

South Greenland 1996

The "Torssuqatoq Spires Expedition"

19 July-16 August 1996



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Supported by

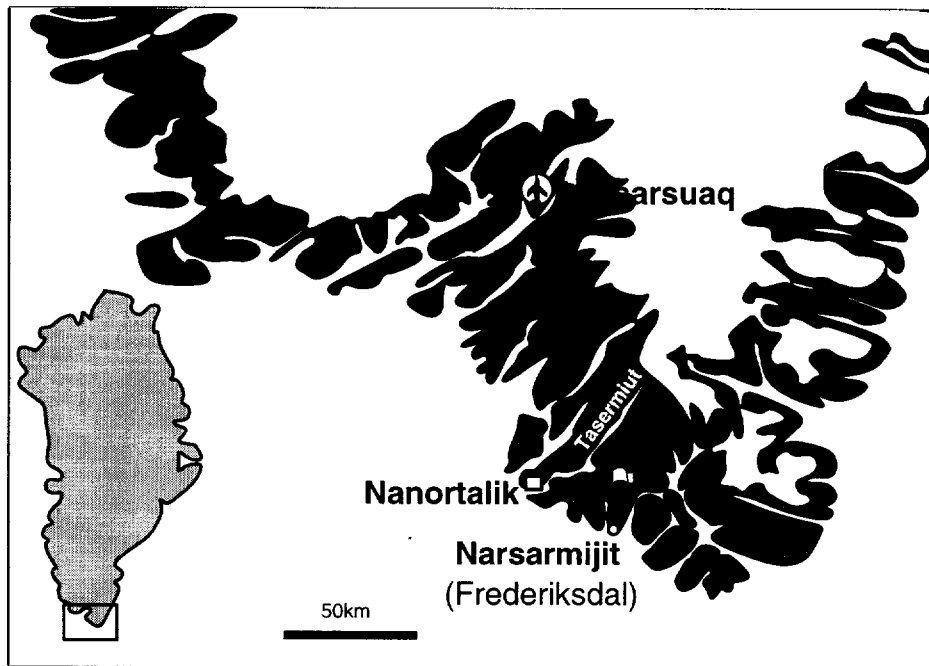
The Mount Everest Foundation
British Mountaineering Council



Final Report

Introduction

The Cape Farewell region at the southern tip of Greenland has been a popular destination for mountaineering and kayaking expeditions for several decades. In contrast with the inland glacier mountains of the remote east coast, south Greenland's peaks are accessible from coastal bases reached easily from the settlements of Nanortalik district (Map 1). The area has become famous for its impressive rock faces, and the development of 'big wall' routes has proceeded apace in recent years. Less well-publicised are the Alpine-scale rock and snow peaks that dominate the southern fringes of the inland ice and the archipelago that forms the tip of the country. Seeing an opportunity for exploratory climbing at a reasonable standard, and inspired by the Alpine Club's symposium on Mountaineering in the Polar Regions in 1995, we assembled a small team and chose a base camp location from the 1:250000 survey map. Further research showed that our proposed site on Torssuqatoq Sound had been used by a 1975 expedition from St Andrews University, and they had climbed more or less everything in sight, so a new site was selected at the head of Narssap Sarqa fjord, north of the village of Frederiksdal. According to the map, this allowed access to an area of glaciated peaks up to 1700m high, and no record was found of any climbing expedition having been active in this valley. Numerous teams had made ascents from Tasermiut Fjord, and several expeditions in the 1970's and 80's had climbed in the area to the north, but we were convinced that untrodden summits were available.



Map 1. South Greenland showing extent of inland ice.

