



Far Out: The First Ascent of a Gigantic Sea Cliff

Faroe Islands

OVER THREE WEEKS in July and August 2017, Yuji Hirayama (Japan), Cedar Wright (USA), and I traveled to the Faroe Islands with hopes of climbing Cape Enniberg. Located at the northern tip of the island of Viðoy, it had one the tallest unclimbed sea cliffs in the world, rising 754m directly out of the ocean.

This area came onto my radar roughly five years earlier. The Faroe archipelago is a self-govern- ing part of the kingdom of Denmark, north of Scotland. Although the Faroese people have been climbing sea cliffs to reach nesting birds for hundreds of years, only recently have climbers been traveling to the islands to establish modern routes. Many of the hiking trails pass through private land, and we secured permission from the owners of Enniberg to approach and climb on the wall. They even offered to sail us out to the base when they next went out to check on the population of nesting puffins at the bottom on the cliff. When would this be? Maybe tomorrow, maybe the next day...

Our plan was to attempt the north face of Cape Enniberg by the line of least resistance, which looked to be a sort of arête between two overhanging faces, leading to some steep grassy slopes and then a ridgeline to the summit. We estimated the line might take somewhere between four and 24 hours to climb, if it was possible at all. Our boat ride departed from the tiny local harbor one evening after 8 p.m. We hoped to be on the summit before a forecast three-day storm arrived at 2 p.m. the following day.

Formed in bands of volcanic and sedimentary rock, the cliffs in the Faroe Islands mix some decent basalt with serious choss—some kind of volcanic ash the consistency of compressed kitty litter, impossible to protect or climb without grabbing loosely attached grass hummocks. The rest of the bands sit somewhere between these two extremes, in some unfathomable random order. The Faroe Islands also are home to one of the biggest populations of fulmars in the world. These birds defend their nests by projectile-vomiting partially digested fish. If you climb here, you are going to get puked on—just accept it.

By 10 p.m. we were climbing, a surreal experience with the forever twilight. Cedar, in his element and always thinking about getting to the top as fast as possible, took on the first pitch. He placed one piece of gear two meters off the floor and then basically soloed 50m of decaying grassy slab to the first belay. You know a pitch has been scary when you second in five minutes what took the leader almost an hour to climb. We had barely made it to the beginning of the real rock climbing, and now, looking up toward the expanse of crumbling stone and circling birds, I think we all had a moment of doubt.

Nine hours later, we dragged ourselves onto the soggy grass slopes that signaled the halfway point. The predicted storm had hit 10 hours earlier than expected, and we were cold, soaked to the skin, and covered in vomit. Both Cedar and Yuji had pulled off some audacious and bold choss leads. We were doing it—we just had to keep going up.

The second half of the climb was a series of never-ending grass slopes, interspersed with rock bands of varying height. The original plan had been to simul-climb the obvious ridgeline to the top, following as much continuous rock as possible. However, the ever-increasing rain soon put a stop to that idea, as any more than a body length of rock became nigh on impossible to climb. What would have been

5.9 in dry conditions now would require a long bolt ladder. Instead, we followed the grass upward, weaving left or right until we found a gap, gully, or some other way through. Once on the next level, the process was repeated—for six long hours. I lost count of the number of times we were forced to backtrack, even down past where we had come before. As fatigue and frustration took its toll, simul-climbing became short-roping, which eventually became plain old soloing. Then all of a sudden, we passed another rock band and there were no more. A crew of locals waited for us at the summit. They hugged and congratulated us for the climb, gave us a bottle of gin, and then left to rescue one of their stranded sheep.

Dreams of recovering with a lazy afternoon went out the window as we arrived at the tiny village to find what must have been half the inhabitants waiting for us. Dressed in traditional clothes, Faroese flags flying, we all celebrated the ascent in the most random of fashions: drinking strong spirits out of rams horn cups, a fitting finale to this oh-so-strange route: Faro enough (5.12- X A3).

During our trip, we and Caroline Ciavaldini (France) also established four shorter climbs on the south face of the Trælanípa wall on Vagar Island, which juts 142m out of the sea. The four climbs are mostly bolted and all around 5.12. Recently, a massive section of the wall fell into the sea about 300m to the right of our climbs, but luckily they all were unaffected!

– James Pearson, United Kingdom

Images



Schematic of the route Faro enough, the first climb up the 750-meter Cape Enniberg cliffs.



Yuji Hirayama belaying Cedar Wright on the first pitch of Black Sheep, a mixed trad and sport line up one of the steepest and longest sections of Trælanípan that surprisingly climbs at a relatively reasonable grade of 7b+.



“Yuji Hirayama’s contribution to the wall of Trælanípan was Golden Ram (7c). Here he balances over

into the delicate finishing slab, covered in big fat slopers, which is about as good as the rock climbing in the Faroe Islands gets.”



James Pearson on Slupp (7b+), a steep line up one of the wildest prows of Trælanípan.



Looking up at Cape Enniberg, Europe’s tallest sea cliff: 750m of choss, grass, and vomiting birds. The 2017 first-ascent route started off-picture at far right to reach the grassy bench, then climbed the 250-meter rock prow in the middle, followed by 400 meters of grassy simul-climbing.



The team on top of Cape Enniberg, after climbing through a long and wet night.



Cedar Wright getting a taste of things to come on the first pitch of the route Faro enough, the first climb up the 750-meter-tall Cape Enniberg cliffs.

Article Details

Author	James Pearson
Publication	AAJ
Volume	61
Issue	93
Page	247
Copyright Date	2019
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions