



AAC Publications

Slovak Direct

Climbing a Legendary Route on Denali

IT WAS JUNE 1 and Chantel Astorga and I were making our way up the East Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier under clear skies. The expansive south face of Denali emerged as we rounded a corner, and the mighty Slovak Direct, rising nearly 9,000 feet to the highest point in North America, just to the right of the Cassin Ridge, came into view. Just over one year earlier, we had stood in this same spot, ready to attempt the Slovak. After a day and a half of climbing, 4,000 feet up the wall, a huge storm rolled in. We retreated to a safe bivy in a bergschrund at 14,500 feet, still about 3,000 feet above the foot of the face, and waited out the storm for 24 hours, until a small break in the weather allowed us to continue our descent.

Once back on firm ground, Chantel and I sat on our packs, rehydrating and chatting about what we had just experienced. We both felt relieved to have escaped the storm but bummed to have been shut down by weather. We knew we had the ability to climb this route, and the fire inside was burning strong. We made a pact right then to return the following year and finish what we'd started.

Chantel and I met in 2010, when we were both guiding on Denali, but it wasn't until the spring of 2016 that we started making plans to climb together. Chantel was interested in Mt. Foraker's Infinite Spur, and I was interested in the Slovak Direct. After some deliberation, we decided to try the Slovak the following year. This route was first climbed in May 1984 by Blažej Adam, František Korl, and Tono Križo of Slovakia. The team placed 150 rock pitons during their 11-day ascent and descended the South Buttress. The route they created is considered one of the most difficult on Denali (20,310 feet). By 2016, 32 years after the first ascent, only half a dozen more teams had succeeded.

After our first attempt on the Slovak, Chantel and I came back even more mentally and physically prepared. In October 2017, the two of us and my husband, Jason Thompson, had topped out on the previously unclimbed southwest face of Nilkantha (6,596m) in the Garhwal region of India. We named our route Obscured Perception (1,400m, VI WI5 M6 A0 70°). Succeeding on such a big route in the Himalaya gave Chantel and me the needed familiarity and confidence to head back to Alaska together.

We flew onto the Kahiltna on May 13, giving ourselves six weeks on Denali to acclimatize and wait for a good weather window. We had timed our departure just right, as a recent 10-day storm had dropped up to 12 feet of snow in certain areas of the Alaska Range, and we arrived soon after this mega-storm cleared. However, unsettled weather still hung over the range, and it took us longer than expected to make our way to the 14,000-foot camp on the West Buttress of Denali. Knowing that we'd given ourselves plenty of time, we appreciated the slow pace up the mountain, enjoying powder skiing and spending time with friends along the way.

Once we made it to 14,000 feet and established our base camp for the coming weeks, we started the process of acclimatizing by climbing and skiing on the West Buttress and West Rib. I made it to the summit once during this process and also skied multiple days from 17,000 feet. At the end of May, we got word that a high-pressure system was moving over the mountain. We felt acclimatized and strong. We rested two days before skiing down to the base of Ski Hill, where we'd left a cache of gear. The next day, under cold, clear skies, we started the long walk up the East Fork of the Kahiltna, spirits high for the good weather and our chance for redemption.

At 4 a.m. on June 2, we awoke to clear, calm skies and got the final word from Chantel's boyfriend to "Go like Valentino"—a reference to Valentino Rossi, an Italian motorcycle racer. By 6 a.m. we were crossing the bergschrund and moving together, motoring up the first 1,000 feet of low-angle snow climbing. I felt the cold air filling my lungs and sensed the strength in my legs as we climbed toward the first crux—I had anticipated these sensations nearly every day since we'd bailed the year before.

We uncoiled our single rope at the start of a tricky rightward traverse. Depending upon the year and snow level, this featureless slab of granite can be both difficult to climb and to protect. But the hardest stretch, about 80 feet long, was in good shape for us, with supportable snow and ice over the rock, even giving us a few cam placements to protect the follower. Chantel delicately made her way across the traverse and brought me over, and then we simul-climbed the rest of the 700-foot traverse to the base of a granite wall, where the route reared upward. The WI6 ice pitch above is another crux of the first day on this route, with anything from steep water ice to choss and unconsolidated sn'ice. Unfortunately, we had the latter. Chantel left her pack to haul once she'd finished the steep terrain, and she carefully navigated the bad protection, loose rock, and rotten ice to complete the pitch.

I took the lead for a few more difficult mixed pitches, and then 1,000 feet of snow wallowing brought us to the bivy site at 14,500 feet in a bergschrund. We set up our tent and made some water before lying down. We'd been told this would be the only comfortable bivy on the route, and we were happy to have a few hours to rest and relax.

We awoke early the next morning to heavy spindrift falling down the nearly 6,000 feet of slope still above us. Once the sun hit the upper mountain, however, the spindrift subsided. Moderate ice and mixed terrain got us to the steep and intimidating rock pitch that had been our high point the year before. I felt nervous standing at the base. During the previous attempt, the spindrift had been so intense on this pitch that Chantel's lower body was buried with snow as she belayed. I had to put my head down and brace myself from the fire hose of snow. It was pretty disappointing to feel that I wasn't strong enough to lead that pitch, in those conditions, but in the end we made the right decision to turn around.

This year was different. Racking up below the intimidating pitch, I felt a strong sense of confidence. With a very patient belay from Chantel, I carefully made it through and found a good belay a full rope length above. Once Chantel arrived at my stance, we realized that we were off route and needed to be more to the right. Luckily we were able to trend right on the next pitch to gain the correct corner system and not lose any elevation.

Soon we arrived at the base of the impressive dihedral system we had seen in so many pictures, with a massive granite wall on the left and a small climber tackling a steep pitch of perfect water ice in the back of the corner. It was those photos that had first attracted me to the Slovak years before. The sun had left us and the temperature was dropping. I led us up amazing and strenuous water ice for a few rope lengths as Chantel shivered at the belays below. Finally, around four in the morning, we topped out the corner system and chopped a ledge just big enough for us to sit in our shared sleeping bag for a few hours. No sleep was had, but a little rest, water, and a few laughs went a long way.

The warm sun encouraged us out of our bag. Just above was the final rock crux, a steep A2 pitch at 15,100 feet that climbs directly up rock to the right of the 5.9 X "Ramp Pitch" followed by early parties up the Slovak. Chantel has a strong background in El Cap speed climbing, so this moderate aid pitch went quickly and smoothly for her. After one more difficult mixed pitch, we were through the majority of the technical climbing on the route.

Our weather forecast had predicted that we would encounter a strong pulse of weather that day, but until that point the day had been sunny and calm, and we started to think the forecast might be wrong. Unfortunately, as we made our way up moderate mixed terrain, the visibility started to

deteriorate, the snow started to come down, and the temperatures dropped well below zero Fahrenheit.

As the storm reached full throttle, we were in a total whiteout, climbing low-angle terrain right next to the giant active serac band called Big Bertha. We couldn't see Bertha, but we could hear her creaking and cracking, and our hearts beat faster, hoping we were far out of the line of fire. Cold, wet, and exhausted, we fought our way up the final technical pitch sometime around midnight. Although we were psyched, we knew we had to keep going to find any sort of protection from this storm. Under strong winds and blowing snow, we coiled the rope and put our heads down, plodding up knee-deep snow for an hour or so until we found a protected flat spot near the Cassin Ridge around 3 a.m. We quickly set up the tent, tossed our stuff inside, and jumped in. After being on the go for 33 hours, with very little food and water, exhaustion and relief lulled us to sleep.

We awoke a few hours later to the sun hitting our tent. All we had left was 3,500 feet of snow walking to the summit of Denali. With our gear littering our little bivy platform, we brewed water and ate the last of our quality food, savoring this moment of relaxation and calm, the intensity of the previous days slowing letting go.

At 6 p.m. on June 5, Chantel and I stood on the summit of Denali, a place we had both been many times before, but this time feeling the sense of accomplishment and peace we'd earned after making the ninth known ascent of the Slovak Direct and the first female ascent of the route. Filled with new energy, we ran and laughed our way back to 14,000-foot camp in just four hours, reaching our tent there at 10:30 p.m. We each lay in our own sleeping bag on big inflatable pads, talking and giggling like two little girls having a sleepover, until our eyelids grew heavier and we found ourselves overtaken by sleep.

Summary: Ascent of the Slovak Direct on Denali (ca 2,700m, Alaska Grade 6 and approximately WI6 M6+ A2 by the line followed), June 2–5, 2018, by Chantel Astorga and Anne Gilbert Chase (both USA). This was the first female ascent of the route and perhaps the most difficult Alaska Range ascent yet by an all-female team. Chase spoke at length about this climb in an interview for episode nine of the AAJ's Cutting Edge podcast (see link below).

About the Author: Anne Gilbert Chase, 34, is a professional alpinist and registered nurse finding balance between a life in the mountains and a life at home in Bozeman, Montana, where she lives with her husband, Jason Thompson, and cat, Nili.

Images



A delicate traverse toward the first step crux of the climb.



Chantel Astorga leads steep mixed on day one of the Slovak Direct.



The elegant icy corners in the heart of the wall.



Starting the third day of the climb, high over the East Fork of the Kahiltna Glacier. The second bivouac was in the small, snowy saddle in front of the rock point just below the climber.



Astorga leading the A2 rock pitch at 15,100 feet, the key to the upper slopes of the south face.



Anne Gilbert Chase (left) and Chantel Astorga after completing the Slovak Direct to Denali's summit.



Anne Gilbert Chase leads the difficult rock pitch above the first bivouac, the climbers' high point during their 2017 attempt.



The Slovak Direct (Adam-Korl-Križo, 1984) ascends about 2,700 meters on Denali's south face, finishing on the Cassin Ridge. The Astorga-Chase bivouacs are marked.

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