Data Sources

The most useful information about travel and life in Greenland came from the Lonely Planet guide to Iceland, Greenland and the Faeroes. This seemed quite up-to-date, perhaps because Greenland isn't changing too fast yet. Greenland Tourism's glossy brochures were also informative, as were the opinions of Greenland "old hands" Mike Banks and Paul Marshall. Nanortalik Tourism is run by the near-legendary René Nielsen, a Greenland resident of 11 years who can fix pretty much anything in the way of local logistics. He is easily contacted by phone or fax and anyone planning to travel to the Cape Farewell region should get in touch with him. He also keeps a file of recent mountaineering expeditions' reports, which can be useful.

Access

Southern Greenland is served by the international airport at Narsarsuaq, with flights from Europe coming via Reykjavik (Icelandair) or Copenhagen (SAS). Connections to other Greenland towns are by Greenlandair, who run a scheduled helicopter service to Nanortalik. We flew from London via Iceland. Getting the flights booked was very difficult; no sooner had the summer timetables been published than all the flights seemed to fill up. Several agencies worked to get our schedule worked out, but all had tremendous difficulty finding seats on a suitable combination of routes. Eventually, we got a viable route worked out by Mountain & Wildlife Ventures of Ambleside.

After several relatively dull days in Narsarsuaq, we had a small helicopter to ourselves for the scheduled flight to Nanortalik. Supplies were obtained at surprisingly reasonable cost in Nanortalik's supermarket.

René had organised our charter boat to Narssap Sarqa, a 26ft cabin cruiser that would have looked more at home on the Grand Union Canal than the north Atlantic. The Greenlandic people are, however, a seagoing culture, and more than used to handling themselves in their environment. The ride to BC took around 3.5 hours, with visibility down to 15m at times in one of the area's famous fog banks. A 4-foot swell didn't improve our confidence as Kristian the boatman navigated by radar and sonar through the skerries and icebergs. Field ice can be a hindrance to sea travel in the late spring and early summer, but it had dissipated by the time of our visit and was never likely to cause problems. However, many spectacular 'bergs from the glaciers still made the ocean interesting

Insurance

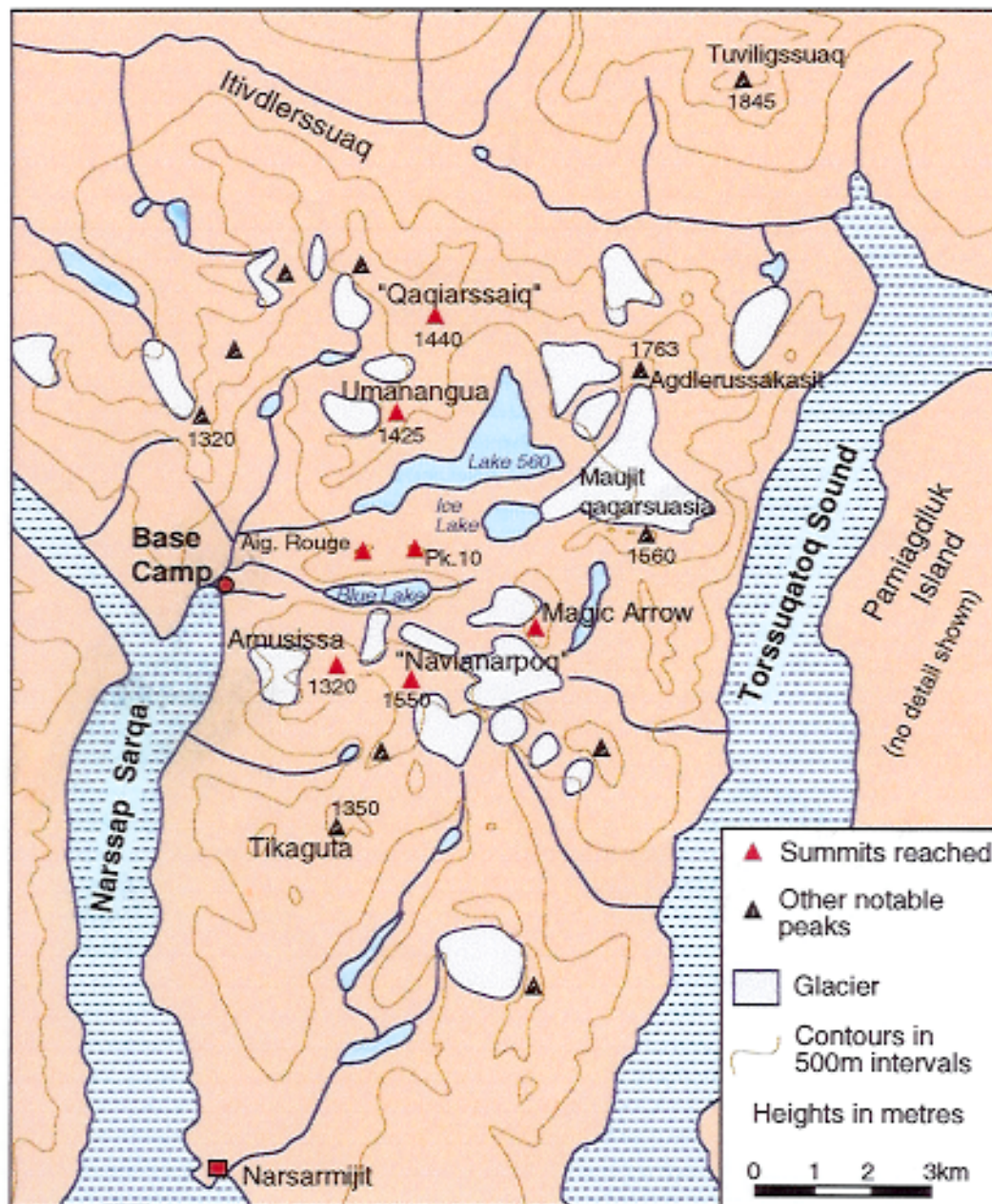
Rescue services in south Greenland are well-maintained by the police, primarily as a service to ice-affected shipping. In general they rescue first, then decide whether to charge, based on an assessment of individual circumstances. Medical services are usually free to everyone. We used Snowcard insurance because it was half the price of the BMC. *However*, despite selling a policy as "worldwide high risk (including mountaineering)," Snowcard are now querying anything that looks pioneering because they claim not to cover "wilfull exposure to risk." This contradiction appears to be a let-out clause in case they have an expensive claim, but after seeing full details of this expedition they accepted the proposal "as long as you aren't doing anything against the best advice of professional bodies."

In the Field

Base Camp

Base camp was established at the head of Narssap Sarqa fjord on 24 July. A wide river valley offered ample comfortable camp sites, but we chose to camp next to an abandoned hunters' shack whose presence was a pleasant surprise. Although it had only three quarters of a roof and was fairly squalid inside, by the time we had re-fitted the door and sealed the windows with bin bags it provided a welcome shelter for gear and cooking.

We had no direct contact with the outside world, but the nearest settlement was only 6 hours away (15 minutes by boat). One day we walked to Narsarmijit (Frederiksdal) and had a horrible time on steep vegetated slopes, needing to climb 600m to get around a crag that fell straight into the fjord, and only making it past a huge cleft by wading at low tide. Fortunately we managed to find a lift back! In case of emergency, it would be easier, if slightly further, to walk to Tasiussaq on the shore of Tasermiut fjord.



Map 2.

Terrain

Base camp was surrounded by rocky mountains with variable rock quality. Our area was dominated by Ketilidian acidic gneisses, which could be quite rotten, while some of the peaks were composed of fairly sound granite. Peaks typically had altitudes of 1200-1400m, with some notable higher summits. Low altitude valleys were vegetated by heather, willow herb and the like, concealing ankle-cracking scree that made any kind of trekking quite arduous. Valley sides were deceptively steep, while glacier territory started about 400m in some valleys. Very large boulder scree hindered many objectives.

River crossings were variable; crossing the main river low down required thigh-deep wading, while the river descending from Lake 560 (via a 1000-foot waterfall) could not be crossed in its lower 2km.



The head of Narsap Sarqa Fjord; base camp is behind the right-hand iceberg. Base Camp Crag on the right.

Weather

We had been led to expect fairly wet weather much of the time, but were pleasantly surprised (see diary). In all we probably only lost three or four days that we would have used for climbing. The best weather was the cool, bright & breezy type that dominated the first week. This kept down the insects and allowed spectacular views. The wet weather was chilly but never windy; we did not experience a single storm. The final week was characterised by sea mist that reduced sea-level visibility to 50m, but which typically broke up around mid-day. Daytime BC temperatures were typically 10-16°C.

Climbing

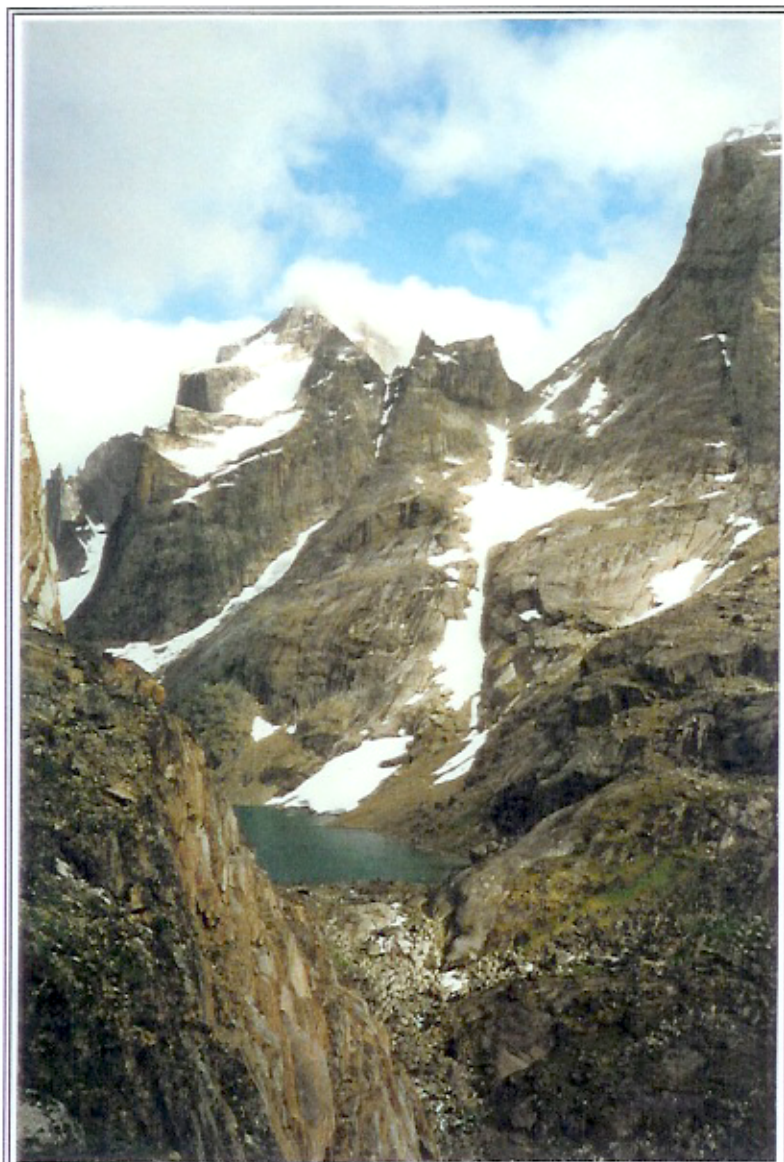
The rationale of the trip was to climb Alpine-style from base camp as much as possible, taking lines of least resistance up peaks that we believed to be unclimbed. The accompanying diary gives the dates of ascent, but the flavour of the routes is summarised here:

1: Amusissa (1320). A bit of an ugly bulk of a mountain, but closest to base and well-guarded by cliffs on all sides. Simon & Ali took a line on the west spur (PD), climbing above Base Camp Crag on steep scree and broken rock to reach a sharp ridge leading to the summit plateau. Joined after 1 hour at the summit by Chris & Henry, who took a more technical line (AD+) on the northern flank to join the ridge. Superb clear day, fantastic inspiring views over endless Alpine peaks and glaciers, and an iceberg-strewn north Atlantic. Noticed that adjacent peak at ~1550m is unmarked with spot height or name on the map! Some terrifying-looking rock walls hereabouts. (View from the top on the front of this report.)

2: Aiguille Rouge (1100). A fine, obvious peak above BC. First attempt to reach WSW Ridge deflected by 100m deep breche. Simon & Ali returned to Base Camp Crag (see below). Chris & Henry got onto Aiguille Rouge by a scree gully and climbed a D- route to summit on broken, lichenous rock.

3: Base Camp Crag; Route 1. HS4b, 600m. The crag overlooking BC is a huge slabby expanse of granite, quite low-angle in its lower half. Simon & Ali tied on and headed upwards as they pleased, quite a privilege! 15 pitches later, they'd done the first ascent of a crag that would be a major venue in the UK.

4: "Navaianarpoq" (1550). We refer to this mountain by the word that is Greenlandic for "it is dangerous." As recced by Ali, we took a daigonal line across rock ledges for several hundred metres before a short pitch brought us to the first of four linked snow/ice fields of the north face that lead to the summit. The snow was bone-hard and Simon's crampon fell off half way across the upper icefield. A rock-only route to the summit was taken by Ali & Simon from this point, and fortunately the missing crampon was found on descent by Chris & Henry. A superb, classically Alpine day out at AD.



Navaianarpoq (left) and Amusissa (right) above Blue Lake. The route on Navianarpoq takes the lower rock buttress to the linked snow fields.

5: "Qaqiarssaiq" (1440). Up the main river valley to explore, we got extremely tired of boulder scree so were happy to take a 700m snow ramp (F) across the south-facing cliffs to bag this peak on the "border ridge." So named because it's a Greenlandic-looking spelling of our opinion on the scree. Summit conditions a bit Scottish.

6: Magic Arrow (1200). The prize of the trip. Simon missed out by being in bed with a streaming cold. A fine finger of immaculate grey granite in the glacier country, requiring a couple of grade V+ pitches and an abseil descent, TD-.

7: Umanagua (1425). The other prize of the trip. A big piece of not-very-good rock that Chris and Henry coveted, Simon and Ali didn't. A good effort on a cunning and committing route up the SW ridge at D. Simon and Ali were backing off the summit spire of Pt 1320 across the valley at this time, defeated by inadequate equipment following a lack of reconnaissance. They were at least rewarded with fabulous views into the main massif, and ticked a subsidiary top at 1250m.

8: Tikaguta (1350). Ali & Simon walked for over 5 hours, including the trip's most horrendous suicide scree, to reach a col from which 400m of near-vertical rock loomed as the only way to the top. Even if it didn't spring any nasty surprises, it would be by far the hardest route either had done. Not fancying the odds, they backed off. Poor visibility may have contributed to choosing the harder of the available approaches.

9: Base Camp Crag. Henry & Chris stole a line from the other pair and bagged "Dick Van Dyke" at HS4b. Three pitches of the sea-level traverse gave the others "Dave Lee Traverse," VS4c.

10: Peak 10 (1000). The "twin peak" of Aiguille Rouge, not quite so precipitous and soloed by Ali in an idle moment, PD+.



Base Camp Crag. Alastair Mitchell on "Dave Lee Traverse" (VS4c).

Equipment & Supplies

Clothing and hardware were equivalent to summer Alpine; temperatures never dropped below 5°C at BC, but fleece and windproofs were needed on breezy summits. Ice hammers were carried to allow a compromise between ice-axe work and peg placement, but only one peg was used on the trip. All team members took leather mountain-walking boots that would accept a strap-on crampon, and these turned out to be the most suitable footwear on the limited snow, uneven rocky ground and easier scrambling. Heavy plastic boots would definitely be a hindrance on this terrain. Rock boots, worn with socks, were carried for more technical ground.

Mosquitoes were virtually absent because of the lateness of the season. The biggest problem was the clouds of small black flies that do not bite but swarm into every orifice and ignore chemical repellants. SI, HL & AM had headnets that were considered essential, in some cases worn over climbing helmets. The best design was by Camel Trophy, incorporating a fold-away headnet with a baseball-style cap; its advantage over the other designs was its very fine netting that did not hinder vision.


























No special rations were taken; most food was normal stuff bought in Nanortalik supermarket. In retrospect we could have allowed ourselves more leeway and taken more supplies in, given that we had motorised transport all the way to BC. All garbage was bagged and taken back to town for disposal.

Kerosene bought from the town pumps burned quite poorly with a lot of soot. We would recommend taking petrol in future, but we had gone configured for kerosene because we did not know petrol was so readily available. "Clean" kerosene from the supermarket was very expensive.

Fishing at Narssap Sarqa was exceptionally poor because of previous overfishing with fixed nets during the trout season (a point of some bitterness amongst locals.) Foraging was therefore restricted to wild mushrooms (every meal), blueberries and crowberries. Angelica was available but not popular.

No firearms were carried because of the extreme unlikelihood of meeting a polar bear in South Greenland. However, in René's shop we encountered the skin of the one that was shot near our base camp site last August!

Expedition Diary

Date	Happening	Weather
Fri 19 July	Flight LHR to Keflavik. Camp at Keflavik.	
20 July	Flight Reykjavik (City Airport) to Narsarsuaq.	
20-22 July	Camp at Narsarsuaq, walking & fishing.	
23 July	Helicopter Narsarsuaq to Nanortalik. Shopping. Night in Hostel.	
24 July	Boat to Narssap Sarqa. Establish Base Camp. Recce walk.	
25 July	First Ascent of Amusissa.	
26 July	First Ascents of Aiguille Rouge (1100m) and Base Camp Crag.	
27 July	Rest and recce to Blue Lake.	
28 July	First Ascent "Navianarpoq" (Pt. 1550)	
29 July	Rest.	
30 July	Exploration of upper valley. First Ascent Pt. 1440 (?)	
31 July	Rest.	
1 August	Trek to Narsarmijit (Frederiksdal). Buy biscuits, meet locals.	
2 August	Rest. "Dick Van Dyke" climbed.	
3 August	First Ascent of Magic Arrow (SI ill).	
4-6 August	Poor weather. Rest. "Dave Lee Traverse" climbed.	
7 August	Tikaguta recce (SI & AM). First attempt on Umanangua (HL & CB)	
8-9 August	Bad weather.	
10 August	First ascent Umanangua (HL & CB). SI & AM attempt on Pt. 1350.	
11 August	AM solo ascent of Peak 10 (Pt. 1000).	
12 August	Doss. Watch icebergs.	
13 August	Pick-up by boat and return to Nanortalik.	
14 August	Conspicuous consumption in Nanortalik. Camped by Hostel.	
15 August	Helicopter to Narsarsuaq. Flight to Reykjavik.	
16 August	Flight Keflavik to London.	

