicon (2002), and about 300 meters of new terrain. Climbed capsule-style, with every pitch led free by at least one climber. Entire team, June 22-July 4

**Great Sail Peak, Mascalzone Latino** (600m plus easy ridge, 5.12b A0 pendulum). Della Bordella-Schiera, July 7-8

**Great Sail Peak, The Northwest Passage** (700m, 5.12a) Favresse-Villanueva, July 7-8

**The Tree of Wisdom, The Seed of Madness** (600m, 5.11c, A0 pendulum). Della Bordella-Villanueva, July 13-14

**Copier Pinnacle, 24 Hour Round Trip Camp to Camp** (600m, 5.11d). Southeast prow of the formation. Favresse-Schiera, July 13-14

**The Citadel, Catacomb** (900m, 5.12a). Offwidth and chimney system just left of Arctic Monkeys (McAleese-Thomas-Turner, 2010) on "Welshman's Peak", the far right side of the Citadel. Favresse-Villanueva, July 25

*All climbs and attempts were done without bolts*

List of all climbs done by 2016 Belgian-Italian expedition.

## Article Details

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