



AAC Publications

Princess Louisa Inlet Wall, Journey to the Center of the Earth

Canada, British Columbia, Coast Mountains, Princess Louisa Inlet

The Princess Louisa Inlet Wall, rising about 1,400 meters at the head of a fjord off Jervis Inlet. (1) PLI Trail (17 pitches, ED1/2 V 5.10+, Brodie-Rowat, 2002). (2) Journey to the Center of the Earth (25 pitches, VI 5.10+ C2, Besen-Heinrich, 2019). Neither party reached the summit, which may be unclimbed. Photo by Noah Besen

Inspired by a story in the 2018 AAJ, which heralded unclimbed walls along the BC coast, I had been curing my winter blues with virtual flights through Google Earth. On the last day of 2018, I stumbled onto a low-res photo of a hulking mass of swamp and stone geotagged to Princess Louisa Inlet.

Research revealed this wall to be 1,400m tall, with only one known route: PLI Trail (17 pitches, ED1/2 V 5.10+), established by John Brodie and Peter Rowat over the course of nearly two decades, and ending on a prominent pinnacalce about halfway up the wall. Interest hastily morphed into a foolhardy obsession for me and Noah Besen, my partner for this project.

Eight months later, in August 2019, we stood beneath that wall with our necks craning to see the granite dissolve into roiling cloud far above. With only a few Yosemite trade walls between us and not a single first ascent, we had gotten so caught up in scheming and dreaming that we neglected reality until we were starkly in it. We blundered ourselves and our gear to the base over three days, openly wondering what the hell we were doing there.

The wall looked horribly uninviting from below—all we could see was moss and dirt—but the rock was actually quite solid and compact. Unfortunately, we were largely forced to avoid the cleanest stone, since our bolt kit had been seized by a ranger immediately upon arriving in Princess Louisa Marine Provincial Park. Instead, we stuck to the few continuous cracks we could find, which tended to be packed with dirt, mud, and flora.

Much to our delight, the first four low-angle pitches went well. We fixed 180m of rope to a large ledge and returned to the ground to celebrate our first success and wait out some rain headed our way. When we woke from triumphant dreams, we were floating. Literally. We had pitched our tent in a waterway, and now we crashed through a sudden torrent to collect our flotsam. Cell phones and toilet paper were the only casualties. After moving camp out of the river, we spent the day canoodling like newts in a tent with no fly.

We dried out and continued to purchase passage up the wall with toil and fret. Pitch six (5.10+) presented our first real challenge: a steep stemming corner split by a turfy tips flare. Intimidated, I tried to treat it like any other pitch, except it was unlike anything I'd ever done. All holds and gear placements required constant and mostly fruitless excavation with fingernails from strenuous stances. The physical pump and mental frenzy crescendoed quickly, and I was barely able to rest on a meager cam for a few seconds before it ripped and sent me down to the belay. The only other piece, a number 0 C3 cam, held.

Seven days in and halfway through our trip, we had fixed all six of our ropes up roughly 300m (about one-third) of the wall. A good forecast forbade surrender and obliged us to commit to the wall with a few days of food, two gallons of water, and little confidence in success. We ascended the lines one last time before throwing them to the ground. Over the next three days we aided hand cracks running with muck, freed fingertip flares filled with filth, squirmed up an offwidth walled with moss, slurped from puddles, broke a gear loop, backflopped onto a slab, and loved every goddamn second of it. With

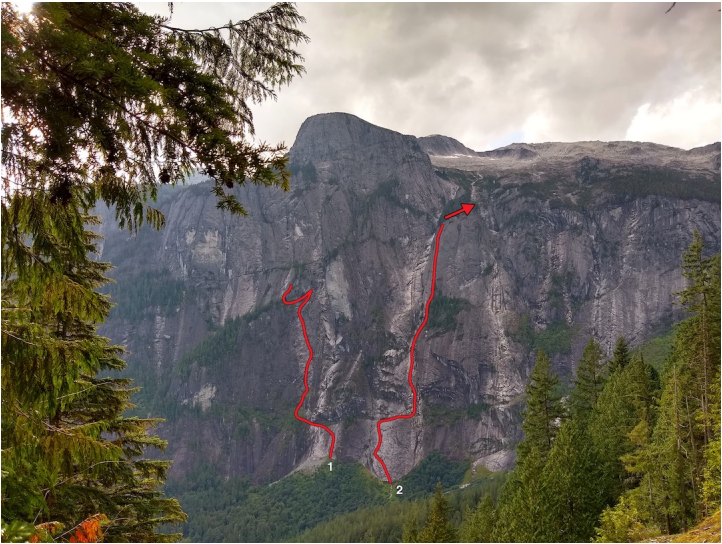
each foot we climbed we became more confident, and eventually we found ourselves in a forest atop a shoulder of the main wall, with 25 pitches below us. We had been bumbling fools at the base of the wall, and we still were 1,000m higher. But naivete may have been our greatest virtue—a smarter team could not have climbed this sodden wall because a smarter team would never have come.

We hadn't thought about how to get down, as we hadn't thought we'd get up in the first place. Rappelling seemed a dangerous, expensive, and time-consuming chore that would cover the mountain with trash, so we opted to "walk off" instead. We spent the next 18 hours covering the eight miles back to camp, laden like mules and negotiating a maze of granite terraces, an unexpected glacier, and a consequential hanging talus field. We lost our minds and our bodies but thankfully not our way, and reached the dock suffering only a golfball-size welt, a sprained MCL, and a misaligned patella. Next time we'd rappel.

All in all, our route, Journey to the Center of the Earth (1,000m, VI 5.10+ C2), was characterized by dirty finger cracks that were free climbed around 5.10 and muddy hand cracks or dusty seams that were aided up to C2 (the clean 5.10+ offwidth battle on pitch 23 being a notable exception). Despite our generally poor climbing style, we left the face as we found it, placing no bolts and leaving no anchors, tat, or fixed gear behind.

– Kevin Heinrich, USA

Images



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Noah Besen following pitch six (5.10+) of Journey to the Center of the Earth (1,000m, VI 5.10+ C2) on the Princess Louisa Inlet Wall in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia.



Clouds clear as Noah Besen settles in for his and Kevin Heinrich's first night on Journey to the Center of the Earth (1,000m, VI, 5.10+ C2) on the Princess Louisa Inlet Wall.



Noah Besen peers into the maw while cleaning the second crux (pitch 23, 5.10+) of Journey to the Center of the Earth (1,000m, VI, 5.10+ C2) on the Princess Louisa Inlet Wall in the Coast Mountains of British Columbia.

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