



AAC Publications

No Mystery No Adventure

New Friends and New Routes in East Greenland

“Libeck! I have never been so fucking scared in my life!” Ethan Pringle’s yell from 80 feet above startled me to attention. I’d been lost in the view of electric-blue icebergs floating in the sea a mile away. We were 1,500 feet up—not even halfway—on a sheer granite tower above a remote fjord on Greenland’s east coast. Around us, spear-tipped summits stabbed into thick, gray-pink clouds.

We had already been moving 14 hours, and I’d begun to think this route might take longer than the 48 hours we’d planned for our nonstop push. Suffering seemed a sure thing. Ethan has just danced through a spectacular, pinky-sized 5.12 crack, making it look like 5.9. He yelled again: “...But I am having so much fun! I’ve never been so psyched!”

At that moment, I knew we’d not only climb this tower, we also were going to have a great time doing it. Ethan and I had only met once before this team-of-strangers expedition. We had never shared a rope. At base camp were two other members of our team, Angie Payne and Keith Ladzinski, who also were strangers to me. Coming here together was not our idea....

I first met Ethan Pringle, a leading U.S. sport climber and boulderer, at a marketing meeting in California at the headquarters of Mountain Hardwear, one of our mutual sponsors. We were there to discuss a project where climbers with diverse skills and strengths would join forces somewhere remote among steep rock peaks. My job would be to take younger climbers who were crushing in their respective climbing genres and bring them on a Libeck-style expedition. It sounded fun. And who could resist another trip, paid in full, to go somewhere beautiful and do first ascents? However, I would not be following three unofficial rules for expeditions: 1) Go with friends. 2) Go with friends. 3) Go with friends.

On expeditions into deep wilderness, emotions are laid bare. People get scared or lonely or frustrated. Team dynamics can go in any direction. Neither Angie Payne, one of the world’s top female boulderers, nor Ethan had ever been on a remote climbing expedition. Photographer Keith Ladzinski had been plenty of wild places, but I had never met him either. He was there to capture the beauty and adventure of climbing in the remote fjords of east Greenland. But would he also witness a dramatic meltdown? Or would this be the beginning of new friendships and great success? Always an optimist, I truly believed the latter. I have always said, “Without mystery there is no adventure.” On this trip it was more like, “Without strangers there is no adventure.”

We met up in Iceland. I arrived directly from a solo expedition to Franz Josef Land, Russia, where I narrowly avoided being killed by falling rock. Ethan came from Norway after completing a new 5.14 project. Angie arrived fresh from bouldering competitions in the States. Keith came with Angie after finishing one of his award-winning films. This would be my seventh expedition to Greenland. For me it was going to a second home, for them a strange and unknown land.

At the end of our two-hour flight to Kulusuk on Greenland’s east coast, the pilot pulled up at the last minute, unable to see the wet tarmac through the rain and clouds. Our stomachs dropped like we were riding a roller coaster, but I could see this was no laughing matter for Angie. She was already way out of her comfort zone. When we finally arrived in the Inuit town of Tasiilaq, bright red, yellow, and blue houses were surrounded by a cobalt blue ocean and snow-white icebergs. Wisps of gray fog slithered by, adding to the fairy-tale scene. Dozens of Greenlandic huskies stood barking by

abandoned fishing boats when we stepped off the helicopter. I smelled the familiar scent of seal blood—the dogs were being fed their favorite meal.

Soon we were at my friend Hans Christian Florian Sorensen's house. A surgeon and key contact for many expeditions, he is one of Greenland's heroes. We soon learned that excessive ice and rough seas would prevent us from going where I had hoped. But Hans Christian suggested another possibility, a fjord lined by granite towers that he had seen the previous summer. None of the most prominent towers had been climbed. We sipped hot coffee and looked at maps and photos in Hans Christian's living room, where walrus skulls and narwhal horns three and four meters long provided the decorations. Ethan's mouth literally hung open. "That wall is freaking huge!" he exclaimed. Angie spotted beautiful boulders in Hans Christian's photos, and scooted her chair over to the computer for a closer look.

We hired a fisherman to take us north to the fjords in a 22-foot boat, dodging icebergs as we moved up the coast. Ten hours later we were near our destination, but fog had settled like wrapping paper around the towers. Unsure where to land, we probed for icebergs with the boat's spotlight as we tried to find a place to drop anchor and wait for the fog to lift.

