



## AAC Publications

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### **West Maiden, Southwest Face And Other Climbs**

Alaska, Brooks Range, Arrigetch Peaks

**On July 6—coincidentally our second wedding anniversary—we departed Seattle to fulfill a long-sought dream of climbing in the remote Arrigetch Peaks.** Two days later, Brooks Range Aviation set us down at Circle Lake under a heavy gale, with 230 pounds of gear, 110 pounds of food, and 310 pounds of human. We cached kayaking gear and a week's worth of food at the lake and then began our trek to the Aiyagomahala Valley via Arrigetch-Aiyagomahala Pass. It took us four days to execute a double carry of our gear and provisions. We then spent 18 glorious days in the valley, exploring its far reaches and pushing our limits on a variety of climbs.

The weather during our trip was exceptionally mild by reported Arrigetch standards. Though we sat through four days of fairly continuous rain, most days boasted blue skies and only localized showers. As such we were able to climb nearly every other day, alternating climbs with rest days and scouting hikes. We camped near the base of Battleship and moved camp once to disperse our impact. We saw no other people or megafauna in the valley, charismatic or otherwise.

On July 14 we warmed up by climbing Citadel via its west ridge (class 4) in terrific weather. We next set out to attempt a new route on the south face of Battleship. However, we found it littered with loose scree and retreated after one roped pitch in the middle of a hailstorm. It appears that clean rock routes up Battleship exist, but we did not take time to explore them further.

On July 20 we established a new route on West Maiden, following a long, right-angling crack system that splits the southwest face and is clearly visible from the valley below. From the base of the apron, seven pitches of terrific crack climbing delivered us to the summit ridge just below the top. Our route, Misty Maiden (800', III 5.8+), was excellent and the summit of West Maiden magnificent. We rappelled the east ridge.

On July 22 we set out to climb Arthur Emmons, intent on finding a variation to the unrepeatable 1971 Krakauer-Bullard Route (IV 5.5 AI3) that didn't require ice tools and avoided any exposure to the decaying glacier on the north face. We instead ascended the glacier perched between Pyramid and Arthur Emmons, using only crampons. From the col between these peaks we scrambled up talus toward Arthur Emmons, briefly descending the south face to skirt a sizable gendarme (sometimes called "Holiday" on early maps). We reached the rock portion of the Krakauer-Bullard Route five hours after leaving camp.

Once on the route we roped up and enjoyed stellar rock climbing in marginal weather. We topped the ridge's final headwall at 11 p.m., after sitting out two rainstorms. The downpours had turned the mellow but lichen-covered summit crest into an unprotectable slip-and-slide, forcing us to retreat 100' short of the true summit. We retraced our steps for the long descent, which included a stuck-rope adventure at 3 a.m. Around 8 a.m., we had a close call at the glacier's toe involving a piano-sized boulder that came loose and violently crashed between us, releasing a shower of smaller rocks in its wake. We reached our camp roughly 26 hours after we set out. The rockfall experience taught us that navigating the receding Arrigetch glaciers late in the season was too risky for our taste, and we turned our focus back to pure rock for our remaining climbs.

On July 25 we climbed Camel via a prominent and delightful 200' dihedral on the southeast face, joining the east ridge. We found a summit register consisting of a vintage chocolate bar wrapper

hidden inside a rusted tin can. The register noted Robley Williams Jr. and Michael Westmacott's 1964 first ascent of the east ridge, as well as a variation climbed that same day by Sally Westmacott and Chuck Loucks up the south face to join the east ridge. These routes were only briefly noted in AAJ 1965. This was a fine treat, as Robley is a longtime friend. Also on the summit, we found a newer rappel sling, suggesting at least one other ascent. We dubbed our route the Dromedary Dihedral (500', II 5.8). While we were admiring the summit artifacts, a dramatic lightning storm boiled up. With electricity buzzing in our ears, we began a rapid retreat of the east ridge, rappelling from a hastily built anchor in a notch just east of the Dromedary Dihedral.

