

86. Guy McKinnon on the summit of Peak 8599ft at sunrise, with Mt Bertha behind (north-west ridge facing camera). *(Paul Knott)*

Summary: An account of two climbs in the Fairweather range, south-east Alaska by Paul Knott and Guy McKinnon – the north-west ridge of Mt Bertha (3110m), a new route, 23-27 April 2009; and the first ascent of Pk 8599ft (2621m) via east rib and south face, 30 April - 3 May.

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BOB SHEPTON

Greenland With The Wild Bunch

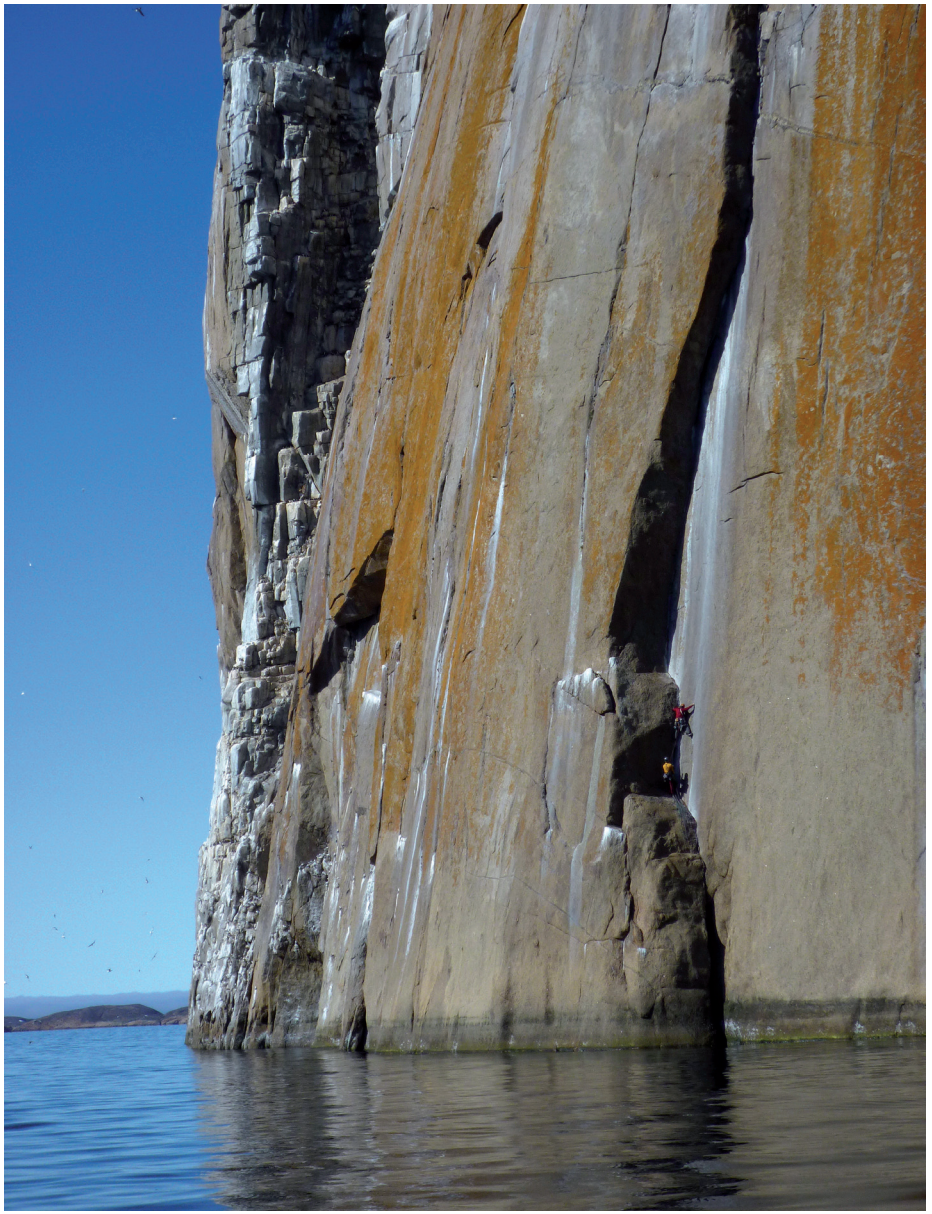
The Skipper's Tale



87. Straight off the deck of *Dodo's Delight* and onto *Seagulls' Garden* (E5 6a). (*All photos from the Team Collection*)

The email read, 'Bob, do you know where there are any big walls to climb in Greenland? We did some on Mt Asgard in Baffin last summer and would like to do some in Greenland in 2011.'

'Well yes' I do know where there are some big walls on the west coast of Greenland but I am not going to tell you where they are as I want them for



88. Sean Villaneuva and Olivier Favresse approaching the first hanging dihedral on *Red Chilli Crackers* (E6 6b).

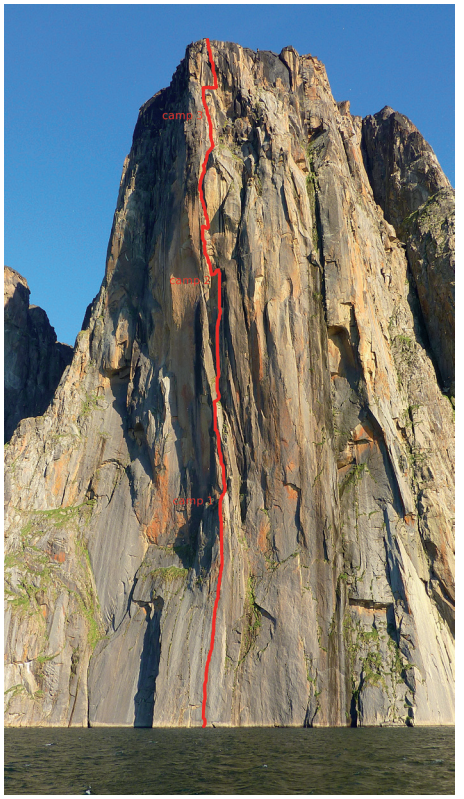
myself and my teams. But … it so happens I left my boat in Greenland for the winter, what about this year?'

'Ah, we'll have to think about that, and get back to you.'

To misquote Caesar: they cogitated, they came, they saw, they conquered.

As one of my 2009 crew said: 'I can't believe you have world-class

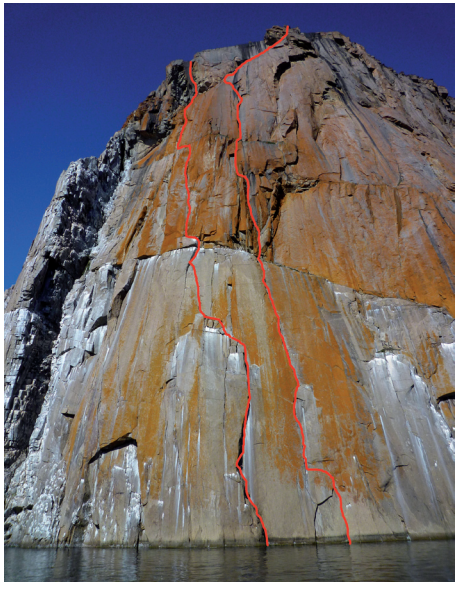




89. Above: the west pillar of Angagoq Tower, Quvnerit Island, Cape Farewell area, showing the lines of *Chinese Gybe*, scene of Nico Favresse's fall, and *Chloé*. Figures give scale!

90. Above right:Impossible Wall, Sortehul, near Upernavik, showing the line of *Devil's Brew* (E7 6c, 5.12d, 850m).

91. Right: Red Wall, Agparssuit, southern end of Sortehul, showing the lines of *Red Chilli Crackers* (left) and *Seagulls' Garden*.
(See Summary for technical details).





92. Ben Ditto on *Seagulls' Garden*. The dihedral of *Red Chilli Crackers* is below to the left.
93. Below: exiting the third portaledge camp on Impossible Wall; Olivier Favresse jumaring, Sean Villaneuva waiting.



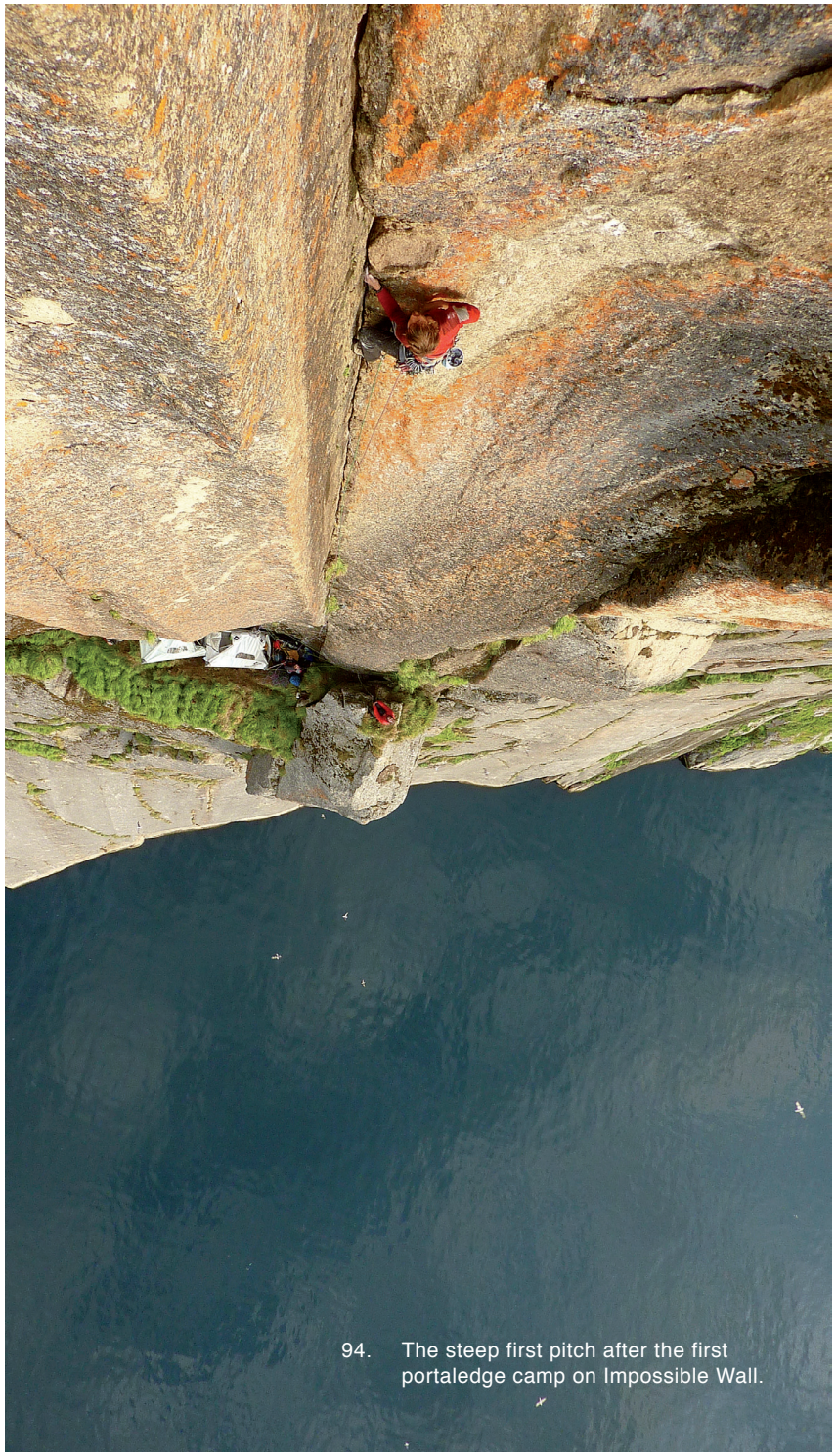
climbers on your boat this summer.' Ignoring the implied insult – why shouldn't I have world-class climbers on my boat? – the team then were the Favresse brothers, Nico and Oli, from Belgium, Sean Villaneuva O'Driscoll, parts Irish, Spanish and Belgian, and Ben Ditto, American. World class? We would see; I just dubbed them 'the Wild Bunch' after all those high fives and yells at the top of climbs on their website – and to keep them in their place of course. They enjoyed that. So 'Greenland 2010 – Tilman International' was born.

The boys duly arrived in Aasiaat on the plane and immediately that afternoon took over the Greenland National Day celebrations at the party at the boatyard, entertaining the staff with their musical instruments and song. Next day we went out for an afternoon's sail in my boat, *Dodo's Delight*, a 10 metre Westerly Discus, literally to learn the ropes as two of them had never sailed before, and then next day finally put out for the passage to Upernavik.

It proved a rather arduous passage for us all and especially the two novices. We motored across Disko Bay. There was a breeze at last so we turned the engine off and sailed. But thereafter the engine would not start and we had to sail whether there was wind, however strong, or none at all, and there was the occasional iceberg looming suddenly out of mist. It was particularly frustrating in the dead calms, of which there are many in Greenland. Sean was heard to comment 'This must be the low point of the expedition.' I hoped he was right and there would be nothing worse. It took us five days to sail the normal two day passage, and we had the final indignity of sailing very slowly through a lot of icebergs in full view of the settlement of Upernavik, and then had to negotiate coming alongside the wharf on sail alone. 'Well, you wanted to learn how to sail, lads, didn't you?'

Upernavik

Solving the problem of starting the engine proved embarrassingly easy; sorting the alternator did not. But obviously the team wanted to get quickly to the climbing so I bought a portable generator which was far too big and heavy for a small boat but was the only one available, and we set off for the big walls. We started on Red Wall, the headland of Agparssuit, at the southern end of the Sortehul. Apparently the Greenlanders call it 'the cliff where the guillemots stand in line', and so they did, like black sentinels on parade. I got the impression that the Wild Bunch were not too used to sea cliff climbing as they seemed put off by the seagulls wheeling and squawking around. But they stepped off the boat up against the sheer cliff, and into the dinghy moored at the bow, and so onto the rock to start the climbs. They had chosen two well defined dihedral and crack lines straight up the cliff, and completed them in one big 30-hour push. Thus *Seagulls' Garden* (400m) at E5 6a sustained or 5.11 and *Red Chilli Cracker* (350m) at E6 6b sustained or 5.12a became the first routes ever to be done on this wall with all its potential. The only problem was that to save weight they had not taken a radio with them and when finished had to walk all the



94. The steep first pitch after the first portaledge camp on Impossible Wall.

way round the fjord behind the headland to where I had anchored the boat. The first I knew of their arrival was when Sean swam, in the nude in arctic waters, across to the boat in the early hours next morning.

'Oh, I'm sorry, I was asleep.'

'Not at all, I wanted to swim.'

After a brief visit back to Upernavik I dropped them off for another climb on a dramatic face halfway between Upernavik and the Sortehul, this time by a short dinghy ride. I returned to Upernavik to deal with the alternator problems whilst they set up camp and then put up another superb route on this face, *Brown Balls* at 5.12a (sustained 5.11, with two pitches of 5.12a) , 450 metres. It became a team effort, as Nico had come up to a huge pillar which looked just too close to giving way for comfort; he and Sean went down to the high point of the other two, who then abseiled off and left them to finish the route. So the final route takes the continuous line just to the right of the obvious central pillar. They described it as 'a superb line with Yosemite-type cracks', and all the harder on this first ascent owing to having to clean sand and earth from the cracks. It was then a combined on sight free ascent, though Nico confessed to one pull on gear on a 10-metre wet section of wall.

