



Sixty-One Sleeps: A Big-Wall Free Ascent and Other Greenland Adventures

Greenland, West Greenland

My world is damp, my sleeping bag is limp and clammy, I can't remember the last time I could feel my toes. Every few seconds, I hear the drip from the fly onto the inside of our portaledge. My phone and Kindle are both dead, probably waterlogged. We're camped on the side of Qaersorssuaq, a 900-meter wall rising directly from the Arctic Ocean on the west coast of Greenland. It's day three stuck inside the portaledges in a storm, and there's nothing to do but wait.

After over a month's journey by inflatable sea kayak just to get to the wall, then two weeks of fixing ropes and stocking our wall camp, we have about seven days of supplies to make this thing happen...or not. Outside is gray, freezing mist—just our little patch of wall with no sky above and no sea below. Occasionally the clouds part and we get a glimpse of an iceberg in the fjord, 600 meters below. At least water is not an issue—we can collect a large drybag of the stuff in about ten seconds just by holding it against the waterfall cascading down our route.

My wife, Bronwyn, is lying on her back next to me, motionless, staring straight up at the portaledge ceiling. I hear movement in our friends' Kelsey and Angela's ledge, six feet above. I speak loudly above the wind: "Hey, girls, I'm thinking about...going climbing?"

Six weeks earlier, our team of six had been dropped off on a beach 300 kilometers south of the island of Qaersorssuaq with half a metric ton of food and equipment. As Paaluk Kreutzmann, our local outfitter, turned his boat around and powered off into the distance, I wondered if we had bitten off more than we could chew. Then, when two of our six inflatable kayaks ripped at the seams the next day, it felt like the whole thing might be over before it really began.

Two days of frantic sewing later, we were back in the water with six fully functional inflatable kayaks and six semi-functional non-inflatable humans: Bronwyn, me, and our friends Zack Goldberg-Poch, Jaron Pham, Angela Vanwiemeersch, and Kelsey Watts. All of us, except for Angela, live in Squamish, British Columbia.

As we traveled, I gradually felt my previous life fading into the background. The 24-hour Arctic daylight meant we weren't restricted to a normal schedule. We timed our movements by the wind and the tides, putting in long hours of paddling when the conditions were good and resting when the wind turned against us. When each sleep-wake cycle is a few hours longer than 24 hours, you eventually "lose" entire days. Over 65 calendar days in Greenland, we had 61 sleeps!

I'd been to this area before—nine years earlier, as a fresh-faced big-wall newbie. It was a life-changing trip, slingshotting me into adventure climbing, with a slight detour to (barely) earn my Ph.D. in mathematics in 2015. During that trip, standing wide-eyed on top of the Horn of Upernavik during a 31-hour continuous summit push with my friend Ian Faulkner, I looked north to where endless fjords stretched to the horizon, lined by the biggest cliffs I had ever seen. This trip was about coming back under my own steam to visit those fjords, even if just to see what they were like.

Using Google Earth, I had found a sneak route, an inside passage, that would take us from where I'd

been in 2013, close to the town of Uummannaq, all the way to the town of Upernavik, 300 kilometers to the north. The route wound through endless fjords and channels, but at one crucial point the ocean ran out—we would have to portage up and over a 20-kilometer overland section, the biggest question mark of our journey.

Our final destination was Qaersorssuaq, an island wall I had spent the past 12 months keenly researching. While there were no good photographs of the wall online, a few tantalizing words in the 2002 AAJ by Jia Condon (also a Squamish resident) were enough to pique my interest. I reached out to Jia, and he sent me a few photos. Holy cow! Qaersorssuaq looked like it had the best rock I'd seen anywhere in Greenland, and it had never seen a free ascent.

After many days of paddling, we were delighted to travel the final two days up Ukkusissat Fjord using an improvised tarp-sail in a strong tailwind. With our six boats lashed together, we rode the wind to the head of the fjord, touched paddles to sand, and stepped into shallow water. We found ourselves in a wide, tidal river delta, a constantly shifting landscape of braided streams, mud, and quicksand. The next two days were spent wading upstream through thigh-deep glacial meltwater, towing the boats behind us—our feet were numb, even with full dry suits.

The river delta soon gave way to rocky tundra and beautiful, isolated lakes. This was perhaps the most remote part of our trip—nobody home for many kilometers in every direction, just us and a herd of musk oxen that watched us calmly from across the valley.

We had so much stuff—food, climbing gear, paddling gear, camping gear, cooking gear—that we had to portage three loads each. So those 20 kilometers of overland travel turned into 100-plus kilometers, mostly done with extremely heavy loads. We paddled lakes whenever possible. The low-level background threat of polar bears felt real and constant. Each night we slept inside our trip-wire system: thin fishing line that would trigger a blank shotgun shell if a bear pushed against the line, hopefully both scaring the bear and waking us up. Jaron, our friend and cameraman, whose primary role was to document the trip, kept a shotgun under his pillow.