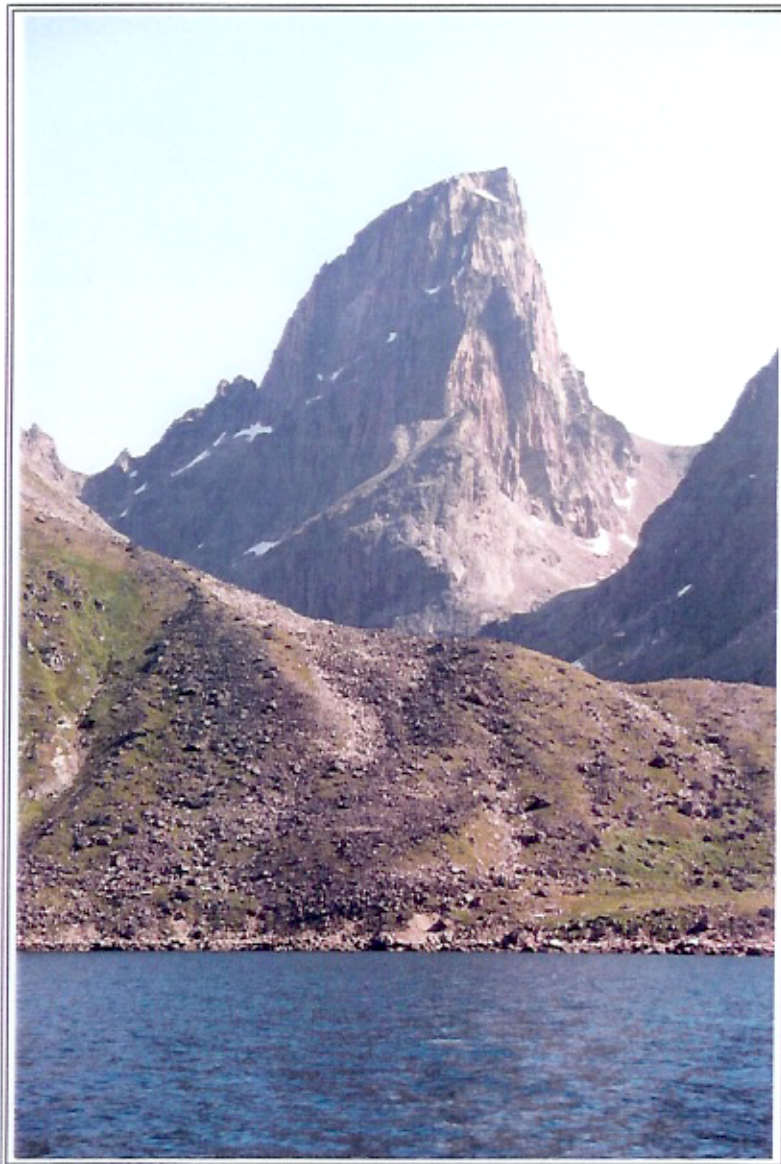
(Nanortalik to Leeds in 25 hours!)

Comments

The expedition was successful for a number of reasons; the weather was relatively good, the team was an exceptionally harmonious grouping, and the setting was more beautiful than any of us had expected. There is immense scope for pioneering Alpinism in this area, from straightforward snow-climbs (particularly further towards the ice cap) to serious rock and big-wall routes. Tikaguta (1350m), Agdlerussakasit (1763m) and Maujit qaqarssuasua (1560m) offer particularly inspiring Alpine rock-climbing objectives, and there is endless cragging to be had around the fjords. We heartily recommend the South Greenland experience to anyone who wants to climb Alpine routes that pop straight out of the ocean.

Appendix 1 - Accounts

Item	Expenditure	Income
Flights	3427.20	
Boat charter	679.73	
Hostel accommodation	45.32	
Stores	453.16	
Flight surcharge (Iceland)	264.81	
Iceland expenses	100.00	
Insurance	328.00	
Total	5298.22	
MEF grant		(800.00)
BMC grant		(600.00)
Personal contributions	(4 x 974.55)	(3898.22)
Total		(5298.22)



One for next time; Tikaguta (1350m). Simon & Ali's attempt ended just above the right-hand col.

Appendix 2 - Contacts

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