Metrophobia

Total Immersion in Southern Greenland

ONCE PLANTED in my head, Silvan's project grew relentlessly in my thoughts, from a seed to a blossoming tree, shaded by strong moments of doubt, a clash between the desire to live fully and the need for self-preservation. What alpinist has not known nights of insomnia before a serious climb? Silvan's project awoke this demonic conflict within me.

Silvan Schüpbach and Christian "Laddy" Ledergerber had already approached one committing climb in Greenland by kayak, in 2014, paddling for seven days and walking two more to reach the Shark's Tooth, whose 900-meter northeast face they climbed all free (AAJ 2015). This had seemed to me a perfect adventure, far from the routine of work and daily life. This time, he wanted to push things even further. The idea was to kayak 170 kilometers, each way, through the fjords of southern Greenland and then climb an enigmatic pillar of stone more than 2,000 meters high. The few accounts of climbing on Apostelen Tommelfinger (the Apostle's Thumb) described rock ranging from good to absolutely horrid. It seemed the southwest face had never been climbed. During a climb of Ulamertorsuaq, about 40 kilometers to the southheast, Silvan had taken a photo of the Tommelfinger's headwall. It looked steep and imposing. The photo watered the seedling in my mind, its vines tangling into both hemispheres.

Every previous team visiting this area had been dropped off by helicopter. Our plan was to approach "by fair means." Initially I regarded this concept with skepticism. Is not the very idea of fairness subjective? Was this term not a media creation for something that simply should be inherent to the concept of an expedition?

During the weeks before our departure, I felt in turns confident that this would be a great adventure and afraid I wouldn't be prepared. Would the paddling revive the shoulder injury I had acquired while falling into a crevasse on the Hielo Continental in Patagonia two years earlier? Would the rock be unstable and dangerous? In the AAJ I read about a team that had bailed just below the summit of Apostelen Tommelfinger after rockfall broke the foot of one of the climbers while he lay in a portaledge. Five years later, he returned and climbed half the wall again, only to discover that a huge pillar they had climbed previously was now detached and half missing (AAJ 2009).

A few personal factors were also somewhat alarming: I had never kayaked, and two members of our team of five were total strangers.

To live a year like a wolf or a hundred like a sheep, I thought, pushing away the undercurrents of doubt. I sent a message to Sylvan that now strikes me as a ridiculous attempt at self-persuasion: "Not much time to train but really motivated for the project. Not worried for the kayaking. The wall is where the real challenge lies."

ANTOINE MOINEVILLE, my companion on many faraway adventures, and I decided to train on the small Lac de Passy, down-valley from Chamonix, when we could spare time away from guiding. We borrowed a fiberglass slalom kayak and a river kayak—completely different from the sea kayaks we would use in Greenland—and loaded them into the car. The big puddle of a lake was lined with girls in bikinis and wailing children splashing in the shallows. The water was smooth and warm, reflecting Mont Blanc and its satellites. No swell, no wind, no freezing water, no heavy loads, no hours on end of intense paddling—it was like a walk in the park to train for a Himalayan ascent.

A couple of weeks later, our team of five—Silvan, Laddy, and Fabio Lupo (the Swiss guys) and me and Antoine (the Frenchies)—met in the small fishing town of Nanortalik, near the southern tip of Greenland. Laddy, the most experienced sea kayaker, was our captain. Fabio was new to big walls and expeditions but had been very serious in his preparation, with many miles of kayaking. Antoine also had kayaking experience from his youth. I was the duckling—my kayaking odometer showing a total of five kilometers. Before leaving town we met up with a local kayaker to get some tips on tides and currents. “In this 3°C water you have five minutes to get out, then you’re fish bait!” His deep laughter threatened to open the Pandora’s box in my mind, into which I had stuffed my aquatic worries.

We caught a lift by boat to the fishing village of Aappilattoq. There, we packed the kayaks with our climbing gear, reduced to the strict minimum (a double rack, four 60-meter half ropes, a tag line, and food). We brought a fishing rod in hopes of supplementing our basic menu of polenta, pasta, and porridge. Our Swiss cheese sponsor had given us 25 kilograms of their finest, which fit perfectly into the triangular ends of the kayaks. Soups and bars were lodged in the empty spaces between cams and other gear.