I don't love using terms like "fair means," "self-propelled," or "self-supported" to describe trips like these. Ultimately, it's all arbitrary. Did you fly in from somewhere? Did you build your own kayaks? Grow your own food? For me, the reason to do a trip like this is not to tick a box in someone else's style rule book; instead, it's to have a less grandiose, more personal experience.

I chose to go with this particular group because I knew we aligned on the experiences we were seeking: How do we want to feel? How do we want to interact with the places we visit? For all of us, the goals were to experience the landscape on its own terms. To move slowly. To feel small. A small group of friends in a giant landscape.

Arriving at the wall a full month after we started our journey, on top of a year of planning, I felt very determined. Camped opposite Qaersorssuaq, we watched intently as the light moved across the face, revealing different features. The base of the wall was a huge apron, leading to a steep golden headwall. The full wall was about the same size as El Cap, with a similarly confounding sense of scale: Is that a finger crack—or an offwidth? One pitch to connect those features—or five? In the evening the wall glowed red, appearing inviting compared with the many chossy cliffs we had spent the last month paddling past.

In Greenlandic, Qaersorssuaq means "sheer cliff rising out of the water"; the cliff is generally known as Sanderson's Hope, but I prefer the local name. The formation had been aid climbed twice before, but never freed. There were three possible lines to try—the two aid lines and, to their right, a third, unclimbed option—and no obvious way to decide among them. For such an important decision,

it's funny how much it comes down to guesswork, imagination, and luck. After much deliberation, we

decided to go for the unclimbed line, a discontinuous crack system that, we hoped, led to the top. As our goals, we had: Don't die. Climb the mountain. See what we can free climb.

Before committing to the wall, we spent two weeks working on the lower route as teams of three: "Day Team" and "Night Team." Twenty-four hours a day, someone was doing something to either push the fixed ropes higher or ferry supplies to our high camp, while the other team slept at base camp across the fjord. We were overjoyed to find perfect splitter cracks, mostly low angle, 5.8 to 5.10, with solid, occasionally well-spaced gear. We'd sometimes lead with the ice axe to clean mud from the cracks, but everything up to our high camp went free and onsight. Above the portaledge camp, the angle kicked out and the character changed—it looked burly.

There is a moment of silence as I wait for the girls to respond.

"Are you serious?" asks Angela.

"I'm coming," says Kelsey.

Bronwyn, Kelsey, and I don full down suits underneath our raingear and start up the fixed lines, which stretch 200 meters above to the high point we'd reached before the storm.

Hanging by a thin strand anchored out of sight in the mist above me, suspended above the swirling clouds beneath my feet, I feel exposed. It's a serious place to be. Small things can quickly turn into major things up here, especially in these conditions. Self-care is key: Take the time to change layers each time you start or stop. Monitor your body temperature and energy levels. No mistakes.

Belayed by Kelsey, I start climbing. Soaking-wet rock. Freezing water running down my arms. It's times like these that the free climbing "game" starts to feel a bit silly. Why am I not weighting the cams? For some reason, though, the rules are so ingrained that I quest upward, almost unconsciously defaulting to free climbing mode, thrutching between slippery jams as the pump sets in. Years of practicing the "try hard," making a habit of giving 100 percent every time I tie in, allow me to tune out my outrageous position and find the flow. I'm fighting; I yell as I lurch to a sopping-wet jug, my hands numb.

I build a belay and lean against the wall, panting. The pitch was probably 5.11-, but in these conditions it felt like my absolute limit. Maybe this is just nuts? I feel dismayed that, after giving absolutely everything to get here and climb this wall, we might be defeated by the weather. But as I slump at the belay, I feel the light change. Behind me, the tops of the clouds are just visible, lit by bright sunlight. I've broken out above the storm! It feels surreal to be presented with this new landscape— like the view from an airplane as it rises above an overcast sky. Above, the rock is already drying, and I can see what looks like the summit a few pitches higher.

Kelsey and Bronwyn join me at the belay, gleeful after days of inaction. We can't believe our luck. I radio down to Zack, Angela, and Jaron, who are still at the portaledge camp.

"You guys have got to get up here— we're going to the summit!!!"

"You're joking, right? It's still raining," they radio back.

After some convincing, we persuade them to begin the long, slow jumar commute. As a team of six, we climb through the night, watching the sun set under the carpet of clouds. It gets cold, really cold, as we stagger onto the summit plateau. Standing on top in an icy wind, high above the clouds, I feel like we're on another planet—not a place for humans. But as a small group of friends, after an epic journey to get here, we get to enjoy this place for a few moments before we begin our descent.

SUMMARY: First ascent of Sea Barge Circus (900m, VI 5.11+) on the north-facing cliff of Qaersorssuaq (a.k.a. Sanderson's Hope) in West Greenland, by Jacob Cook, Zack Goldberg-Poch, Bronwyn Hodgins, Jaron Pham, Angela Vanwiemeersch, and Kelsey Watts, August 5–24, 2022. This also was the first free ascent of the wall. On the nearby Red Wall, Hodgins, Vanwiemeersch, and Watts established Time Is a Construct (400m, 5.11 A2), to the right of all other routes on the face, in a 50-hour push, with one "shiver bivy," August 1–2. Meanwhile, the other team members repeated Seagull's Garden (400m, 5.11+, Ditto-Favresse, 2010).