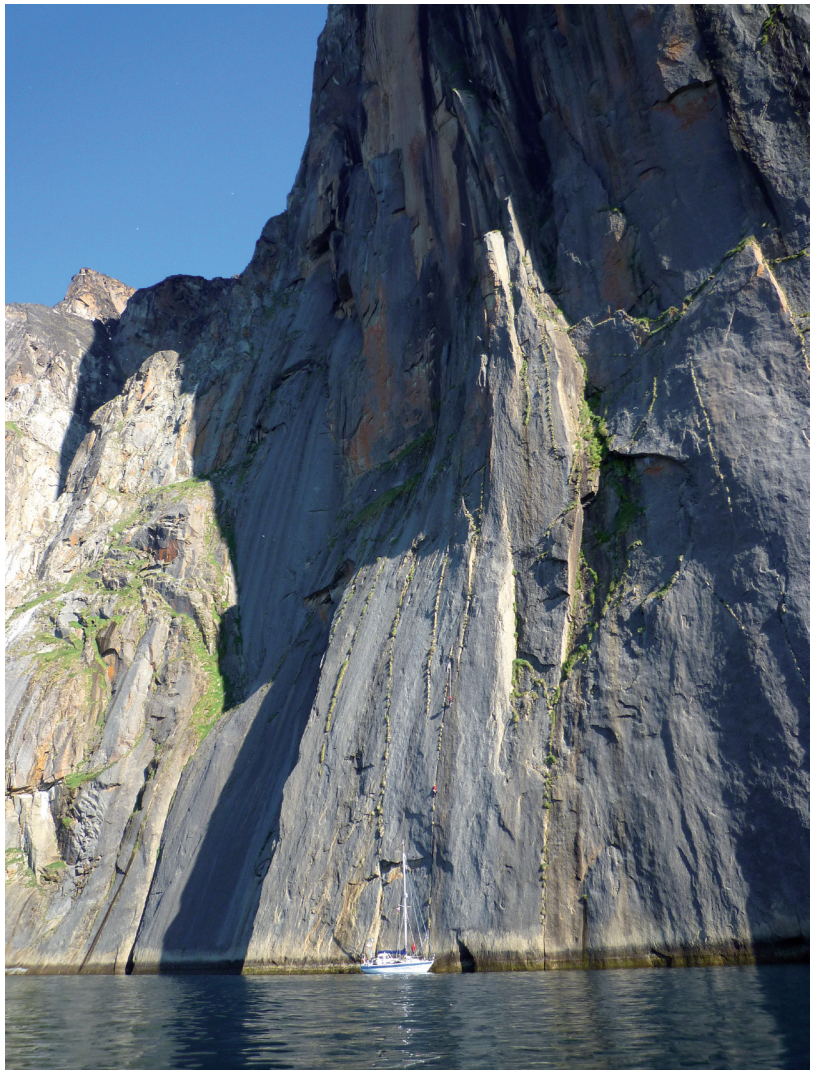
But the team's *tour de force* in this area was the first ascent of Impossible Wall. I had had my eye on that wall for many years now but, as I told them, I had never had a team good enough to climb it before, hence the name. Their route – *Impossible Wall and the Devil's Brew* (there are stories behind all the names) at E7 6c or 5.12d was simply the steepest and hardest climb on the wall, and probably in this whole area, comprising 850 metres and 19 pitches



95. Ben Ditto leading on *Chinese Gybe*, Quvnerit Island, Cape Farewell.

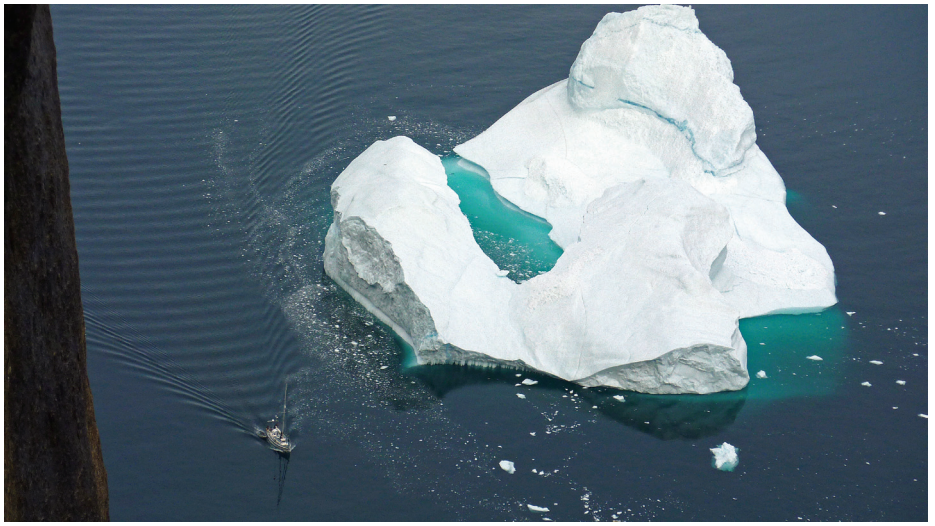


96. Olivier Favresse heading for the team's biggest cam on *Chloé*, Quvnerit Island.



97. The vast sweep of *Impossible* Wall, showing Ben Ditto and Sean Villaneuva on the first pitch of *Devil's Brew*.

with each pitch sustained. They started by simply stepping off the boat, moored alongside on a couple of cams into cracks; this was the first time a 'Garden of Eden' had been planted on my boat, with all the grass and earth thrown down as the boys climbed and cleaned the route above. There was no let-up in standard and it took 10 days to complete the climb with three portaledge encampments on the way. True, three of those days were spent stuck on their portaledges owing to bad weather but this was initially no problem as they had included their musical instruments in the haul bags and fell to 'jamming' and composing new songs. But gradually the infa-



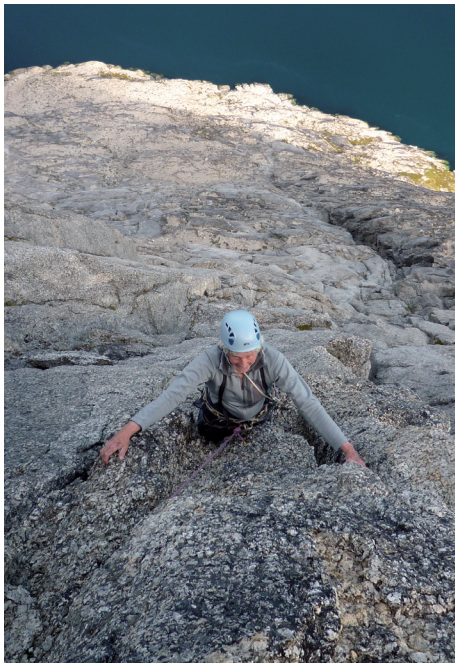
98. Between rock and ice: The Skipper returns with *Dodo's Delight* to see how the team is doing on Impossible Wall.

mous black hole above (coincidentally Sortehul also means Black Hole) began to drip more and more water on them. Three days later Sean, our loose rock, wet rock, grass, lichen expert – it doesn't matter as long as he can just keep on climbing – managed to lead the black greasy hanging chimney crack. Nico also had his moments. The Greenlandic name for this wall is Seagull Cliff or Bad Seagull Cliff, and they were. He *had* to get onto this ledge but the fulmar simply wasn't having it and kept ejecting that foul smelling slime all over him. It took repeated swings with a number 4 cam before the fulmar finally relented.

The hard penultimate pitch also proved interesting, especially as Nico had to keep emptying the contents of *his* stomach, in ways I would rather not describe (but very awkward in the midst of a hard climb), owing to the seagulls having polluted the water supply. They topped out to a well deserved dance together on the summit and a toast in champagne when I picked them up round the back of the mountain in the boat. Funnily enough it had only been eight days for them, as their days were 30 hours long!

Nico was heard to remark later: 'I think that must be the greatest adventure of my life so far,' and a knowledgeable authority has subsequently commented that it was 'probably the hardest climb done in Greenland to date.' It *was* a landmark climb, and hopefully these groundbreaking ascents will open up the tremendous potential of this area for climbing, at almost any standard, for the future.

Whilst they had been on the wall I took myself off to explore eastwards towards the icecap, and to survey some other possible big walls we had been told about. As usual in Greenland the distances were further than



99. The Skipper enjoying himself high above the water on *Never Again!* (E2).

100. Opposite page: Above the clouds on Impossible Wall.

expected, and there turned out to be only one possibly interesting big wall anyway. I did however find some other useable anchorages, one of which was a beautiful remote keyhole anchorage, well worth the effort. These have now been reported to the Royal Cruising Club Pilotage Foundation, which is in any case in the process of conducting a comprehensive survey of sailing in arctic waters. I also discovered another aspect of exploration in Greenland: on two occasions I nearly hit isolated rocks in deep fjords, the water going from 100+ metres to four, three, two metres in a matter of seconds. Either they were in the wrong place on the charts, or my boat was in the wrong place on the chart plotter.

The team were keen to look at other areas and had heard especially of the potential around Cape Farewell in the far south. We went south first to Aasiaat to sort out gear we had left and then made the rather arduous 500 miles plus passage to the Cape Farewell area. The wind refused to blow or was 'in our faces', and we had to make the whole passage on engine, with a difficult evening weaving in heavy swell through ice – growlers, bergy bits and icebergs – streaming out of the Sermilik glacier and fjord south of Paamuit. We called in at a couple of 'towns' and inspected the occasional big wall possibility on the way, but to no avail. One advantage of having a boat is that exploring and investigating is possible, but this time the team had to get their kicks by skinny dipping in arctic waters amongst the ice floes! We re-stocked at Nanortalik, read past expedition reports from the Tourist Office, and made our way round to the Cape Farewell region.

Cape Farewell

We immediately noticed the difference. At Upernavik it had been big sea cliffs; here the terrain was Alpine in character. We did five new routes. The first two were on a wall beneath an unnamed peak north-west of Tikaguta on the Saga map, which the boys only found because they got lost in the morning mist. It had involved a 5km walk-in, carrying all that gear, from the boat anchored in the Torssukatak, and gave 'two classic, clean, direct lines on excellent rock' at E4 or 5.11, both of 450m. They were kind enough to name the main summit Shepton Spire, and then completed the traverse of the ridge at D-TD to a subsidiary summit.



Two further routes were made on the wall at the northern end of Quvnerit Island. Both were clear-cut off width cracks – *Chinese Gybe* and *Chloé*, both 550m E5 6b or 5.11+. The names? On the first, Nico, eight metres above a stance with no protection, pulled on a huge block of some 200lbs which came away in his hands. He struggled to hold onto it and find purchase somewhere somehow, but in the end had to push it away and take a 16m plus fall, ending upside down with 400m of void below him. The rock hit the wall and burst but mostly missed Ben on the stance, who only took a badly grazed ankle but later found the blade of his pocket knife snapped in half in his sack, presumably by the shrapnel. Both were considerably shaken. Chloé was a close friend of the group, the Belgian boulder champion, who was killed in a fall in the Alps on the very day of this ascent.

The final ascent was a mistake, at least by the skipper who foolishly allowed himself to be persuaded to go out with Nico and Sean. The route

on Angnikitsoq at E2 and 500 metres was too long and too hard for an old man, however expertly guided, who survived, exhausted, but named the route *Never Again!* Seventy five seemed a good age to retire, again. However he was able to join the Wild Bunch victory dance at the top and become a full member!

Atlantic

We stopped at Saft Wall on the way out but the weather turned gnarly and only bouldering was done. We made our way down Prins Christian Sund, enjoyed the hospitality and Danish pastries at the Weather Station and headed out for the Atlantic crossing, 'for the experience' as the lads put it. They were not disappointed; it was quite a tough crossing with a lot of headwinds before we could work south and pick up favourable westerlies to bowl us along to Scotland. We hove-to, to sit out Post Tropical Storm Danielle and another vigorous double depression later. And again to repair the steering at sea which had worked rather loose. We finally came up to Mingulay and Pabbay and inspected the cliffs with a view to climbing, before anchoring off a remote beach with a huge colony of seals lining the water's edge. But the next day the skipper overruled the climbing for fear of weather and we eventually arrived at Oban in a full gale. Welcome home!