Launching the kayaks, we paddled straight east, headed for the sea. The first passage would be Prins Christian Sund, a fjord that extended about 70 kilometers and would take us three interminable days to traverse. I struggled to keep up with my companions. By the second day I had pain from my little toenail to the extremity of my earlobe. The scale of the walls enclosing the fjord gave me the depressing impression that our velocity was that of snail. I decided to stay close to the shore, where smaller details like patterns in the rock or clumps of floating seaweed would enhance the impression of speed, tricking my brain into ephemeral satisfaction. At various times during the first 20 kilometers, I suggested stopping to climb one of the impressive walls we passed. My companions laughed as if I’d meant this as a joke. The rhythm of our days was tuned to the turning of the tides, as we tried, without much success, to use the currents to our favor.

The whole fair-means concept was taking on another color, as I began to understand that I had seriously underestimated the approach. Not only was the commitment greatly increased, but the physical and mental toll of kayaking would make the climbing more difficult too. Instead of getting fat at base camp, we were burning calories and seriously digging into our reserves of motivation and energy. It was clear to me that we would arrive at the foot of the wall exhausted.

The real kayaking had yet to start. In order to reach Lidenow Fjord, where Apostelen Tommelfinger rose from the northern shore, we had to turn to the north along the deeply incised coastline and cross committing open bays and fjords, where dry land would be far from reach. The winds were usually from the northwest—we would be paddling straight into them. Our frail vessels rocked up and down in the swell, my four companions appearing and disappearing from view in turn. Black fangs of rock jutted from the ocean, contrasting with vivid blue icebergs. The swell reflected off rock and ice, creating wild water. The sound of cracking ice and thunderous waves made for a dreadful atmosphere.

“Raft up!” shouted Laddy. We converged in the middle of a broad bay to form a stable, multi-hull raft. “We have to paddle faster and get out of here,” our captain said. “If the wind picks up any more we’re fucked! We need to move quickly and find a sheltered cove for the night.” Our island of safety broke up and we paddled with renewed urgency. Then, moments before we finally reached the far side of the bay, the smooth, rubbery back of a whale broke the water before me, cracking my deep bubble of concentration. Seabirds glided around a zebra- striped rock buttress. Life! I felt my lungs inflate with the salt- suffused air, the parched skin of my face relax, and the grip on my paddle loosen. I opened to the place and time, body and mind distilling into sea spray and wind. I was where I wanted to be.

WHEN WE TURNED the corner into Lindenow Fjord and headed back to the west, the water calmed and more mind-numbing paddling began. The landing for Apostelens Tommelfinger was still more

than 30 kilometers away. Every morning was punctuated by Laddy's motivating war cry: "Paddle, paddle, paddle!!!" I didn't know whether to laugh or knock him out with my paddle. I had developed tendinitis in my fingers from gripping the paddle's shaft, and my posterior seemed to have molded to the shape of the plastic seat. My companions, for whom I had thought this must be a pleasure cruise, also expressed pain and discomfort—which was quite heartening to me. When we stopped every night there was a moment of peace and respite—until the mosquitos came out. The only fish we could catch was the ulk (a.k.a. scorpion fish), a monstrous-looking creature with bulging eyes and four rows of teeth that tasted as foul as it looked.

As the fjord narrowed, excitement replaced our fatigue. A shallow bay opened to pastures of green, spotted with huge golden boulders and myriad colorful flowers. Streams gushed from the dark blue glacier above, coiling through the finely ground sand of the beach. The Tommelfinger loomed behind, its jagged spires shooting toward the sky. I leaped into the water, gleeful that I would not touch a kayak again for ten days.

We packed away our dry suits and emptied the boats. We had little time to rest from the fatigue of our journey. The next day we shuttled gear and food toward the foot of the wall, taking some time to scope a line. One major obstacle quickly became apparent: To access the most interesting section of the wall, and the part that seemingly had the best rock, we had to surmount a terrifying hanging glacier. There seemed to be nearly constant icefall from this 100-meter barrier. Had we not just paddled for seven days, I would have turned around immediately, judging the risks to be too high. After long deliberation we decided to scale the glacier on its extreme right side. Above this, 700 meters of steep rock steps and hanging glaciers would finally lead to the real climbing, a 1,000-meter missile of granite rocketing toward the stars.

