



## AAC Publications

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### **The Slovak Direct: Eleven Days Alpine-Style on a New Route up Denali's Huge South Face**

Alaska, Central Alaska Range, Denali

**The 1985 AAJ published a single paragraph about the first ascent of the route now known as the Slovak Direct.** A more substantial account is published below, adapted from the book 100 rokov JAMES ("100 Years of JAMES"), released in 2021 on the centenary of JAMES, the Slovak mountaineering association.

The mountaineering club Metropol Kos ice from Slovakia, under the leadership of Stefan Haberland, organized many interesting expeditions. One of them was to Alaska in 1984. On May 2, 1984, a team of mountaineers boarded a plane in Prague. Their goal was Denali, the highest peak in North America. They wanted to climb a first ascent on the big—and for Slovaks, not unknown—south face. [In 1980, a team of four from Czechoslovakia and the U.K. climbed a new route up the right side of the south face; it was dubbed the Milan Kriz s ak Memorial Route in honor of a well-known Slovak mountaineer and rescuer who had died in a helicopter accident the year before.]

On the 10th of May, after four days of trekking, they placed base camp under the south face of Denali at an altitude of 2,700m. The party made two climbing teams: Blaz ej Adam, Frantis ek Korl, and Anton Kriz o were in the first team, with the goal of climbing a first ascent to the right of the Cassin Ridge. The second team— Frantis ek Adamík, Ján S akula, and Ervin Velic —would help the first group on the lower part of the face (as far as their first bivouac) and then climb the South Buttress and upper Southeast Spur and be available for support. On the 13th, they all started the climb, with gear and food for 14 days.

By their fifth day, Adam, Korl, and Kríz o had reached a big snowfield in the middle of the face [above a prominent hanging glacier] with a slope of 45°. They made a camp for one tent just below the big corner that dominates this section of the face. It took the climbers three days to climb this corner, fixing ropes as they went. They returned each night to the tent. During this section, Adam took a leader fall of 10 to 15 meters. In all, during their ascent, the climbers reported placing 150 rock pitons and 40 ice pitons. On the ninth day, they climbed a rock-ice chimney, to the right of a smooth slab, that was the crux of the whole climb. [Above this, the Slovaks moved left into an area now called The Ramp, which is only known to have been repeated twice, in 2000 and 2008. The Slovaks rated the rock climbing on these pitches up to UIAA V- (roughly 5.6/5.7); both parties that repeated The Ramp said it was one of the cruxes of the route, though conditions may have been very different. Most climbers avoid The Ramp by a variation discovered by Ben Gilmore and Kevin Mahoney during the second ascent of the route, also in 2000.] **Not far above, the climbers reached the upper snowfield leading to the summit. Here they were able to pitch their tent again, only the second tent site they had found on the route.**

The weather had been very good earlier in the climb, but during the final days it was bad. Fortunately, the climbers were now in easy terrain. As they moved up on the tenth day, a snow cornice [in the summit area] hung above them all the time, and they were afraid that it would fall on them at any moment. [The Slovaks did not finish on the Cassin Ridge, as most parties do today, but continued directly toward the top via the Haston-Scott Route (1976).]

By 1 a.m. on May 23, they were close to the summit. They had been communicating with the South Buttress team by walkie-talkies and had planned to meet on the top of Denali. But the weather was

now very bad, and blowing snow had slowed the progress of the South Buttress team. The first team, completing the new direct route, bypassed the summit by 10 meters, because they were afraid of the huge summit cornice, and they continued down in the direction of the Southeast Spur. After 20 minutes they met Velic , who had plowed a path in deep snow from the second team's high camp at 5,800 meters. In such bad conditions, he did not want to continue to the top, so they all descended together.

Above the high camp, the climbers met Adamík and Špakula. After a short rest, they continued to descend, and by afternoon they had reached the saddle [atop the Ramp Route], but they didn't stay there for long and happily reached base camp that same day.

**– Translation and other assistance provided by Vlado Linek, JAMES**

## Images



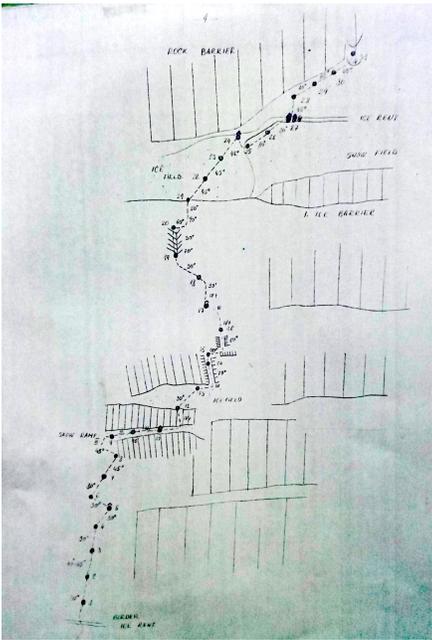
Blažej Adam (left) and František Korl relaxing after completing the difficult lower wall of Denali's south face.



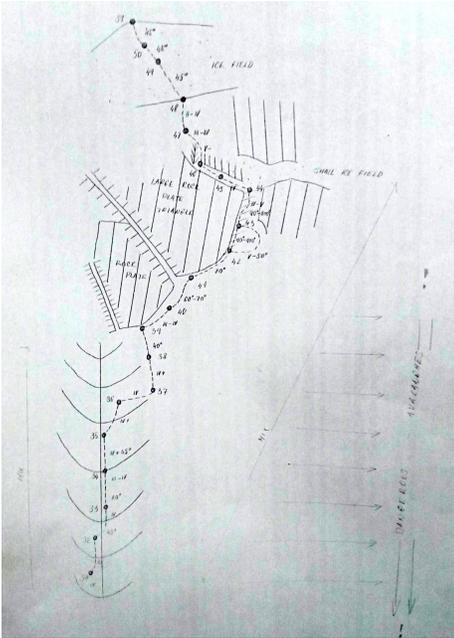
Blažej Adam (left) and František Korl at a bivouac chopped in the snow during the 1984 first ascent of the Slovak Direct route. During the 11-day climb, the climbers found only two sites (a total of three nights) where they could pitch their tent.



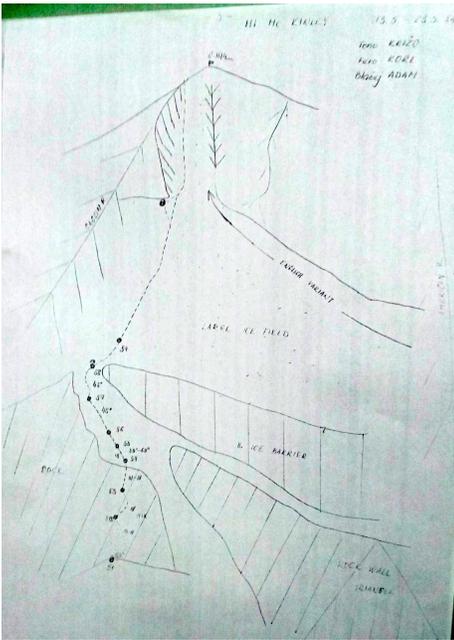
Back at Kahiltna base camp, Blažej Adam displays his Footfang crampons, "worn out" during the climb.



The 1984 topo of the lower portion of what became known as the Slovak Direct route on the south face of Denali.



The middle portion of the Slovak Direct route, with many of the key passages, shown in a 1984 topo.



The upper section of the Slovak Direct route on Denali, as depicted in the first-ascent party's 1984 topo.

## Article Details

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