



AAC Publications

Golden Petals: The First Ascent of Xanadu's West Face

Alaska, Brooks Range, Arrigetch Peaks

I SAG DEEP INTO MY HARNESS and absently stare upward into a mesmerizing plane of granite.

From my precarious hanging position, I am doing my best to keep the moist arctic wind from blasting my skin. Despite wearing every layer that I packed for this month-long trip into Alaska's Arrigetch Peaks, the cold air still chills me to the core. With only two days left in the trip, our team is feeling pressure to free the wall we've just climbed. Billy is below me, screaming as I reel in slack. There is no blood in his icy fingers as he tries to manhandle the granite knobs. He screams as he chinks up before reaching for the crux holds; he even screams as he gasps for air. As he arrives at the belay, we eke out smiles and wordlessly share the love for the brutal situation we have thrown ourselves into.

David Bain, Gabe Boning, Billy Braasch, and I began dreaming of this trip soon after our close friend Chris Vale died in a rappelling accident on El Cap's East Ledges in September 2016. The five of us had connected through our involvement in the Dartmouth Mountaineering Club, and now we wanted to do something to commemorate Chris' enthusiasm and sense of adventure. It seemed appropriate to attempt a first ascent in his honor, and we were drawn to the wildness and remoteness of the Arrigetch Peaks.

Xanadu is the centerpiece of the Arrigetch, a small subrange of the Brooks Range above the Arctic Circle. At 7,160', the summit is not the highest in the region, but the peak's ever-present mass, steep, aesthetic geometry, and its position at the headwaters of Arrigetch Creek give it a feeling of utmost prominence within this cluster of granite towers. Its eastern aspect is shadowed, stark, and glaciated. But under a cloudless summer sky, the western wall is illuminated in glowing, golden light from noon until midnight.

Knowledge of Xanadu's west face has been passed by word of mouth through various climbing circles. The late Mugs Stump dreamed of climbing it, and the wall lured Tommy Caldwell, Hayden Kennedy, and Corey Rich into making a trip in 2011 (AAJ 2012); they ended up climbing a neighboring cliff. We learned of Xanadu's west face from Jon Krakauer, who, together with Bill Bullard, made the only known ascent of Xanadu, via its southwest ridge (AAJ 1975). I was apprehensive to reach out to such a well-known figure, but Jon responded enthusiastically almost immediately. Between email exchanges and phone calls, he provided valuable information, insight, and encouragement. He vividly described his vision of a line up the west face—beautiful and bold face climbing through vertical and occasionally overhanging granite flakes. His hypothetical route closely matched what we eventually climbed.

After three days of hiking heavy loads, David, Gabe, Billy, and I caught our first glimpse of the gold-plated west face of Xanadu. Until that moment, all of the granite we'd seen along Arrigetch Creek seemed cold and dreary. Though we were weary and had contemplated stopping for the night, the sight of Xanadu rejuvenated us like a jolt of caffeine. Without words, we unanimously decided to push on to our base camp for the next few weeks, located in a lush alpine meadow below this massive piece of rock.

Gazing through binoculars, we looked for vertical weaknesses. The 1,500-foot wall was mostly devoid of cracks—instead, it was a mosaic of flakes. Although such features tend to encourage free climbing, we had read enough trip reports of loose, rope-chopping flakes in the Arrigetch to feel concerned. After much deliberation, we set our sights on a flake system on the right side of the face, below a

looming overhang near the top of the ridge first climbed by Krakauer and Bullard.

As we contemplated our strategy, we contrasted our plan with that of Sílvia Vidal, who we encountered on our hike in. We were shocked to see another person, and even more surprised to learn that her goal was the same as ours. She was taking a rest day because her eyes were swollen shut from 11 days of non-stop exertion, ferrying loads to the base of Xanadu. Sílvia had budgeted nearly two months for her incredible solo mission, hauling an immense kit, including a portledge, and committing to the face without returning to a cushy base camp like ours. Every couple of days we would shout “Hi Sílvia!” across the sea of granite. She would chime back with a friendly “Hello!” Most days, though, we tried to honor her solitary journey by not bothering her with our shenanigans. Sílvia topped out her masterpiece as we were flying out of the Arrigetch.

Between our base camp at 4,200 feet and the foot of the wall at 5,800 feet sat a loose and shifting talus field and a Half Dome–style death slab. Studying the approach through binoculars, we noticed a mysterious peach-colored object strung out along the slabs.

“Is it a piece of parachute? Maybe some trash from an air drop?”

“No way! It’s a giant bag of Cheetos!”

“It’s too big to be Cheetos! Could it be a tent that blew in there?”

“No, I think it’s just a really big bag of Cheetos.”

“God, I hope so.”