Russian roulette is a game you try not to play too often in a long climbing career. That morning I felt like the chamber of the gun had too many bullets. We reached the foot of the glacier with dark thoughts and the desire to get it over with quickly. After a pitch of dirt, rocks, and ice, threatening to fall apart at any moment, Silvan geared up for the second pitch, a 40-meter overhang of compact white ice. Our four ice screws were meager protection for such an obstacle, but Silvan is a master. Antoine, Fabio, and I waited with the haul bags, hiding from falling ice in a small cavern while Silvan and Laddy climbed.

Click, click, click.... This time, happily, the game went our way. Above the ice plateau, a massive belly of monolithic rock arched upward. We laboriously carried the bags toward our line, observing impact craters in the snow. From time to time a whistling sound signaled an incoming rock, and we ran in circles like terrorized rabbits, as we had no idea where the rocks were coming from.

The climb began next day with wet chimneys and mossy cracks. It was actually quite enjoyable and we gained elevation quickly. Climbing on such slippery terrain is like dancing with an egg balanced on your head—much delicacy and caution are required. The clock was ticking and we adopted a ballistic strategy. We divided into two teams: one to lead and belay, and another to jug and haul the bags behind.

Above the highest snowfield were few ledges, and we had no way to carry portaledges in the kayaks. Our second bivy, sleeping in suspended hammocks, brought to mind the famous black and white photo of Royal Robbins on El Cap's North America Wall. We twisted and turned all night as sounds of falling ice filled our dreams. The next morning dense mist clotted the mountain, filling the air with brisk humidity. The clouds swished in and out, giving us glimpses of the endless glacier extending to the westward. The hanging glacier, now far below us, spewed out seemingly impossible quantities of deep blue ice. The whole mountain shook and trembled. We joked about the metro passing below: "Last stop, Apostlen Tommelfinger!"

It was a good reminder that we weren't stuck in Paris or Basel, waiting for the subway to carry us to

work. Metro, work, sleep, metro, work, sleep. We feared the falling seracs, but worse was the fear of being trapped in a life where every day resembles the next. The anxiety of facing the absurdity of this world stripped of the freedom to choose our own path, a life devoid of authenticity, where desire, love, and passion are luxuries. Here we were afraid, but we were living a life we'd chosen!

After four days of climbing, we reached a big ledge two-thirds of the way up the tower. The mist dissipated slowly and, although we were soaked to the bone, it appeared the summit was within reach. That night we had a long discussion about strategy. It was obvious we should attempt a fast push to the summit and back, but we wondered if we should rest for a day to maximize our chances. The discussion was long, and each of us took part, examining the pros and cons. The weather seemed to be stable, and finally we decided to rest.

Then, as we settled in the sleeping bags, Laddy suddenly exclaimed, "Let's go for it tomorrow!" In unison we all instantly agreed.

The next day was full of exciting climbing: ice-choked chimneys where the only possible anchor was a body belay atop a chockstone; exposed slabs connecting cracks; golden sun-burnt granite. As we rose above the surrounding peaks, we could see unfamiliar walls and glaciers cascading down from the continental plateau. The fjord's dark blue twinkled with pieces of ice reflecting the sun. As we topped out, frosty clouds engulfed the mountain in a deep gray cape, but still we lingered on the western summit of Apostelen Tommelfinger, savoring our success along with some of the delicious Swiss cheese. We wanted to stretch out this moment, to stay forever. But eventually we finished the cheese and slowly lowered into the clouds.

The next day the wall was covered in ice and unclimbable. We all congratulated Laddy on his sixth sense—our planned rest day would have cost us the summit! But now we had spent five humid nights on the wall, and my sleeping bag was an amorphous mass of soggy down. I felt like a gutter dog. Thirty-something rappels were necessary to reach the glacier. We had been quick enough that we could allow ourselves the luxury of two days' rest before sitting in the kayaks again. I could already hear the war cries: "Paddle, paddle, PADDLE!!!" Fucking fair means.

OUR BODIES were worn out from two weeks of nonstop effort. Though I had learned much about kayaking and I could now keep up with the group, the 40-kilometer open-sea crossing between the Lindenow and Prins Christian Sund fjords promised another struggle for survival. One day after leaving our comfortable base camp, we faced a decision whether to commit to a 15-kilometer crossing of an open bay. The shore would be far from reach, and the wind was even stronger than on the way in, whipping salt spray into our faces and pushing us out toward the infinite horizon. A two-meter swell was capped with white froth, and the storm dug at its sides, making the waves dangerously steep. But the desire to put the danger behind us outweighed these concerns, and we decided to make a run for it.

