



AAC Publications

Lucifer, North Face, Agua Sin Gas

Alaska, Coast Mountains

In the AAJ 1947, Fred Beckey wrote, “Although they do not rise so high as the great mountains farther to the N.W., these peaks of the Alaska-Canada Boundary are magnificent in their alpine grandeur and challenging in their technical difficulties. Here, indeed, is one of Alaska's neglected mountain regions, not without mystery.”

I made my first trip to the Stikine Icecap in 2009 to make the first ascent of the west ridge of Burkett Needle (AAJ 2010). The climbing on the Needle was trumped only by the scenery: The Icecap seemed to be teeming with beautiful lines. I was amazed to learn many of them were unclimbed, and as a result I have more or less returned every year to attempt to climb one of them.

In 2014, while approaching the West Witches Tit (AAJ 2015), Jess Roskelley and I spotted a very attractive north-facing wall to the south-southwest, on the other side of what local climbers call “The Cauldron” or “Witches Cauldron.” I took a few photos and made a mental note. I later found out the point was called Lucifer (Point 7,872’), and it was first climbed by Peter Rowat and Rupert Roschnik, by its east side, in 1976. From the upper bergschrund, Lucifer’s north face is approximately 1,800-1,900’.

After reading that southeast Alaska’s snowpack was 30 percent of normal in 2015, I more or less assumed I wouldn’t get to climb there unless a weather window appeared early in the year. In August 2013 I had been shut down by extremely difficult glacier conditions in a low snow year, and I didn’t want to do another scenic helicopter flight with no climbing. However, with a weather window shaping up in May, I pinged the usual suspects and Doug Shepherd was available for a quick trip. Doug and I met in Seattle on May 13, then caught an early flight north to Petersburg the following day. We flew into the range by helicopter late on May 14.

After the helicopter left, I discovered I’d left my stove at home. I think most trips would have ended the trip right there, but with the warm temps and high pressure we found a few shallow glacial pools to collect water from. Still, no hot water meant no coffee, which is an epic in my book. Doug earned a Partner of the Year nomination for not killing me right then and there. Given the heat wave, we opted for a 2 a.m. departure from camp in hopes of completing a majority of the climb in the predawn hours.

Our goal was a direct line up an ice runnel on the central, diamond-shaped face. But given the above-freezing temps and sloppy snow conditions we opted for a safer, less direct line that first ascends the steep glacier/icefall below Lucifer, then up a gully climber’s left of the steep face. We managed most of the climb before sunrise, though we found the climbing slow going, with numerous open crevasses and sloppy snow. We encountered some vertical snow and sn’ice in places but found the majority of the terrain to be moderate. Atop the gully we joined the east ridge to the summit. From camp, the climb took us 12 hours.

From the summit we reversed our route, descending around 4,000’ back to camp. We managed to snag a pickup the same day, and were back in Petersburg late on May 15, making for a sub-24-hour Petersburg-to-Petersburg trip. Given my stove oversight, we named the route Agua Sin Gas (III WI4 Steep Snow).

– John Frie

Images



The north face of Lucifer. Agua Sin Gas climbs up a snowy gully left (out of frame) of this prominent, steep face. The 1976 first ascent of Lucifer, by Peter Rowat and Rupert Roschnik, climbed its snowy east (left) ridge.



Doug Shepherd leading moderate terrain on Lucifer's north side.



John Friehe, Travel Pig, and Doug Shepherd (left to right) atop Lucifer after making the first ascent of its north side. The Devils Thumb massif is in the background.



The north face of Lucifer forms the central peak. Friehe and Shepherd climbed the glacier/icefall and then up the snowy gully on the left side of Lucifer.



Climbing steep, soft snow on Lucifer's north side.

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