We soon discovered a 65-meter static rope, abandoned by some party. Though it clearly had been absorbing UV light, vast amounts of water runoff, and rockfall for several years, we resourcefully put this bonus rope to use on our route. (Later, we carried out the rope and gave it to our bush pilots, who used it to tie their planes to shore.) As we started to work on our line, we split into teams of two and alternated days on the wall. Although our ultimate goal was to open a free climb, we knew that our initial climbing strategy might involve yo-yoing, French-freeing, and occasional direct aid to make progress. We had carried in enough rope to fix three-quarters of the wall, and we put it to use.

Atop the death slab we approached the intimidating vertical wall, anxiously pressing our palms against it, hoping for a sign. We soon discovered a thin, overhanging seam that would allow upward progress. Using blades and beak-style pitons, I nailed my way up what we christened Sílvia’s Seam, an homage to our new friend. Above, the angle of the wall eased, but the protection also evaporated. A scary moment of 5.10 R face climbing allowed me to gain the main flake system, and our first pitch was established. This pitch was indicative of what was to come—the climbing was slow and intricate, and on many days we only succeeded in advancing our route several hundred feet.

The next day, David set off from my high point, leading several pitches of thin cracks and enticing laybacks. The rock was solid enough to pull on, but the protection was often questionable. We frequently placed small beaks, and our anchors morphed into nests of slings and cams. Gabe pushed the rope higher, aiding through a seeping and overhanging flared crack. From there, Billy took the lead, moving through a beautiful collage of layered and disconnected orange flakes. At the end of our third day of climbing we reached July 4th Ledge. The terrain we had covered was steep and exhilarating, and though we did not hesitate to aid through difficult sections, it seemed as though nearly all of it could go free.

Above Boomerang Ledge, a broken system that marked the halfway point up the wall, the vertical system we had been climbing dwindled into a labyrinth of isolated features. Billy and I meandered higher, negotiating the astonishing Portal Flake and the evocative Frosted Flakes—the beautiful

expanses of metamorphic granite foretold by Krakauer, varnished and mostly solid, but with flakes that often felt hollow under our fist-tapping probes. Jugging after one lead, Billy prepared to make a 40-foot horizontal lower-out from a single brass nut. "It looks bomber," he said—right before freefalling in a tangle of gear, rope, and aiders.

"I'm OK!" he optimistically screamed as he swung below me at high speed.

Reaching 7-Hour Ledge, an awkward hanging stance with which Gabe and David would become intimately familiar later in the trip, we had nearly fixed all of our 1,000 feet of rope (including the bootied orange rope). The angle of the wall steepened again, and the flakes above appeared fractal and menacing. We had visions of falling onto their jagged edges and slicing our rope.

David took over on the sharp end, slowly aiding up the run-out Pepper Flake pitch, a puzzling lead that required creative protection, including many beaks and micro-nuts. "I want to come down, but I'll try to get in just one more piece of gear," David shouted for the sixth time. After several hours of this he finally lowered from his high point, and he and Gabe rappelled back to camp.

Up until then we'd been lucky to have about 15 days of good weather, with six days on the wall, but now the weather deteriorated into rain and fog. We were starting to run low on food, and for two days we ate half rations and moped in our soggy tents.

On the second day of this, around 8 p.m., Billy pointed out that no rain had fallen that afternoon. "Hey," he asked me with a grin, "want to head up there and finish that Pepper Flake? We can just climb through the night."

He was bluffing, but I was game to try.

"Seriously?" he asked. "Alright, let's do it!"

We jugged the fixed ropes through blowing fog, arriving at 7-Hour Ledge around midnight.

After finishing David's last lead, I hammered in a bolt for a belay. Billy took over, leading a bold pitch of 5.12 face climbing. The S Pitch, named for the wandering, run-out slab, involved thin smears and committing high steps above dubious protection. As morning dawned, another pitch of run-out face climbing (easier at 5.10+) brought us to a seeping ramp. This, we were pleased to see, led over to a notch on the upper southwest ridge, avoiding the final overhanging mushroom. In the notch, we found an ancient nut and blue webbing, likely from the 1974 ascent. We felt comfort in seeing this minuscule sign of civilization.

Billy and I continued up the easy, lichen-covered summit ridge to the apex of Xanadu. We embraced and stood in awe of the huge vertical relief in all directions. Then we heard David and Gabe bellowing below. They had jugged up behind us and spent seven hours on the ledge at the end of our fixed ropes—hence the name—waiting for us to rappel so they could begin their own summit pilgrimage. We slowly descended and passed the torch to our friends, who topped out that afternoon in pea-soup fog. It was July 12, and we felt extremely privileged to make the probable second ascent of Xanadu and the first ascent of its west face. But we still had about a week remaining before we were to be picked up at Circle Lake, and we knew that we could climb our route in better style.