Gray. Rain. Wind and waves. The captain fired up the engine, and half an hour later we could see towers through wispy layers of fog. We unloaded our bags on a granite slab as the mist turned into pouring rain. Soon we were soaked as we scouted the spongy ground for a suitable base camp. Purple flowers glowed from bright green moss dotted with shiny dew diamonds. We were surrounded by huge granite towers, our tents crowded by boulders the size of small homes. The sharp needle of first-ascent longing pricked into my veins.

After setting up our cooking tent and crafting a stone-tabled kitchen, we settled around a stove and hot coffee with a touch of whiskey. This was perfect—the weather forced us to be tentbound and get to know each other better. We sipped steaming drinks, listened to raindrop drum beats, and talked about life and all the unclimbed rock that waited somewhere out in the mist. For the first time I could feel real camaraderie flowing among the team.

By the second morning the rain had slowed, and Angie made it clear that she wanted to focus on bouldering. But I wanted to get her tied in for a big first ascent, to feel the glory of standing on a high summit. The previous day, after we came ashore, I had hiked to the base of the most prominent tower in the cirque. A proud father who always misses his daughter on expeditions, I called it Daddy's Tower. A system of splitter cracks and corners went directly up the steepest, longest part of the northeast face. It was over 3,500 feet tall. Just as I was about to walk down in the rain, Ethan showed up.

"Do you think we can climb that line?" Ethan said, gazing up at the tower. "Dude, that is huge!"

"That is the best line here, maybe the best I have seen in all of Greenland," I said. "We are definitely going to climb that route."

But first I wanted to climb as a team, and I suggested we try the long but seemingly straightforward ridge left of the main face. We packed up for two days, and a three-hour hike brought us to a bivy site on a patch of green grass and lavender flowers, 1,000 feet above the ocean. Vanilla glaciers wound down the mountainsides across the fjord, and massive icebergs drifted in gray-turquoise ocean. I could smell the fresh scent of rain. The team was beaming.

The next morning, we had to cross a half-mile-wide glacier to reach the tower's base. Mazes of 40-foot-deep, five-foot-wide crevasses crisscrossed the bare ice like tiger stripes. I feel comfortable on these dry glaciers; the crevasses seemed to me like welcome smiles. To Angie they were like frowns of doom. "This is insane! Is this safe?!" she yelled. Small stones and dirt had sunk into the glacier's

surface, leaving spiky points of ice that worked like grip tape on a skateboard. I assured Angie the glacier was quite safe to cross, even without crampons.

The drizzle turned to light rain. We made it across the glacier and started up a steep talus slope of loose, geometric puzzle pieces. Angie was nearly paralyzed with fear as we picked our way up the gully. "Are we going to die in here? I am not psyched right now!" Then, just as we started to harness up, pouring rain shut us down.

During the descent, Keith and I began trundling boulders down the slippery slopes, simply for the childish pleasure of it. We kept finding bigger and bigger boulders to send crashing down. As the two of us heaved a huge boulder, Keith slipped and tumbled head over heels. He soon came to a stop, but it could have been very ugly. Angie shouted, "What the fuck, guys? This is too dangerous!" We walked back to camp in silence. Angie went back to her tent and cried, her emotions raw. By evening, hot chocolate mixed with whiskey had us all smiling again, laughing over the events of the last two days. But for me the taste of defeat lingered—I badly wanted the first ascent of that gigantic tower.

The following morning revealed bluebird skies, freshly cleaned by the rain. I was up early making coffee. Our conversation quickly led to the hunt for sweet new boulders. Not for me, though—my thoughts were on a completely different wavelength.

"Hey guys, I'm going to run back up to that route we got rained off and try to solo it. I can be up and back in a day." I said this casually, hoping no one would mind if I took off for a bit. But Ethan said, "Dude! Libeck, are you crazy?" Angie chimed in, "You are nuts. Are you serious?" Eventually they came around. An hour later I left with a rope, a bit of pro, Clif Bars and water, my Year of the Dragon mask, and my iPod rocking to a live Grateful Dead concert from 1977, fueling my psyche. I sang out loud to the rocks and icebergs, "Fire, fire on the mountain...there's a dragon with matches that's loose on the town..."

