



AAC Publications

Mt. Temple, North Face, Stringing Up the Lights

Canada, Alberta, Canadian Rockies

An overview of routes on the north face of Mt. Temple (3,544m), showing the new line Stringing Up the Lights (1,200m, WI4+ M3+ R) in red. The original Elzinga-Miller (north ridge) is green, the modern Elzinga-Miller is yellow (many people who do it nowadays bail out left onto snow slopes rather than following the ridge proper to reduce overhead exposure), the Greenwood-Locke is light blue, and the Greenwood-Jones is white.

I lay in my van as night fell on October 16 with nervousness in my stomach. Taylor Sullivan had worked a six-day week rigging Christmas lights in Calgary and wouldn't arrive until late. He'd spotted a beautiful vein of ice slithering down the north face of Mt. Temple (3,544m). It was probably formed by serac activity, as he'd never seen it before, despite living nearby.

We were inspired, but our limited experience on big Rockies walls and huge overhanging seracs made us feel inadequate and fearful. As a result, the easier, safer Elzinga-Miller (1974), which gains the north ridge to the left of the north face headwall, was our main plan, but we'd packed enough gear to keep the unclimbed and aesthetic direct line to the right as an option.

At 4 a.m. on October 17, a bang on the door and blinding torchlight woke me. Fear turned to action, and dawn found us entering the Dolphin Couloir. Melt-freeze sn'ice saw us gain elevation quickly through stellar Scottish-style mixed pitches: tools in plastic ice and cams in splitter quartzite cracks. We soloed steep rock moves around a wind lip, finding our rhythm as I led the technical pitches and Taylor punched tracks through snow.

As we arrived at the top of the Dolphin snowfield, the October sky was clear blue and the mountain was sheltering us from strong southwesterly winds. A strenuous dry pitch took us to the decision point: escape technical difficulty and objective hazard by continuing on the ridge or head directly up the gorgeous tongue of ice that weaved up through the headwall and its ominous crowning seracs. With conditions near perfect and adrenaline in our veins, recklessness prevailed.

True to Rockies form, the first pitches of "ice" turned out to be unconsolidated crud on a chossy limestone band. About 150m of thin cascading ice, half a stubby thick, followed. The climbing wasn't steep, but insecure placements, illu- sory protection, and nonexistent belay anchors shredded our nerves. Then, midway through an unprotected simul-climb, a huge rockfall released above, sending microwave-size blocks rattling down the gully and forcing us to dive for cover. Dark- ness was closing in, the steep ice above looked cruxy, and we were tempted to retreat, but poor rappel options made continuing up the only choice.

As I led off, I found with relief that the ice thickened and the rock regained quality. Although progress was slow as night fell, temperatures dropped, and fatigue built, we were treated to fantastic climbing. First, a near-vertical WI4+ ice-choked gully, narrow enough for crampons to stem out wildly on the rock either side. Then, a thick smear of ice, which weaved up a slab and corner system and improbably around a roof.

Several snow and ice pitches later, we were ascending an alleyway through a maze of house-size seracs, clamber- ing onto a leaning block to escape the face, and plodding around crevasses to the summit. Despite a mammoth nighttime descent ahead, the relief to be out from under seracs was palpable. The wind had eased, and in the calm silence, the Rockies spread out beneath us, bathed in

moonlight. Self-doubt evaporated—we'd done it: Stringing Up the Lights (1,200m, WI5 M4 R), with 350m of new technical terrain, done in a 28-hour single push.

Another dawn broke before we returned to civilization. Taylor hotfooted to Calgary for another day of stringing up the lights as I contemplated how mountains are one of the few remaining environments which allow us to be reckless, where those who know better can't stop you from risking your life. We accepted huge risks, but in an age of mountain athletes and professionals, the fact that a full-time accountant and Christmas light-rigger can still put up a quality line in a setting like Temple's north face shows how many incredible, accessible routes are still to be climbed, and how anyone can dream of climbing them.

— Chris Petrauskas, Canada

Route Description

Pitch one: From the upper left corner of the Dolphin snowfield, climb through a deceptively steep band of rock (M3+) to another smaller snowfield. From here you can either follow the traditional Elzinga-Miller Route to the north ridge or do an easier/safer variation of the Elzinga-Miller by traversing left around the ridge on a narrow ledge/shale band if you want a less involved day.

Pitch two: Otherwise, head for the striking, beautiful, ice/mixed gulley system which climbs the full length of the headwall by stepping right and up (M3).

Pitches three to five: Climb three pitches of thin icefalls (AI3) and sparsely protected mixed ground (M3 R) to reach a small snowfield beneath a steep, long, narrow gully of ice.

Pitch six: Climb the narrow gully of ice (crux) in two short or one long pitch. The pitch steepens and narrows higher up, but luckily the ice here is much thicker for protection and you can stem out across the rock chimney in some wild positions (WI4+).

Pitch seven: Traverse right into the next icefall system, climbing up a cool left-facing, steepening corner, with tools in ice smears, rock gear in the corner crack, and front points stemmed out left onto the rock slab (M3+). Belay beneath a steep step of thick water ice.

Pitch eight: Climb the steep headwall of ice (WI4) before skirting left beneath a wall of rock.

Pitch nine: Climb through final ice smears into a low-angled alleyway of ice flanked by seracs (WI2).

Pitch ten: Work up and left and exit onto the summit slope with a final steep move through a serac (WI2).

Images



Chris Petrauskas traversing one pitch above the Dolphin snowfield where the new line Stringing Up the Lights (1,200m, WI4+ M3+ R) and the Elzinga-Miller split right and left.



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Taylor Sullivan climbing steep ice on pitch five of Stringing Up the Lights (1,200m, WI4+ M3+ R) on the north face of Mt. Temple.



Taylor Sullivan climbing in the upper section of the Dolphin Couloir, north face of Mt. Temple.



Chris Petrauskas climbing thin cascading ice on pitch three of Stringing Up the Lights (1,200m, WI4+ M3+ R) on the north face of Mt. Temple.



The north face of Mt. Temple the day before the first ascent of Stringing Up the Lights (1,200m, WI4+ M3+ R).

Article Details

Author	Chris Petruskas
Publication	AAJ
Volume	64
Issue	96
Page	175
Copyright Date	2022
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions