



AAC Publications

The Spectre, Variation to Original Route; Alpha Tower, First Ascent by North Face

Antarctica, Trans-Antarctic Mountains, Gothic Peaks

THE SPECTRE, reminiscent of Fitz Roy, is located at 86°12.255'S, 148°28.294'W, in the Gothic Peaks (named by American scientist and mountaineer Ed Stump). The closest human habitation is the U.S. base at the South Pole, 440km away, while the closest logistics hub is the Antarctic Logistics & Expeditions (ALE) Union Glacier Camp and blue-ice runway 1,060km away.

Although it would be possible to fly directly to the foot of the Spectre, the distance from ALE's fuel depot at Thiels Ski-way would make additional flights necessary, and the whole undertaking would become prohibitively expensive (\$500,000+). After extensive research and study of Antarctic wind models, Jean Burgun (France), Mark Sedon (New Zealand), and I developed a strategy to limit the interior flight time to a minimum by utilizing the revolutionary tool of high-aspect-ratio power kites to tow skiers and sleds. These enable long-distance travel at high speed with great loads.

On November 15 we were dropped 220km from the South Pole at 88°S, 135°W (3,000m above sea level). This marked the point of no return from the Thiels Ski-way for a Twin Otter carrying our team of three with 65 days of supplies and equipment for snow kiting, traditional man-hauling, polar survival, and alpine-style wall climbing (total weight 650kg). We intentionally omitted to pack a drill.

It was -37°C and clear with a light easterly, but within hours the weather deteriorated into a full-scale blizzard, with wind of 40+ knots and wind chill below -60°C. We were tent-bound for four days.

Once moving, our objective was to kite-ski 300km downwind before descending to the Trans-Antarctic Mountains along the massive and heavily crevassed Scott Glacier. We then had to reach and climb our intended goal, the spectacular south spur of the Spectre, return upwind to our drop-off point via a combination of man-hauling and upwind tacking by kite, collect cached food and equipment, and kite downwind 1,100km to the Union Glacier Camp.

Each phase posed a formidable challenge. The initial journey to reach the Spectre was hindered by unusually strong wind and poor visibility. These factors, combined with the expected extreme cold, pushed us beyond the limits of safe kiting with 180kg loads, and the journey took far longer than anticipated.

The only previous technical climbing in the Gothic Peaks took place during four science expeditions led by American geologist Edmund Stump, backed by the huge resource of the U.S. government. Stump and his brother Mugs, who acted as field guide on two of the expeditions, completed several very impressive climbs, including the intimidating and massive east face of Grizzly Peak (2,200m) and the first ascent of the Spectre (2,020m) by an impressive 750m route up the north face and northwest ridge.

On December 7, within days of our arrival, all three of us summited the Spectre via an unintentional variation to the Stump route. We found cruxes up to Scottish VII, 7—difficulties far in excess of those described by the Stumps. These were due in part to our taking a different route and also to different conditions. On top, feeling that we were the most isolated people on Earth, we made a hasty and thankfully uneventful retreat as a storm approached, reaching the tents 24 hours after leaving. Within

an hour the wind was blowing 30 knots.

Due to the length of our journey, we hadn't brought a portaledge or enough gear for a full big-wall ascent, and, on closer inspection, the elegant 720m south spur of the Spectre appeared far more "big wall" in nature than anticipated. This, together with the ferocious wind we experienced, led us to decide against an attempt—an easy decision for those who value their toes and futures.

Instead, Jean and I attempted to traverse the Organ Pipes, a series of towers running east to west, with Spectre being the highest. We began on December 11 with the north face of the most westerly peak, which we dubbed Alpha Tower. Once again we found far steeper and more difficult terrain than expected, including a desperate 15m ice-choked offwidth and unconsolidated snow gullies with sustained difficulties of Scottish VII, 7. We summited in sublime conditions, then made a committing rappel descent to the col on the far side, down the most compact granite I've encountered.

To that point it had taken us 14 hours and the way ahead looked of a similar nature. We opted to escape down snow slopes on the north side of the col. Once again, severe winds struck just a few hours after we regained camp.

The outbound journey proved to be far less brutal than the approach, and our high-performance kites and skis performed far better than hoped for upwind travel, reducing the total man-hauling distance to just 60km. Toward the end of the journey, beneficial wind allowed us to cover 650km in just four days, reaching Union Glacier after 51 days in the field.

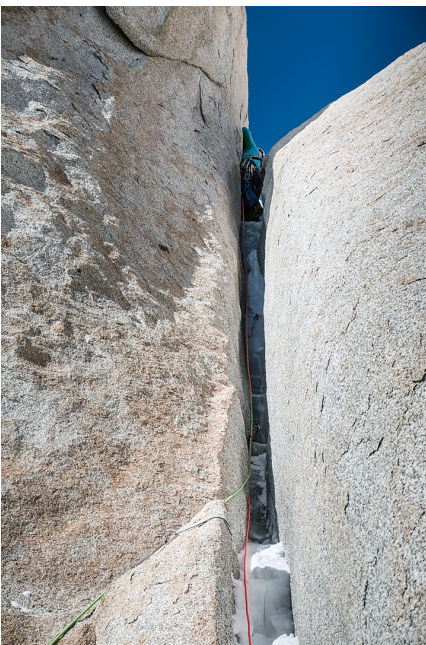
We believe it would be possible for a skilled team to travel overland and unsupported for the entire approach and return from Union Glacier. This would add 1,000km to the journey, upping the ante a big notch and creating a truly "by fair means" approach to one of the great remaining alpine prizes.

– Leo Houlding, U.K.

Images



Jean Burgon on the summit ridge of Alpha Tower during the first ascent. (A) Mt. Griffith (3,095m). (B) Scott Glacier. (C) Grizzly Peak (2,200m). (D) Zanuck (2,525m). (E) Zanuck East (2,380m). (F) Sanctuary Glacier. Zanuck was first climbed in 1987 by Paul Fitzgerald and Ed Stump. Zanuck East was climbed by the 1970 New Zealand expedition—they also may have climbed the peak immediately to the right. Grizzly Peak was named after Mugs Stump, who climbed it twice, though the official version is that it was so named because it bristles like a bearskin. Mt. Griffith is unclimbed, though in 1987 the Stumps reached quite high on the mountain.



Leo Houlding near the top of the difficult ice-choked offwidth on the north face of Alpha Tower.



Kite skiing in front of the Organ Pipes. The lowest and most westerly of the towers, dubbed Alpha Tower, lies above and slightly left of the skier and was climbed from the far side (north face). The Spectre, two towers to the right, is the highest peak in the group, with the elegant, unclimbed south spur falling 720m directly to the glacier.



The north side of the Spectre. The orange line is the original Stump route, while the red is the variant climbed in December 2017.

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