The route was not difficult, mostly 5.6 and 5.7, but I dragged the rope behind me in case it got too scary. More than halfway up, I had to stop and consider the next section for about 20 minutes. Above was steep, flaky rock for about 400 feet. The last time I'd free soloed anything remotely dangerous was the same day Derek Hersey fell to his death from the Steck-Salathe in Yosemite Valley, back in May of 1993. Free soloing gives me the chills, especially now that I am a father. Still, it appeared manageable. I had been in similar positions many times before, and felt I could make the right call. I thought of Angie and her intimidation the previous day. Like her, I've had to overcome fear throughout the years. I still do on every expedition. I've just found ways to make friends with fear—fear keeps me safe. I started up a set of triple cracks and climbed steadily but cautiously until I could pull on to a good ledge below a fourth-class ridge, full of adrenaline. Back on easy ground, I pulled up the rope and headed for the top.

While I was soloing the tower, Angie, Ethan, and Keith explored a dreamland of Arctic bouldering. Angie writes:

I had no desire to go back and climb that tower with Mike, but I did have a new respect for his drive and his skill. Although I experience climbing in a very different way than he does, I saw in him a hunger to climb, and I could relate to that. I was still physically and emotionally exhausted from our team outing the day before, but Mike's psych was invigorating. There was a granite playground at our fingertips, so Ethan, Keith, and I set out to see what we could accomplish.

For the most part, I've bouldered existing problems. Clean boulders with chalked lines present concrete challenges that I can wrap my mind around. In Greenland, I felt like a beginner all over again. Finding the best boulders, spotting the lines, chalking holds, and unlocking the movement—it was a process I'd rarely experienced in its entirety.

Ethan had a knack for finding the good rock, so I followed his lead the first day. We quickly realized that the boulders further up the hill were cleaner than those near camp. But this perk came at the cost of my feeling out of place and vulnerable again. The talus was loose underfoot, threatening to crush my toes with every step. The sounds of rockfall punctuated the serene setting. Then we came upon a perfect, cottage-sized boulder. And for the first time in my 17 years of climbing, I saw a line, chalked it up, and completed a real first ascent: The Legend of Hans Christian. Ethan quickly followed suit and established Richard Keil on the same boulder.

We continued exploring in the shadow of the tower that Mike was soloing, communicating with him intermittently via hand-held radios. Ethan and I were experiencing the rock in a drastically different way than Mike was, but we were all climbing, and something about that fact was uniquely motivating. Ethan found the gem of the area on a sweeping, 35-degree overhang of fine-grained granite. He worked on the main line for about half an hour and was set to try the problem again when Mike radioed from the top of the tower. Through Keith's longest telephoto lens, we could just see him on top, waving his arms in the air. Ethan sent Shipwreck (V11) on his next try. "It was one of my proudest boulder first ascents ever," he said later.

When Mike returned to camp, he and Ethan began planning their new route on the front side of Daddy's Tower. I planned to sit this one out, and so I set out to establish more boulders, sometimes alone, sometimes with Keith doubling as photographer and spotter. I was finally hitting my stride, and everything was falling into a familiar rhythm as I completed lap after lap on a hilltop boulder overlooking the iceberg-dotted ocean. And then, suddenly, I was rocketing through the air toward two poorly placed pads, with no spotter and the reality that any rescue could be days away. In that terrifying moment, I gained a new understanding of the word "remote." Luck was on my side, though, and I hobbled away bruised but not broken.

Before departing for Greenland, I'd been dead-set on establishing new boulder problems: perfect rock with perfect lines. I'd make a perfect little list of first ascents to bring home. Thinking about the trip nearly a year later, it would be a gross disservice to reduce it to a list of names and grades. Greenland was a journey of individuals through emotions and experiences, surrounded by a mind-blowing landscape. I had never seen as much raw beauty as I saw in Greenland—the kind beauty that is laced with volatility and unpredictability, the kind that makes one feel small and insignificant. It's no wonder I was intimidated.

