



AAC Publications

Mt. Hunter, East Face, Diamond Arête, One Way Out

Alaska, Central Alaska Range

The east face of Mt. Hunter, showing the original Diamond Arête (yellow line, Donini-Tackle, 1985) and One Way Out (red line, Gardner-Hennessey-Smith, 2024). The 2024 climbers intended to continue straight up the rock wall to gain the upper arête, but weather concerns forced them onto the 1985 route to reach the summit. Photo by Michael Gardner.

The Diamond Arête on the east face of Mt. Hunter was first climbed in 1985 by Jim Donini and Jack Tackle. Anyone who wants a classic tale of old-school Alaskan adventure climbing would be well recommended to check out their story in the 1986 AAJ. They named it after the large rock face—which the lower part of their route follows on the left margin—because it reminded them of the Diamond on Longs Peak in Colorado.

Since the first ascent, there has only been one repeat, in 2005, by Samuel Johnson and Freddie Wilkinson. Jack Tackle had told Michael Gardner about a possible direct start to the Diamond Arête—a big dihedral system up the heart of the intimidating face of the Diamond wall—back in 2018. Ever since, we'd been hoping to try it.

The lack of activity on a line as notable as the Diamond Arête is due to two factors. First, it's a difficult route, even by modern standards. Second, access is only possible via ski aircraft—and pickup is not guaranteed. Because large seracs and avalanche slopes threaten the entire small basin beneath the east face, it would be a dangerous place to wait out a storm. Thus, the three crucial ingredients for the Diamond Arête are a psyched team, a stable forecast, and, most importantly, a pilot bolder than the climbers!

In May 2024, seven seasons after Jack told Michael about the line, the stars finally aligned. On May 14, Paul Roderick of Talkeetna Air Taxi dropped Michael, Rob Smith, and me at the base of the east face so we could attempt the direct line. Paul kept the engines running while we unloaded; he snapped a few photos and quickly took off again. We made our way as hastily as possible to the relative safety of the base of the wall and immediately started climbing.

From the first steps, it was clear we were in for a difficult time, with deep trail-breaking and vertical sn'ice that was alright to climb but difficult to protect. The rock, however, was exceptional, full of beautiful splitters, like something out of Yosemite. A steep, unprotectable pitch after the 'schrund took us to moderate ground and a long, deep traverse to the start of the dihedral.

The initial four pitches of the corner took us around seven hours, with sustained, technical, and sometimes dangerous climbing. Tricky torquing in thin, overhanging cracks on the first pitch, a fragile ice column on the second, and a bold, slabby traverse on the fourth took us to the end of daylight and a small bivy ledge. Two more hard pitches in the morning brought us to the top of the dihedral, where we expected to take a short break before tackling several hundred meters of difficult climbing leading directly to the apex of the wall. However, a glance toward the upper mountain made it quite clear that our expected weather window of three days wasn't likely to last even two. The only sane decision, given our position, was to traverse left and get up and over the mountain as soon as possible.

Forgoing the direct line, we made a long traverse back to the left, searching for the fat ice of the original route's exit pitches. Either we wound up in the wrong spot (possible) or things had changed in 40 years (also possible), but a final difficult dry pitch was required to reach the top of the wall.

Simul-climbing on moderate mixed terrain brought us to the namesake arête, where several sideways pitches of calf-burning hard ice led to moderate slopes. After battling deep snow and strong wind, we were thankful to find a large crevasse in which to shelter for the night.

The next day brought more of the same, this time in a whiteout. With the aid of GPS apps on our phones, we were able to find Hunter's 14,573' summit. We descended to the top of the north buttress entirely in a whiteout, which was about as fun as it sounds; nonetheless, we located the familiar rappels down the Bibler-Klewin, and before we knew it we were in base camp.

Our route, One Way Out (2,200m, WI6 M6+), was more like a variation than the full direct line Jack had envisioned. That awaits a more talented—or luckier—team. Nonetheless, we are proud to have added some hard climbing to an already proud route, and to have reached Hunter's summit, which had eluded the previous two ascents of the Diamond Arête for various reasons. It was a memorable three days, made even more so in retrospect: It was the last big alpine route Rob and I got to share with our friend Michael, who died on Jannu East in October.

—Sam Hennessey

Images



In the big corner on the One Way Out variation to the Diamond Arête on Mt. Hunter.



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