After just a few minutes of paddling I realized a corner of my spray skirt had slipped off and water had gotten inside my kayak. A terrible mistake! The boat tipped dangerously, the water inside obliterating all balance and steering. I capsized three times in half an hour. For 15 minutes my kayak was completely immersed. Our attempts to pump out the water were abandoned as incoming waves filled the hull much quicker than I could pump. Laddy tugged me through the icebergs toward shore. You have five minutes to get out, then you're fish bait! On shore, trembling and blue-lipped, I was wrapped in a survival blanket and given warm water. It took many hours of shivering in a damp sleeping bag before I was warm enough to consider starting again.

Four more days of kayaking lay ahead, and naturally I was filled with apprehension. Although we had finished the most exposed part of the voyage, the northern wind stayed strong until the end, propelling us toward the finish but also making the navigation more demanding.

We arrived back at Aappilattoq 21 days after leaving. It seemed like so much more. Time had

dilated, like Dali's melting watches. The outside world had progressively and unconsciously faded from our minds. "Fair means" had been the cornerstone of our trip, and the game we played had pushed me to my limits. Yet the term still seemed insufficient compared with what we had lived through. The notion of fairness implies a standard, a rule, which seems totally contradictory to the freedom implied in mountaineering. Our approach and style had not been about rules but about letting go, leaving the constraints and shackles of daily lives in our wake. We'd been immersed in a dreamy world where the absurdity of worldly needs was replaced by something much more basic. Such an immersion takes time...and distance.

Summary: First ascent of Metrophobia (1,700m, 7a A2+ 120° ice) on the southwest face of the ca 2,100m western summit of Apostelen Tommelfinger (a.k.a. Tiningnertok), by Christian Ledergerber, Fabio Lupo, Antoine Moineville, Silvan Schüpbach, and Jérôme Sullivan, July 29– August 4, 2016.

About the Author: Born in Los Angeles in 1983, Jérôme Sullivan moved to Bordeaux, France, as a child, giving him an early taste for traveling and exploration. He works as a mountain guide in Chamonix.

Images

The kayaking could be calm or even tedious, or it could be suddenly life-threatening in the same day.

Arriving below Apostelen Tommelfinger after a week of paddling.

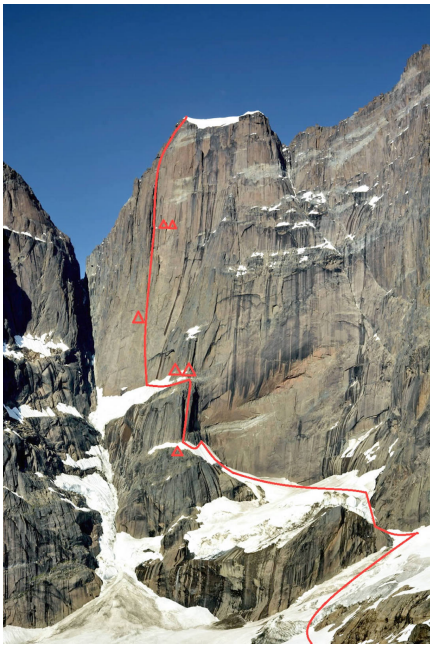
Arriving below Apostelen Tommelfinger after a week of paddling.

Crossing the glacier to reach the upper wall.

The second bivy. Packing portaledges wasn’t an option in kayaks.

Celebrating on the western summit of Apostelen Tommelfinger.

The wet bivouac during the descent.



The line of Metrophobia to the west summit of Apostelen Tommelfinger. The main peak, first climbed in 1975, via the south pillar, is out of picture to the right.

Climbing toward the 100-meter serac wall guarding the route. “Had we not just paddled for seven days, I would have turned around immediately,” the author wrote.

Silvan Schüpbach leading the overhanging ice of the glacier with only four screws available for 40 meters of climbing.

Fabio Lupo leading one of the first pitches on the headwall above the upper glacier.

The author after capsizing three times in half an hour during the return voyage.

The seven-day kayaking approach covered 170 kilometers, some of it across open ocean.

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