As the weather remained unstable, we spent the afternoon of the following day exploring a collection of crags just a few hundred feet up the north slope of the Aiyagomahala Valley. These crags offer short but high-quality cracks, just enough for a playful afternoon. When the weather improved the next day, we attempted to climb the 1,000' north face of Sundial, our name for the low but prominent fin east of Battleship that cast a shadow over our camp each morning. We found the lower climbing loose and grassy, and we bailed before reaching the attractive upper wall.

On the morning of our last day in the valley, we scrambled up the south ridge of Sundial, finding a cairn on top. Seth Adams later told us that he'd scrambled up the same fin in 2014, via the same route. On the afternoon of July 28, we said farewell to our valley home, returning in two days to our cache at Circle Lake in a single carry, with overloaded packs. We portaged to the Alatna River and spent our final week in the wild floating down to the Athabaskan village of Allakaket in an inflatable kayak, roughly 137 miles, catching grayling and pike along the way. On August 6 we caught a commercial flight from Allakaket to Fairbanks after 30 days in the wilderness.

The nature of climbing expeditions to the Arrigetch has changed considerably—environmentally and logistically—since the first climbers visited the area in the 1960s. Comparing our photos to Robley Williams', the glacier recession in recent decades has been dramatic. Airdrops were forbidden in the 1990s, and in 2004 bear canisters became mandatory for all food storage within Gates of the Arctic National Park, adding burdens to an already grueling approach. For those willing to put in the effort to reach the area, the rewards remain incredible. For both of us, the trip stands in a class by itself as the greatest adventure of our lives.

– Stephanie Safdi and Johan Ugander

## Images



Stephanie Safdi during the first ascent of Misty Maiden on the southwest face of West Maiden.



Stephanie Safdi leads up the terrific cracks of Misty Maiden on the southwest face of West Maiden.



Stephanie Safdi atop West Maiden. Behind, from left to right: Shot Tower, Arthur Emmons, Pyramid, Locomotive, and Independence Pass.





The attractive southwest face of West Maiden, showing Misty Maiden.



Looking down into the Aiyagomahala Valley as Stephanie Safdi follows the knife-edge crest at the start of the rock climbing on the west ridge of Arthur Emmons.



: Johan Ugander leads up the west ridge of Arthur Emmons.





Looking down the west ridge of Arthur Emmons, with Pyramid, Melting Tower Wichmann Tower, and Xanadu beyond.



Looking up Dromedary Dihedral, which gains the fourth class east ridge of Camel.



The summit block atop Camel, with Shot Tower, Arthur Emmons, Pyramid, and Wichmann Tower beyond from left to right.



Johan Ugander leading through wet lichen on the summit block of Camel.



Stephanie Safdi atop Camel, with West Maiden, East Maiden, and Citadel behind from left to right.



A view of Camel from the southwest. This aspect (as well as the huge north face) has no recorded ascents. The Dromedary Dihedral is out of view, on the southeast face.





: Left to right: Citadel, East Maiden, West Maiden, (Camel is obscured by West Maiden), Disneyland, and Badille.



Looking west from atop Citadel, showing, in the foreground: East Maiden, West Maiden, Camel, Disneyland, Badille; in the background: Wichmann Tower (left) and Melting Tower (right).



Stephanie Safdi below Shot Tower.





Then: Brownell Bergen surveys the Arthur Emmons massif, July 1964. Peaks from left to right: Battleship, Arthur Emmons, and Pyramid. Now: Johan Ugander surveys the Arthur Emmons massif, July 2015.



Johan Ugander descending the south ridge of Sundial, with Battleship and Arthur Emmons beyond.



Bidding farewell to the Brooks Range before a weeklong float down the Alatna River.



The Arrigetch Peaks have seen significant glacier recession and rockfall over the last 50 years. Details from photographs by Robley Williams Jr. (1964) and Stephanie Safdi (2015).

## Article Details

Author	Stephanie Safdi and Johan Ugander
Publication	AAJ
Volume	59
Issue	80
Page	0
Copyright Date	2016
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions