

Expedition Report Baffin Big Walls

“Arctic Monkeys”

Expedition Name:

Baffin Big Walls 2010

Expedition Dates:

1st May- 30th May 2010

Time in Field: 25 Days

Area of Expedition:

Country: Baffin Island, Canada

Region: Stewart Valley

Nearest Outport Clyde River (population approx 600)

Expedition Members and Contact details:

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I hope this report is useful for other people wishing to visit the area for further climbing and adventures. If you require any further information of our expedition please do not hesitate to contact any of the expedition members.

Aim of Expedition

The aim was to make the first ascent of an unclimbed peak and wall on the southern side of Stewart Valley, off the North East coast of Baffin Island (Canadian Territories).

The climbing anticipated was to be hard free climbing with technical aid climbing. The area we chose to go to has some of the biggest unclimbed walls on the planet. The area is very remote and home to some of the most impressive photogenic and inspiring peaks in the world. We chose to go in May and to skidoo access to our mountain range, this meant cold weather however stable and reasonably quick access over the frozen sea ice.

We aimed for some of the biggest challenges left for the adventurous big wall climbers. The expedition was a success with the first ascent of an unclimbed peak via a new big wall route named "Arctic Monkeys". Further Details can be found in section "The Climb".

Expedition Summary

On 24th May 2010, Mike 'Twid' Turner, Stuart McAleese and Mark Thomas completed their objective of making the first ascent of a previously unnamed peak and Big Wall in the Stewart Valley, Baffin Island.

The wall is located in Sail Peaks, an area full of gigantic rock faces, many of which have never been scaled. This is the first time a UK team has made a first ascent here and indeed are one of only a handful of teams world-wide to even attempt such a climb.

In 1977 a Canadian team was the first on record to climb in the area, scaling 22 peaks and naming one of the summits Sail Peak.

Then in 1998 a US team climbed and filmed the North East Face of a neighboring summit to Sail Peak, naming it Great Sail Peak. Rum, Sodomy and the Lash (VI 5.10 A4+) was their Big Wall route, but they came back with film of a wall to the east which became known as the Citadel. The Citadel was climbed the following year by a team which included Twid and Louise Turner (née Thomas), creating Endless Day (900m: 25 pitches: VI A3+).

Most recently a Russian 5-person team succeeded in establishing a second route on Great Sail (1,150m: VI A4 5.11 85-90°) with Valeri Rozov spectacularly base-jumping from the top.

The team spent 18 consecutive nights on the face. Contrary to expectations, the weather was often harsh with driving snow and high winds hampering the climb at times.

Warming water for hot drinks and rehydrating meals took an hour and a half before it reached a temperature which was usable, whilst belaying required two duvet jackets to combat the extreme cold. The team ran out of fuel and food on the last day before they made the summit but decided to press on. They were rewarded with bright sunshine as they topped out. Temperatures averaged around -20°C for much of the expedition, warming considerably on the last day.

Late spring is the ideal time of year to climb in this area. The weather was generally stable and access by skidoo across the frozen fjord is relatively easy. Any earlier is too cold, any later and there is the risk of the ice starting to thaw making it difficult to get out.

As it was, an early thaw did begin to occur. With the skidoo unable to reach base camp the team opted to make a quick escape, having to wade through freezing slush for around 25 kilometers to meet their Inuit drivers.

Expedition Logistics and Trip planning

How to get to Baffin Island:

By Air from Montreal, Edmonton as Ottawa to Iqaluit using First Air Canadian North. We traveled via Ottawa to Iqaluit using First Air. From Iqaluit there are flights to villages such as Clyde River. From Clyde River we used out agent and his workers to gain us access to the steward valley. This was around 9 hours a full day. The journey was very cold but spectacular, taking you past all the big wall climbing venues and huge open Fjords.

Once in at the wall we arranged a definite pick up date, 1 or 2 day prior our flight out of Clyde River was advised. A satellite phone was taken by the expedition and this was used to stay in contact with our agent in Clyde River.

Weather:

The weather is essentially a polar desert with a low annual precipitation. It can be often foggy and socked in but if it does precipitate, it is usually not more than a light shower or flurries. The winters are long, cold and dark and the summers short. The weather we experienced did range in the month we spent out there. It was very cold and dry in Clyde River on arrival and for most of the trip the average temperature was -20C each day with colder and warmer days.

In the valley whilst on the wall we did notice a pattern. If the weather come from the South West it seemed good, warm enough to climb and fairly dry. If the wind swung north, it was really cold, 30C which 1 day did shut us down. From the East was cold and snowy, from the South more snowy weather was experienced.

The early four days of the trip experienced settled weather, however, once on the wall it seemed to snow every day and maintained low temperatures. The summit day was the best day of the lot, with cloudless skies and warm temperatures in the sun.

As our wall faced North and the corner we were in faced East we got little sun, approx at 4pm onwards till around 3- 4 am. To cope with these cold temperatures we had to wear all of our gear all the time and climb with everything on.

Towards the end of the climb things did warm up a little but maybe this was the team just getting used to living in this cold place?

Polar Bears:

We were fortunate enough not to have any problems or encounters with any polar bears. We asked if any would enter the Stewart Valley and were told

unlikely. However once on the Walker Arm it's a difficult story with lots of seals and big open areas. Polar Bears weren't really a problem for us as we were living on the wall for most of the trip; however, we did have to walk out and about on the Walker arm where there was a greater threat.

On the east coast it is said to be foolish to travel without a weapon to protect yourself against polar bear attacks. While extremely in common, if the hunting has not been good and they are hungry! These carnivores will not hesitate to make a meal of you.

We obtained a gun license in the UK and when we got to Clyde River our agent made a rifle available to us.

Rescue:

Basically, there isn't any. Once "out there" you are completely committed to self reliant. If something was to go wrong, there is no one to call to come and get you. The Inuit would do what they can but would not go on technical terrain. For this reason it is good to go as teams of three or more and to have a good medical kit with experience and training of how to use it.

Navigation:

Compasses are unreliable this close to the North Pole, so a GPS would be more useful. The only map we had was a Google earth photo copy which proved successfully useful to navigate us out over 25km. I am sure maps could be found of this area.

Communication:

It is advised that no one should venture into the back country on Baffin, regardless of the season which has some type of communication. We carried a sat phone which we got from the UK with extra batteries. This is without doubt a very important piece of kit, and keeping the batteries warm is vital. Most of the time, they lived in my sleeping bag along with the phone.

Fuel/ Stores:

Our expedition took 2 stoves and spare parts for both stoves with extra fuel bottles. We had a primus and an MSR liquid fuel store. Both could be used with a hanging stove rig, for cooking and melting snow or ice on the wall. Gas is not an option as it is too cold, and getting hold of it in would be difficult. It is not easy to estimate how much fuel you are going to use but it's so important. It is advised to take as much as you can with you to base camp as this will give you confidence. When we were on the wall we would use one medium size fuel bottle per 2 days for the team of 3. When the temperature was very cold (-30 C) the fuel would even start to freeze; making it hard to preserve fuel on these days.

Further Information

Accommodation:

Ottawa Airport:

Happy Days Inn- (*near Ottawa Airport, with quick easy and free transport to and from the airport. Breakfast included with lots more options to eat nearby.*)

Clyde River:

Qammaq Hotel

Tel 897 924 6201

We camped on our first night in Clyde River which was fine- good acclimatization to the cold! On return we stayed with a friend of our agent who ran a little hostel.

Outfitters/ Agents:

Levi Palitnq Outfitting General Delivery, Clyde River, Nuna vnt XOA OEO

Tel 867 924 6514 levi@palitnqoutfitting.ca www.palitnqoutfitting.ca

Airlines:

First Air Ltd

Shops:

There is an REI in Ottawa which has all you may need. Also really useful and important were out fleece lined wellies which can be bought in most clothing shops and hardware shops in Ottawa. Top tip- on the ice and especially when in starts to thaw!! Great for wearing at base camp and generally hanging out in.

The Climb

The journey alone was enough to satisfy any adventurous climber's dreams. Standing at base camp looking up to the walls surrounding us was utterly amazing. We had been transported to the "Arctic Yosemite" with unclimbed walls everywhere. The rock looks to be superb quality and the walls sheer if not overhanging, with the average size of each wall to be 1200m!

We instantly know this was going to be a tough one, the conditions alone were challenging enough just to live in but to scale 1400m of vertical granite and survive these cold temperatures was going to be a rewarding experience!

Once at base camp, remote as hell, it felt like you were truly on your own, a proper adventure. This place made the Himalaya look accessible! Twid has been to the area before when he climbed "the endless day" so this took the edge of things a little.

It was obvious to us that climbing this wall was going to take a long time, so with time to spare that evening we did a load carry up to the difficult snow and ice at the base of the wall. With 24 hour day light we could afford to work most day well into night or until we were too hungry or tired to carry on.

Over the next 2 days we fixed all of our 400m of fixed rope to the base of the wall and established a porta ledge camp there. There were two options of potential routes to try. It was very soon that we decided to try the amazing crack/ corner line on the front of a huge pillar. The rock looked good and the line strong. This was important to us as we had limited time and as we all wanted to climb the amazing line straight to the summit, this was the obvious choice. The whole wall was unclimbed and with the line looking so strong, spirits were high.

During the next three days we stayed at base camp ferrying nearly all our food, fuel and equipment to our porta ledge camp at the base of the wall. The initial few pitches were a lot more involved and steeper than anticipated, with some loose rock and quite steep aiding. It was obvious for the time being anyway, with temperatures averaging out at -20/25C that free climbing was out of the question. We were forced to climb with all our gear on and belay after wearing two down jackets.

It wasn't long before we were living out of the porta ledges and committed to the wall. This made the leg work easier and allowed us to focus on the route rather than hauling lots of gear then climb a pitch. As a team of three, one person could have a later start and help later in the day. We were initially quite optimistic and hoped we could climb three pitches a day, however, due to the hard nature of each pitch and the length of time it took, we averaged out at 2 pitches a day for the entire trip/

We climbed every day with only one day off in 21 days; spending eighteen consecutive nights on porta ledges on the wall. We didn't aim to find a hard line and looked for the cleanest, purest line to climb. However, there were

times when the constant corner ran out and deviated and one these steep blank sections were hard technical aid climbing. Because of this the route acquired a harder grade.

We aimed for 60m pitches, however to keep things moving we found that this averaged out at 40 m with some pitches being 60 m. We climbed a total of 34 pitches to the summit with some easy ground as well. There were two hard sections that stand out. First the 'Capucin' pitch named after the Grand Capucin in Chamonix. As the quality of the rock was exactly the same! This was a slow hard section which involved some drilling, but mainly hooks, birdbeaks and rp's. This was felt to be A4 for 60m. The second higher on the wall slowed us right down and we named this pitch "birdbeaks for breakfasts" A4 60m.

Once the ropes were fixed completely we moved camp and established our second porta ledge camp approx 500m up the wall. Living on the wall was difficult; we took turns cooking and keeping things warm required discipline. Everything which needed to be warm, e.g. batteries, iPod, sat phone, gloves, socks) were either on us in pockets or lived in our sleeping bags.

Most of the climbing was clean aid with harder sections requiring technical aid. Some sections were climbed free however, this was difficult whilst wearing gloves, lots of clothing and plastic boots and very scary.

The quality of the rock was generally very good and with warmer, sunnier weather most would have amazing free climbing potential. We guess some sections would feel like E3/ E4 and the rest, harder.

There were highs and lows to the trip and I think living on the wall for the length of time we did was the hardest part. Just the sheer length and difficulty of both the weather and climbing dictated this time on the wall. It showed at some point every day with the summit day being the exception. Beautiful blue skies and no wind- perfect! A 24 hour day, we had little choice but to go for it as we had run out of food and fuel was close to empty. We climbed 8 pitches that day and topped out at around 4pm.

Due to the lack of food and fuel, we decided to abseil through the night and arrived at the base of the wall around 7.30am the following morning. We named the route:

Arctic Monkeys

Grade V1 A4, 1400m

Getting out from base camp too was difficult, due to the condition of the access to Stewart Valley. The Inuit's would not skidoo to us, forcing us to walk out. This meant a man haul of all our gear through the night for 25km, to the nearest point in which our Inuit friends could reach.