Summary of climbs

Upernavik Area: (Saga map 14 Upernavik) Sortehul Fjord. Agparssuit: Red Wall (our name), Greenlandic – 'where the guillemots stand together in a row'.

Seagulls' Garden, E5 6a sustained or 5.11, 400m, 12 pitches, Nicolas Favresse and Ben Ditto.

Red Chilli Cracker, E6 6b sustained or 5.12a, 350m, 11 pitches, Sean Villaneuva, Olivier Favresse. Start: GPS 72^0 39.4N 55^0 52.8W. Two clear-cut straight up and down dihedral and crack lines.

On sight free ascents – one pitch on *Red Chilli Cracker* redpointed after a fall when grass gave way. One bolt placed on *Seagulls' Garden* for protection on a slab.

Umiasugssuk: Intermediate Wall (our name) on the north face of Spot Height 620 south of the narrow channel of Torssût, GPS 72^0 46.3N 55^0 56.2W.

Brown Balls, E5/6, 6b or 5.12a (sustained 5.11, 2 pitches of 5.12a), 450m. A superb line with Yosemite-type cracks (harder on first ascent owing to having to clean sand and earth from the cracks). Route takes the line just to the right of obvious central pillar. On sight, combined free ascent (though one pull on gear on a 10-metre wet section of wall); first part O Favresse and Ditto, second part N Favresse and Villaneuva.

Tingmiakulugssuit: Impossible Wall (our name), Greenlandic – 'Seagull Cliff' or 'Bad Seagull Cliff'.

Impossible Wall and the 'Devil's Brew', E7 6c or 5.12d, 850m – 19 pitches, all sustained, (O and N Favresse, Ditto and Villaneuva). GPS 72^0 39.6N 55^0 45.9W. Takes the steepest and hardest line up Impossible Wall; 3 portaledge encampments, 10 days.



101. The Skipper, Bob Shepton, brandishes a bottle of Devil's Brew, a Vietnamese concoction, complete with cobra and scorpion, presented to him by the four climbers, and which gave the name to their stunning route on Impossible Wall.

Cape Farewell (Kap Farvel) Area: (Saga map 1 Qaqortoq/Uummannarsuaq). Unnamed Peak (60^0 03.1N 44^0 31.5W) north-west of Tikaguta.

Corned Beef, E4/5.11, 450m, (Villaneuva and Ditto).

Condensed Milk, E4/5.11, 450m, (N and O Favresse).

The ridge was then followed at D-TD to the eastern summit. Main summit kindly named Shepton Spire. (The names of the climbs describe the skipper's favourite foods aboard a boat.) Two classic clean direct lines on excellent rock. Approach: 5km walk in from the boat anchored in the Torssukatak (60^0 02.9N 44^0 31.3W), or up the valley north from Frederiksdal (longer still).

Quvnerit: (northern end of island, on face of Spot Height 1180, Angegoq Tower).

Chinese Gybe, E5 6b or 5.11+ (off-width), 550m, 15 pitches, (N Favresse and Ditto). One bolt found – previous Swiss team had abseiled off. FFA on sight.

Chloé, E5 6b or 5.11+ (off-width), 550m, 14 pitches, (Villaneuva and O Favresse). On sight, free ascent. Obvious clear-cut off-width cracks below right hand summit. The summit ridge to main and subsidiary summits was completed after an overnight bivvi at TD, but not claimed as a first ascent.

Angnikitsoq: (SE corner – Angnikitsoq qoqa by Spot Height 670).

Never Again! E2 5c, 500m, 12 pitches, N Favresse, Villaneuva, Bob Shepton. Start 60^0 02.48N 49^0 01.58W. Scramble up to rock face, follow cracks through huge rounded slabs between two main crack or chimney systems. This leads to an almost direct crack system steepening steadily all the way up and including a small roof (crux).

www.xpedition.be gives another account from the protagonists with some fine pictures.

Note: the expedition was one of two recipients of a *Piolet d'Or* for 2011. The other went to Yasushi Okada and Katsutaka Yokoyama of Japan for their 2500m route on the south-east face of Mt Logan (5959m), Canada.