First, we set about cleaning up our anchors, some of which consisted of half a dozen equalized cams strung out over 10-foot swaths of rock. Although we had made a point of avoiding placing bolts mid-pitch, we decided to leave robust belay and rappel anchors. To some, this decision may go against wilderness principles, and we did agonize over this decision to add bolts. But, knowing that we'd need to leave fixed gear of some form in order to rappel, we decided to make them high-quality anchors that would last for decades. We placed a total of 17 bolts at the rappel stations on our route.

We then focused our energies on free climbing, rehearsing the moves that were accessible from our fixed ropes. The climbing was classic, often involving delicate laybacking with thin smears for the feet and handholds serendipitously appearing when the macro-features faded. Of the 14 pitches of technical climbing, many fell within the 5.9 to 5.11 range.

As the time to hike out neared, Gabe and David started up the route late one night, swinging leads and freeing every pitch from the second through the 11th. Then, over two consecutive windy and cold days, Billy and I freed the route from the second pitch all the way to Xanadu's summit, leading and following each pitch without falls. Finally, on the last climbing day of our trip, I successfully led the crux first pitch, *Sílvia's Seam*. Essentially a V10 boulder problem, this pitch required thin edging, unlikely foot pastes, and other granite wizardry. The west face of Xanadu could have been blank or perilously loose, but instead it permitted a demanding free route as good as anything we had ever climbed. We called our line *Golden Petals* (1,500', V 5.13+ or 5.12 A0).

On that last day, while Billy and I toiled on *Sílvia's Seam*, David and Gabe repeated the Bullard-Krakauer route to the top of Xanadu. They returned with huge grins, describing endless Type-1 fun and displaying a vintage hex they had bootied from the ascent 43 years earlier.

Throughout this trip, we were constantly reminded of the unique ways in which Chris Vale had entered each of our lives. He gladly would have taken the sharp end on any of the run-out pitches that left us shaking in our rock shoes. Chris would never say no to an adventure, and I'm certain he would have been proud of our success.

About the Author: After earning a Ph.D. in mathematics, Zeb Engberg moved from New England to Utah, where he teaches math and climbs as often as possible. This trip was supported by the Dartmouth Outing Club's Chris Vale Adventure Fund and the Copp-Dash Inspire Award.

The west face of Xanadu in the Arrigetch Peaks. (1) Arctic Knight (5.11+). (2) Un Pas Més (6a A4/A4+). (3) Golden Petals (5.13+ or 5.12/A0). (4) Southwest ridge (5.7, Bullard-Krakauer, 1974). Deep in the Alaskan Bush (Caldwell-Kennedy-Rich, 2011) climbs the right side of the lower cliff on the right. Photo by Zeb Engberg

Images



The Arrigetch Peaks are known for remote granite towers, but also for foul weather—David Bain (left) and Zeb Engberg wait it out.



Billy Braasch connects the golden plates of the Corn Flakes Pitch (5.11) on Golden Petals (V 5.13+ or 5.12 A0), the first route up Xanadu's west face.



David Bain climbing the southwest ridge of Xanadu (Krakauer-Bullard 1974). This route was the first ascent of the peak.



Zeb Engberg tiptoeing through thought-provoking hanging flakes during the first ascent of Golden Petals (V, 1,400', 5.13+ or 5.12 A0). The route was the first ascent of Xanadu's impressive west face.



Billy Braasch nutting a splitter crack during the first ascent of Golden Petals (V, 1,400', 5.13+ or 5.12 A0). Four American climbers made the first ascent of the route ground-up via a combination of aid, free climbing, and yo-yo tactics with fixed lines before placing additional protection bolts and returning to free climb all of the route's pitches.



Basking in the rare afternoon sunshine, Zeb Engberg gains a juggy flake on pitch one of Golden Petals.



View down Arrigetch Creek from the Escape Col approach to Xanadu's west face.



Zeb Engberg nailing up Silvia's Seam, named in honor of Catalan soloist Sílvia Vidal, who put up a neighboring route on Xanadu's west face around the same time. This pitch eventually went free at 5.13+.



Gabe Boning contemplates the seeping, flared feature on pitch three that the team nicknamed the Buttcrack.



David Bain laybacking through the Buttcrack on pitch three of Golden Petals (V, 1,400', 5.13+ or 5.12 A0). Xanadu's expansive lower slabs can be seen below.



Billy Braasch, David Bain, Gabe Boning, and Zeb Engberg in the meadow below Xanadu's west face after making the wall's first ascent via Golden Petals (V, 1,400', 5.13+ or 5.12 A0).



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