The conditions of the lake we were walking on can only be described as knee deep slush and required every kind of little energy we had left to get in time to meet our pick up. Thoroughly exhausted and completely committed, we managed to meet them 10 hours and 25km later at the Walker Arm.

Expeditions Costs

Income

MEF	£1450
BMC	£1800
Sports Council for Wales	£2000
Gino Watkins	£2000
Mark Clifford	£1000
Total =	£8250

(Flights International/ National (Canada) £6300 kindly covered by sponsors convergent).

Expenses

Agent Costs/ Skidoo travel	£ 1890
Sat Phone	£619
Food	£850
Equipment	£2427
UK Flights/ travel/ flight changes	£1157
Accommodation/ Food	£392
Further Equipment/ Miscellaneous/ Insurance	£1062
Total	£8397

Environmental Management:

It is a real privilege to visit areas like this and with that you always feel a great responsibility to preserve and protect them from any possible impact you may have on it. This was as always our aim, to minimize as much as possible. Our base camp rules were simple, leave no trace. To do this, we took out little waste with us and with our agents back to Clyde River where it can be disposed of correctly.

This was helped by the fact we spent few nights at base camp with the entire duration of the trip "on the wall". Whilst on the wall we carried all our litter out with only bolts being placed minimally for safety and abseil anchors. Minimal equipment was left on the wall due to 100m abseils.

Future Potential

It is said that this is the "final frontier" for the adventurous big wall climber- this is true! It is also said that "climbers' dream of climbing El Capitan, El Capitan climbers' dream of climbing in Baffin"- this is also true. The potential for climbing in Baffin is outstanding, with lots of unclimbed features, walls gullies and un-trodden terrain. Access to these areas is difficult and does require quite an involved expedition to get something done. This is the greatest challenge of an area like this, the living and surviving the conditions so rewarding. Climbing here in Baffin you can only feel privileged and one of the lucky ones- a true adventure!

Sponsors: The expedition would like to thank Convergent, Mountain Everest Foundation, The BMC, The Sports Council for Wales, The Gino Watkins Grant, The Mark Clifford grant, Mountain Equipment, DMM, Lyon Equipment, and Howies.

A special 'thank you' to all who sponsored this expedition. Without this help the expedition would not have been possible, Thank you.

Day to Day Diary- Written "On the Wall" During the Expedition by Mark Thomas

Sunday 2nd May

Twids house and pack

Monday 3rd May

Geneva airport in the Landy, fly to Frankfurt and to Ottawa, Cash Crisis! Shopping eat, late to bed.

Tuesday 4th May

Up at 5am; fly to Ottawa to Iqaluit, ripped off by cab driver! Twin prop plane to Clyde River, me Levi our agent, camped out of town.

Wednesday 5th May Sunny and clouds, -20C 20km wind.

Skidoo dudes Harvey Dominique and Freddy took us in. 7 Hours, cold and bumpy, moraine of doom! Arrive base camp 5pm. Set up tent and take first set of gear up the initial snow slope. Bed at 11pm.

Thursday 6th May Sunny, -20C, 15kmh

Carried more gear up and fixed 600m of line to the base of the route.

Friday 7th May Some sun, Cirrus, -10C 2kmh

Jumar up fixed ropes with big sacks including porta ledges. Twid led first pitch, then me up the 2nd pitch. Stu stripped and we abed down all the way to BC. Long day, bed at 12 am. 15 hour day.

Saturday 8th May Snow, - 20C, 2kmh

Jumar back up to high point with more gear. Me and Stu climbing, Stu on 3rd pitch, loose chimney. Twid fixing porta ledges. Me up 4th pitch, steep but good crack. Abbed down to base camp, Twid cooked, awesome feast. Bed 11pm.

Sunday 9th May Snow, some sun, 10C, 2kmh

Up at 7am, Polar Bear! Leaped out of bed with rifle, nothing to see. Big sack carry and jumar up to camp 1, me and Twid to climb. Stu cooked feast, Big fridge sized blocks hit approach route, scary. Night 1 in porta ledge city, rock fall and snowing hard all night.

Monday 10th May Big snow, -8C 5Kmh.

Up at 8am, whole wall plastered in snow and ice. Jug up ropes, Stu belay bunny, cold job today. Me doing breaks, bats and rp's+ very exciting day! Back down to camp 1, bed at 6.30 pm. Big scary cold day on the way.

