



## AAC Publications

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### **Milford Sound, Airport Wall, Mile High Club**

New Zealand, Southern Alps

**In recent years I have been living between France and the USA, not really spending much time in my native New Zealand.** My wife, Julie, is French, and our loose plan was to settle in France when our young son, Sam, started school.

At the end of 2019, we had just finished a three-month road trip in California and headed back to NZ for Christmas—for what we intended to be a 10-week visit. But that was before COVID-19. In February, France began its first lockdown, and India, where I was meant to go in April to attempt Changabang, canceled all tourist visas. Since we were already in New Zealand, which at the time had no COVID-related restrictions, we took the easy option of staying there.

A few months passed. New Zealand went through its own lockdown, which ended on May 13. We emerged with few restrictions, but we certainly weren't leaving the country anytime soon. For two years, I had thought of Changabang daily, and for four months I'd been training cardio almost exclusively. Now I began looking for an outlet for all of the energy I had been saving for Changabang.

There were no standout alpine objectives calling my name in New Zealand, but my friend Merry Schimanski, who was taking a year off work, was keen to help me develop a long rock route. Like me, he has a love of ground-up adventure climbing, and he is also well versed in establishing big granite lines. While we have many nice granite cliffs in NZ, most of them require a long approach, and few have sustained climbing. For me, when it comes to rock climbing, the climbing-to-walking ratio has to be positive.

Located on the northeastern flank of Mt. Sheerdown, which rises out of Deep Water Basin in Milford Sound, the Airport Wall (named for its proximity to the busy airport) is large by New Zealand standards, like a bigger version of Stawamus Chief or Half Dome. Low-elevation and perfect for sunny winter climbing, with an approach of less than one hour, this wall checked all the boxes.

Though no routes had been established, we were not the first to venture onto the Airport Wall. Around ten years ago, Bruce Dowrick and a collection of friends attempted to go ground-up on the central corner line. After fixing lines for 400m through bushy ledges, they bailed 40m up the first pitch of the corner due to some dangerous loose blocks. (This experience was in stark contrast to our line, where we climbed on very solid rock.) Later they returned and rappelled the wall in search of a line. Luckily for us, that's where the exploration stopped. For ten years, the cliff had lain waiting.

Maybe if we had known just how much work the Airport Wall was going to require, we might have picked a different objective. However, who can complain about a big-wall climbing project with a short approach and pitch after pitch of untamed rock?

We started up the wall on June 6. We were aiming for the longest possible continuous rock climb, so we began lower and avoided the bushy terrain that previous attempts had used to access the wall. It took 14 days simply to top out, using aid where needed, and another 16 to 20 days to clean and complete a team free ascent, which we accomplished on August 25. On November 10, 2020, supported by Steve Fortune, I made a one-day free ascent, leading all the pitches in 16.5 hours. We

called our new route The Mile High Club (700m, 22 pitches, 5.12d).

All told, we spent over 40 days on the wall. The winter days were short, but the temps were quite nice. The views over Milford Sound, with its many peaks plastered in ice, were spectacular. We sank about \$4,000 to \$5,000 NZD of expenses into the effort, for bolts, brushes, fixed lines, and petrol for the multiple 3.5-hour trips down to Milford from Queenstown. Merry and I had many helpers over the course of putting up the route—a big thanks to Alastair, Jaz, Rachael, Jessy, Jono, James, Anton, Sooji, and Ruari, who all put in hours or days of work, helping to clean and climb pitches. Ultimately, it was all worth it to have a long, challenging line on which to push ourselves.

Let's leave the Airport Wall for ground-up route development. I doubt there is a sunnier, bigger cliff in the country that has more possibility for future generations, and this will give them something to aspire to. Sections of this wall are immaculate. Other parts will take days of cleaning and hard work. No doubt, whoever puts up the next route on this wall is going to have to work for it.

— Daniel Joll, New Zealand

## Images



The final approach to the base of the Airport Wall takes a trail through the coastal bush and climbs through the clean panel right of center.



Merry Schimanski following partway up the wall with Deep Water Basin down below.



In the fading light, Merry Schimanski ponders the way through new terrain during the first ascent of the The Mile High Club (700m, 22 pitches, 5.12d) on the Airport Wall. Milford Sound is stretched out behind him.



Alastair McDowell belays Daniel Joll as he traverse out immaculate orange stone partway up The Mile High Club (700m, 22 pitches, 5.12d) on the Airport Wall above Milford Sound.



Merry Schimanski questing across virgin terrain on pitch 17 of what would become The Mile High Club (700m, 22 pitches, 5.12d) on the Airport Wall above Milford Sound.



Rachel Knott belaying Merry Schimanski out the vertical pitch 20 during the first ascent of The Mile High Club (700m, 22 pitches, 5.12d) on the Airport Wall above Milford Sound. The Milford Sound airport, for which the wall is named, is visible below.



High above Milford Sound, Rachel Knott jugs the final pitch to the summit of the Airport Wall.



Daniel Joll, Rachel Knott and Merry Schimanski on the summit of the Airport Wall after topping out The Mile High Club (700m, 22 pitches, 5.12d).



The Airport Wall, rising above Deep Water Basin and the Milford Sound airport, showing the line of The Mile High Club (700m, 22 pitches, 5.12d). Several other routes and difficult variations are currently in the works.

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