



AAC Publications

Leader Fall — Off Route, Loose Rock

Canada, British Columbia, North Cascades, Chinese Puzzle Wall

The Chinese Puzzle Wall, illuminated above, was the scene of an iPhone SOS rescue in September 2023. Tricky route-finding, loose rock, and pulled protection factored into an accident that struck two world-class climbers. On serious and remote adventure routes, some risks are unavoidable. Photo: Kieran Brownie

On the evening of August 31, Ines Papert and Emilie Pellerin began a six- hour approach to the Chinese Puzzle Wall in southwestern British Columbia.

According to Climbing.com, “Papert realized she’d forgotten her Garmin satellite communicator, but the pair decided to press on anyway, taking extra care to avoid an accident.”

Their objective was Crouching Tiger (11 pitches, 5.12b). After a challenging approach including technical, wet slabs climbed while wearing heavy packs, the pair arrived at the base at 2 a.m. They slept for seven hours. Climbing.com reported, “On September 1, they put up and fixed four pitches...jugging up to tackle the second half of the 11-pitch line the next day.”

On September 2, they swapped leads, and completed the crux climbing by 6:30 p.m. Climbing.com wrote, “Pellerin began leading up the ninth pitch...(and) realized she was likely off-route. ‘I weighed my options, knowing these last two pieces wouldn’t hold much more than body weight.... I figured I could pull it off. I did a few pretty hard moves to find nothing but a fully closed seam. This was more risk than I could handle.’ Pellerin downclimbed to the highest of the marginal pieces and asked her partner to take. As she weighted the piece, the rock ‘exploded in my face.’ Her two highest pieces pulled, and Pellerin took a 20- to 25-foot fall.”

Pellerin suffered a broken ankle. The pair rappelled and reached the ground at midnight. With a storm forecasted and Pellerin disabled, Papert decided to race to the road to get help. They knew that any delay would hamper air rescue.

Climbing.com reported, “Just before Papert set off alone, Pellerin stopped her.” Neither had cell service, “but playing around on her phone, Pellerin had found a button to send an ‘Emergency Text via Satellite.’...The pair soon received a message from Apple’s support team. They asked her if she had an emergency contact...and Pellerin gave the number of her partner, Ian Middleton. She was allowed...a 40-character message. She wrote: Call SAR broken ankle 6hour hike Slesse.”

ANALYSIS

The next few hours saw confused and frustrating attempts to communicate directly with SAR. Ultimately, the first message—sent to Middleton, along with the stranded pair’s coordinates, led to a successful rescue. At 7:45 a.m., a search and rescue helicopter arrived, and by 9 a.m. the pair was airlifted out. Less than two hours later, a four-day storm moved in.

Not having proper emergency communication was avoidable. As Papert later said, “I was kicking myself for not bringing an inReach.” Friends in the area had satellite communicators, but Papert said she was in too much of a hurry to borrow one.

The iPhone SOS feature saved the day: Introduced in 2022, it allows simple satellite communication versus previous emergency messages that required a weak cell signal. However, this new service has its own issues. Only the iPhone 14 and newer models, are satellite-communication capable. It only works in 16 countries, and it does not allow a direct dialogue with SAR or a dispatcher. The service acts as a third party, relaying a single 40-character message to a single emergency contact. Though Pellerin said that the SOS feature “was so much better than nothing,” she added that it is no replacement for an inReach or another full-featured satellite communicator. (Sources: Climbing.com and the Editors.)

Images



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