Tuesday 11th May Snowing, flipping freezing! 15kmh

Snowed loads in the night. Stu, think we're gonna die! Avalanches pummelling the ledges all night. Up at 7.30am, dig out the kitchen, up the fixed ropes, me to finish off the pitch of doom. Done at 4.30 pm, then Twid through the crack, me to clean and back down to camp 1 at 8 pm. Another big scary day, 3 days for me to do the 60m pitch, "the Capucin Pitch!".

Wednesday 12th May Cloudy, freezing, -20C, 70kmh

Rough night. -25C. Snow on our porta ledge. Northerly wind. Sitting it out with numb toes in the porta ledge palace. 5pm Twid and Stu up the ropes and manage a pitch, me to cook.

Thursday 13th May Snowing, -5C, 15kmh

Early start. Me and Twid go up the fixed ropes. Twid up over the jammed block, me up the imploding flake! Then abseil through the storm back to camp 1. Arrive 10pm, Long day.

Friday 14th May Big Snow, -5C, 15kmh

Warmer today, Stu and Twid up the ropes to climb, me hauling food. Swap over and me to lead over roof from Stu's bum crack belay! Big storm. Long day, abbing in a blizzard back to camp 1. Wet!

Saturday 15th May Snowing, -1C, 5kmh

Bad weather. Late start, me and Twid up the lines to high point, miles! Me to lead, easy at first, then gnarly pendulum off sky hook. Thin crack, tough day, knackered, bed 8.30pm goosed!

Sunday 16th May Snow showers, -10C, 1kmh

Me and Stu down to BC to get more fuel and food. Down through danger zone and to the flatness and luxury of BC, woop woop! Coffee and nice food, yum, yum, yum. Back up through the danger zone, Bed 9pm. Wet feet.

Monday 17th May Shit weather, snowing hard, -5C, 1kmh

Well plastered in ice and snow. No climbing, Good tunes on Stu's boogie box. Cold feet. Long day in the love palace! 1.30pm, me and Twid go up the fixed lines, brutally cold. Twid to lead, me to clean and lead through using nut key to clean the ice from the cracks. Climb till 7.30pm.

Tuesday 18th May Snowing hard, -20C, 70kmh.

Spindrift everywhere, no climbing today. Shocking weather, All trying to stay warm

Wednesday 19th May Snowing, -20C, 20kmh.

Me and Stu up the long fixed lines, me to lead nice pitch but so cold. Stu and Twid take over and me back down to camp 1 to prep dinner, cold day.

Thursday 20th May Snow showers, -10C, 10kmh.

Hoisting camp 1 up to camp 2, sack hauling fest. Me and Stu go up to high point while Twid fixes new camp. Me to lead; amazing pitch, The Gift Pitch, awesome crack. Back down to Camp 2. Big Day.

Friday 21st May Snow Showers, -20C, 15kmh

Up the lines, me to lead on bat hooks, back to camp 2, 9pm. Long day, hell of a route!

Saturday 22nd May Big Snow, -20C, 20kmh

Spindrift everywhere. Very cold, bad sleep. Rough day surviving at camp 2 in a big storm, yuck.

Sunday 23rd May Sun- woop woop! -10C, 10kmh

Me and Stu up the fixed, Bird beaks for breakfast! Then good crack. Twid goes through, then Stu goes through, tricky mixed. Then my turn, up to the chock stone, no way up, ab back, all knackered, back to camp 2, tired, long day, lots climbing. Running out of food and gas. Frozen curry for dinner!

Monday 24th May Sun, -5C, 0 kmh

Up the lines, nice climbing, hot granite. Top out at 7.30pm. Awesome. Ab down, pack up camp 2, ab to camp 1, clear up, ab down to BC and strip gear and ropes, late night, back to BC at 6 a, 24 hour day.

Tuesday 25th- Thursday 27th May- Waiting!

Thursday 27th Eve

The Man Haul of DOOM! Slush fest in a blizzard! Made it to the Moraine, left loads of gear en route. Knackered. Boyz turn up on skidoos woop, woop! Long cold trip back to Clyde River, 9 hours. Stayed in Inuit house.