As the purple-black of the late August Arctic night threw its blanket over the fjord, Ethan and I sat side by side on a small ledge with a bivy sack spread over us like a quilt. It was just dark enough to reveal the northern lights slithering green and blue across the darkened heavens. Their beauty was so fantastic, I don't remember feeling the freezing cold. Then they were gone. Shivering, teeth chattering like cartoon characters, we waited for the sun to rescue us with its warmth. This was Ethan's first bivy. I farted a couple times under the bivy sack. "Mike, seriously, please fart again," he said from deep inside the bunched hood of his parka. "It was so warm for a second." Finally it got so cold we just decided to keep moving.

We were close to 2,000 feet up, maybe 30 hours into our push. With all the teetering blocks we had encountered, I knew it would be very dangerous to rappel the route. "Dude, do you think we should keep going?" Ethan asked. His curious, sideways smile, arched brows, and wide eyes showed both psyche and serious concern. He was relying on my judgment. I assured him, "Yeah man, we might suffer a bit, but sometimes going fast just means we have to keep moving. We just need to keep going up." He smiled, buzzing with enthusiasm, as I re-racked and started up a golden corner.

Later, Ethan cruised a run-out, bouldery 5.11+ pitch and began setting an anchor 60 meters above. He yelled and I looked up and saw an object flying directly at me. I don't remember making the decision—I just reached up and caught the bullet coming toward me. It was Ethan's ascender. A moment later my hand was burning in pain. I got out the first-aid kit: a skinny roll of old medical tape. I couldn't close my two middle fingers, but I taped them together and jugged up to Ethan. He spewed apologies, but I actually found it kind of cool that I'd caught his ascender from 60 meters up. With no

time to lose, I suggested he keep leading and I would jug fast behind him.

Ethan was fired up, and renewed strength swept over both of us. The next dozen hours were a blur. Night came again—the northern lights failed to impress us this time. We were tired but still moving, yearning for the top. A few hours after the second sunrise on this push, we found ourselves on the summit, above a sea of clouds. We celebrated with a hug. Ethan told me this wall was “by far the most meaningful piece of rock” he’d ever climbed. Sixty-two hours after starting our push, we staggered into base camp and hugged Angie and Keith.

Expeditions are like short-term marriages. Sometimes they go bad, but when they’re good, they may create friendships that last a lifetime. Ethan and Angie’s willingness to dive into first ascents and wilderness exploration reminded me of my own first expeditions. I saw their eyes light up with inspiration and fear from Greenland’s raw beauty and unpredictable power. I was inspired by their physical and mental strength. Even though we’d been thrown together as strangers, this was far more than a marriage of convenience. I feel honored to have been on such a journey with these climbers, and even more honored to call them my friends.

Summary

First ascent of Ataatap Tower (“Daddy’s or Father’s Tower”), near Kangertitivatsiaq Fjord in east Greenland, via the southwest ridge (Dragon’s Back, 5.8), free solo by Mike Libecki. First ascent of Built Fjord Tough (3,500’, V 5.12 A2) on the northeast face of Daddy’s Tower, by Mike Libecki and Ethan Pringle. The two fixed 600 feet of rope and then climbed the rest of the route in 52 hours, with a brief sitting bivouac; all but 15 feet was led free. Pringle and Angie Payne also established numerous boulder problems up to V11.

About the Author

Mike Libecki has a goal to survive 100 expeditions by the time he is 100 years old. As of May 2013, he had 60 years and 53 expeditions to go.

Images



Angie Payne, spotted by Ethan Pringle, on Richard Keil (V9). In back is Daddy's Tower, which Mike Libeck was soloing at that moment, via the left skyline.



Libeck and team study maps at Hans Christian Florian Sorensen's home in Tasiilaq.



On guard for icebergs.



Payne on Cowboy Toast (V6). To the left is Roger Johnson (V8), the code phrase Libecky planned to radio if he got in trouble while soloing.



Ataatap Tower (a.k.a. Daddy's Tower). (1) Dragon's Back (Libecky). (2) Coronis (Bunn-Royer). (3) Built Fjord Tough (Libecky-Pringle). See Climbs and Expeditions for more.



Libecky leading on Daddy's Tower and bivying with Pringle (right).



Libecky bivying with Pringle.



Article Details

Author	Mike Libeck and Angie Payne
Publication	AAJ
Volume	55
Issue	87
Page	74
Copyright Date	2013
Article Type	Feature article