



AAC Publications

Peyto Tower, Various Routes

Canada, Alberta, Canadian Rockies, Icefields Parkway

IN MAY 2018, Niall Hamill and I were on our way to the Emperor Face of Mt. Robson. We couldn't wait to get there, but we also couldn't help pulling the van over to the side of the Icefields Parkway to stare at Peyto Tower, a 300m shield of bright white quartzite jutting off Mt. Wilson on the north side of the road, above Saskatchewan River Crossing. We took note of the numerous striking crack systems scarring the quartzite, envisioning a veritable buffet of unclimbed lines that might go free.

Peyto Tower was not unclimbed, of course. In 1992, Rob Orvig and Larry Stanier climbed the prow, looker's left of Peyto's southeast face and said to be a moderate classic. In 2003, Dave Marra, Tony Richardson, and Ken Wallator made the first documented ascent of the far right side of the steep southeast face via the Marra Richardson (200m, 5.9 A1), skipping the lower wall by way of a massive ledge. Bookended by these two climbs, the rest of the steep and intriguing southeast face somehow had largely escaped the attention (or interest) of the very active Bow Valley climbing community.

I needed to return stateside for work that summer, but Niall wasted no time venturing up to the face. When he couldn't find a psyched partner for the three-hour approach or the commitment involved with going ground-up on the relatively untouched wall, he decided to scramble to the tower's summit and then spend a day rappelling a potential new line. After setting anchors through the upper headwall, which was littered with cracks, he equipped a sport pitch of steep, beautiful climbing through the blank white band where the lower limestone converges with the upper quartzite. Later he returned with Grant Stewart to free the line from the ground, climbing some heady, loose approach pitches in a traditional manner to access the bolted pitch and the solid crack systems above. Their route—Prairie Gold (5.11c, 280m)—would be the first free route (and possibly the easiest) on the face.

Come spring of 2019, I was back in Canada, swinging tools with Niall, who couldn't stop talking about Peyto Tower. With dreams of Bugaboos splitters and Banff bolt clipping filling my head, I was having trouble matching his enthusiasm, but he wore me down with the promise of a perfect ledge (which we took to calling Summer Camp Ledge) a third of the way up the face—a choice home base for multiday missions. I was soon daydreaming of spending our summer days on this “mini” big wall.

We came back to Peyto in June and climbed through the lower limestone to the ledge I'd been dreaming about. Unfortunately, it was nothing more than an uncomfortable, uneven ramp. Niall had sandbagged me! After half-hanging in harnesses through intermittent rain showers, we set out to try and complete a harder variation to Prairie Gold. We aided and equipped a steep corner, leaving a pin and bolt where the crack sealed shut, and climbed two more adventurous pitches before the weather turned nasty and we decided to head down. Niall returned on the first day of July to complete the route with Cory Rogans, dubbing it Gravity's Rainbow (300m, 5.12a R).

In spite of generally bad weather, we spent a total of 12 days on the southeast face from June to August, establishing two more new routes on the upper wall. Among many other complications we faced on Peyto, the lower limestone band, with its loose rock and dirty nature, proved to be less than ideal for trad climbing. So we decided to bolt a series of fun sport pitches through the limestone to access the more traditionally protectable quartzite above.

The huge, crimson right-facing corner to the right of Gravity's Rainbow had pulled our eyes every time we went up to Peyto, so we started there. While the first pitch from Summer Camp Ledge was a

brilliant series of bouldery 5.11 crack moves, we found a couple of sections of the upper corner to be coated in the centuries of mud that had drained the mountain. Overall, the quality of climbing on the corner feature was excellent. But the caked mud tainted the route in our minds, and we named it Primordial Soup (300m, 5.11c).

By late summer the steep middle of the wall still remained untouched. So, for our last stint on Peyto, we made a tensioned rappel down and right from Summer Camp Ledge to venture along a ledge system below the white band to a towering overhang of white quartzite. Each pitch took a few hours, as I lead soloed in the aiders while Niall cleaned and bolted the pitches below me for free climbing. After two days, two whippers, and a strained ankle, I was spent. Niall graciously took over, freeing the pitches on the sharp end as I followed in his wake with everything I had left. On the final push, Niall led through the last 5.11 roof, then traversed poorly protected face climbing to a final crack system. We named our route Bengal Spice Indirect (300m, 5.12c PG-13), and we believe it has all the right ingredients to be a modern classic.

In the heat of the day on our descent, after running out of water the evening prior, I was dehydrated, delusional, and swearing I was finished with Peyto Tower. As I caught up to Niall, he was already planning our next mission, sorting gear he wanted to stash for the next season. He asked me what I wanted to do with the new lead line I'd brought up. I looked at the arduous descent, gazed up at Peyto, and said, "Just leave it for next summer." He smiled and tossed it in the bucket.

– Ryan Richardson, USA

Images



Niall Hamill climbing the pitch three roof of Prairie Gold (280m, 5.11c) on the southeast face of Peyto Tower.



Ryan Richardson rope-soloing what would become Primordial Soup (300m, 5.11c) on the southeast face of Peyto Tower to dial in the moves for a free ascent.



The southeast face of Peyto Tower, which juts off Mt. Wilson on the north side of the Icefields Parkway, above Saskatchewan River Crossing in Banff National Park. The Prow (1992) ascends the obvious pillar at far left. Another earlier route, the Marra-Richardson (2003), is far off-picture to the right. All other routes were climbed in 2018 and 2019. Blue: Gravity's Rainbow (300m, 5.12a R). Orange: Prairie Gold (280m, 5.11c). Green: Primordial Soup (300m, 5.11c). Red: Bengal Spice Indirect (300m, 5.12c PG-13).



Niall Hamill making the most of the “perfect bivouac ledge” he used to lure Ryan Richardson for a summer of new-routing on the southeast face of Peyto Tower.

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