Along the way, on July 26, team members established Wears Your Paddle (250m, 5.11, Cook-Hodgins-Watts; 72.489767, -54.618616) and Fish are Friends (210m, 5.9+, Goldberg Poch-Pham-Vanwiemeersch; 72.489148, -54.576044).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Jacob Cook is a professional climber and mathematics professor, originally from London but now based in Squamish, where he works for the University of British Columbia.

Images



Paddling a heavily laden kayak along the stunning west coast of Greenland.



Bronwyn Hodgins navigating the Karrat Icefjord, near the abandoned town of Nuugaatsiaq, which was permanently evacuated following a landslide-triggered tsunami in 2017.



Angela Vanwiemeersch dragging her kayak upstream toward the long portage.



Seaside climbing on the west coast of Greenland.



Wall camp about 600 meters up the 900-meter face on Qaersorssuaq. The team was trapped here by a three-day storm before the final push for the summit.



Above the clouds at the wall camp on Qaersorssuaq.



Bronwyn Hodgins scoping the upper wall from the portaledge camp on Qaersorssuaq.



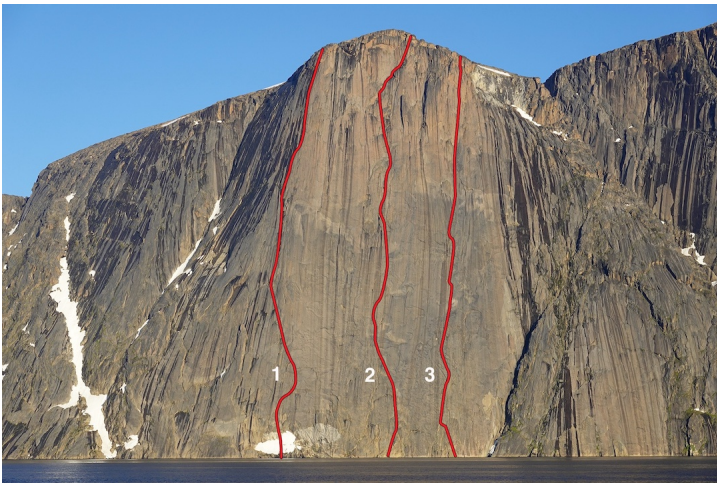
Bronwyn Hodgins during the summit push on Qaersorssuaq.



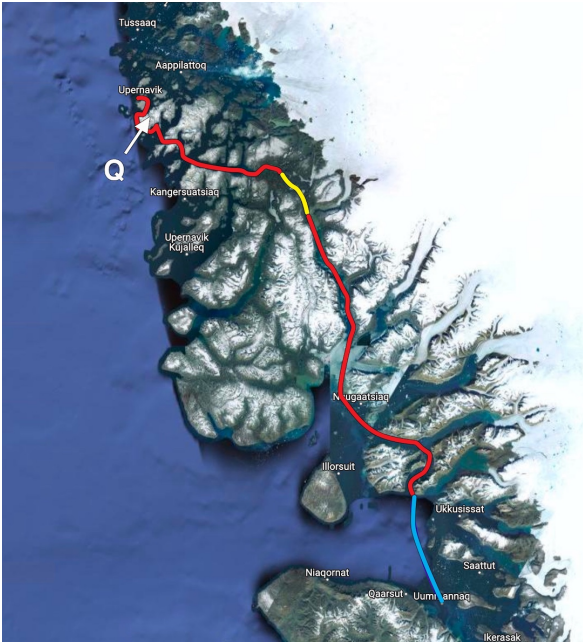
Kelsey Watts climbing perfect granite on the upper wall, belayed by Zack Goldberg-Poch.



Jacob Cook jamming up the north-facing wall of Qaersorssuaq.



The 900-meter cliff of Qaersorssuaq (a.k.a. Sanderson's Hope) rises out of the sea about 7.5 kilometers south of the village of Upernavik. (1) Down North (5.10+ A1), climbed in 2001 by Canadians Jia Condon, Greg Landreth, and Chris Romeskie, after sailing across the Labrador Sea from Newfoundland. The trio used only 15 points of aid. (2) Arctic First Born (E3 5c A3+), the first ascent of the wall, climbed in 2000 by Graham Austick, Paolo Paglino, and Alberto Zuchetti from a base camp on Rev. Bob Shepton's sailboat Dodo's Delight. They fixed ropes to 600 meters and then climbed to the summit in very poor conditions, with much of the wall covered in rime. (3) Sea Barge Circus (5.11+), the 2022 route and first free ascent of the wall, described in this article.



The team's journey from Uummannaq in the south to Upernavik. The blue line shows the boat transfer; the red lines show kayaking passages; the yellow line is the overland section; (Q) indicates the location of the Qaersorsuaq wall (a.k.a. Sanderson's Hope).

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