RICHARD PASH

The Lemon Mountains of East Greenland

(Plates 4-9)

Remember the last really grim climb you did? The desperate struggle in the whiteout when you asked yourself 'What am I doing here?' The time you wished you had realised the route was out of condition before you'd started climbing or the frustrating walk back to the car following a failure. Sometimes sunny days and good conditions seem a bit elusive.

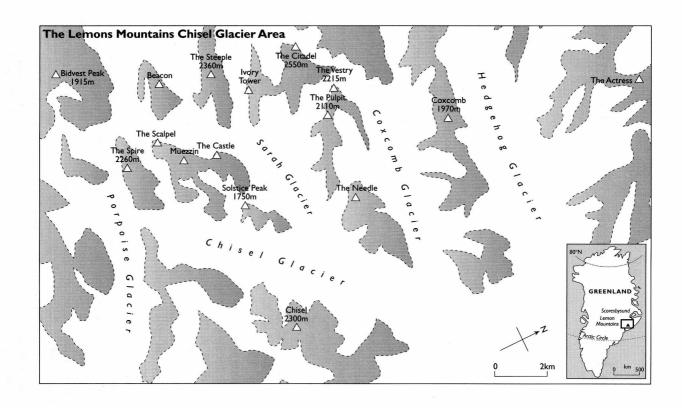
So if I told you that there are some mountains in the world with almost perfect weather would you believe me? A place where most routes are only 60 minutes from camp, somewhere you can climb 1000m lines without bivvy gear? How about somewhere with unclimbed routes on solid granitic gneiss or on good ice in deep-cut couloirs? Such a place exists: the Lemon Mountains in East Greenland.

I'm lucky enough to have spent the last two summers climbing in the Lemons. After our first expedition in 1999 we were tempted back, so I put together a note of what was good about the place to help attract new members.

You can climb six days a week. Stable summer weather typically means blue windless skies; in six weeks this summer we were tent-bound for only six days. Climb fast and light: 24 hours' daylight means no bivvy gear on long routes and the low altitude means no acclimatisation and no headaches. And the choice is wonderful: climb rock in the midday sun in your T-shirt or climb ice in the midnight sun in your duvet. There are no walk-ins because there are no valleys, only glaciers, so an hour's skiing takes you to the bottom of the climb. How simple; a climbing expedition on which you spend most of your time climbing.

Our two expeditions were a loose group of friends of mixed experience and all aged 20-27. Some were Greenland and Arctic 'veterans' back for their sixth expedition, while others were good technical climbers but in Greenland for the first time. As well as a mix of ability it was great to have a mix of sexes there. This summer, with three women, there was a lot less puerile humour than before! Everyone had something to learn and everyone had something to bring to the group. Our rock 'pros' got valuable Alpine experience, our Scottish winter experts taught the rest a thing or two about ice and Greenland taught us all about how to behave in the wilderness.

The jagged peaks of the Lemons are made of good stuff – the rock there is unusually hard for the Arctic – and it is this which gives the area its



character. There are lovely Alpine peaks with fluted snow faces; giant teeth of mountains with impressive snow ridges; rock towers with faces cut by deep ice couloirs; and lots of fine rock spires. Because the rock stratum points up, everything points up: spires, towers, aiguilles, gendarmes.

The catch to the Lemons is that they are not easy to get to; they are in the middle of Greenland's desolate East Coast. Only 3500 people live on the whole of this coastline, which is half of the coastline of the second biggest island in the world. Our nearest town was in Iceland; the easiest way to the Lemon Mountains is to fly from there in a ski-equipped plane. As for our food and equipment, we dropped that from another plane in cardboard boxes, to save money. We had a few nervous moments opening the boxes to discover what had smashed, but apart from losing a third of our fuel everything else was remarkably unscathed. I say 'unscathed' because when you're hungry you don't mind a bit of jam on your fish. The fuel situation was worrying, given we had to melt all our water, but we solved that using blue plastic barrels in the sun. Once we settled in, the feeling of remoteness was fabulous. Standing on the summit of Solstice, our first peak, with thousands of mountains in every direction, it was spine-tingling knowing no one else there. How amazing for such a big view to be so silent.

The Citadel was one of the reasons we came back to the Lemons. It was just too far away from us in 1999, but from every peak we climbed we could see its striking rock profile towering above the other summits. This time we didn't hesitate: two days after making camp four tiny people skied up to its enormous South Face. Tackling several linked snowfields, we were aiming to hit the East Ridge as the sun swung round to warm the rock. This way we caught the snow at 'night' and then had 12 hours to get to the summit before the rock got too cold to climb. Excited to be on our first big mountain we raced up the snow and changed into our rock gear in a flash, leaving axes and plastic boots at the stance. The 6am sun was just starting to light the ridge so there was a bit of hand-shaking going on as we tried to keep warm. Soon though the orange rock was radiating with heat and what had looked like a desperate knife-edge from camp turned into eight pitches of Severe: the knife was 20 metres wide! As usual the scale of Greenland was bigger than anticipated. When we got to the summit ridge what had looked like small snow patches from camp was a two-metre snow crest. With no axes or plastics, the 45-60° snow and ice on the right looked a bit dubious. As for the left, an intermittent rock ledge over a 400m headwall didn't look too inviting either. We decided to head back, disconsolate to fail so close to the top. Rupert, however, wasn't having any of this, so as the rest of us stroked our beards and mumbled discouragingly, off he went. A fine lead with a lot of rope drag thrown in and suddenly a cheeky face appeared beneath the summit. Citadel was ours.

Percy Lemon first spotted the Lemons as he surveyed them with Gino Watkins in 1931 as part of the Trans-Arctic Air Route Expedition of 1930-33. Despite the interest of eight expeditions since then – most famously

Chris Bonington's visits in 1991 and 1993 – only 10 peaks had been climbed on the Hedgehog and Chisel glaciers when we first visited in 1999. Having seen stunning photos taken of the area, we aimed in our two expeditions to explore these glaciers much more thoroughly. Between the two trips we climbed 50 new routes, including 32 first ascents up to TD+.

I was pleased we didn't recce the Steeple properly. Aptly named by Chris Bonington in 1993, it looks impenetrable from all directions: a tower of rock with 60° sides. Its only flaw is a superb ice couloir that reaches from head to foot on its East Face. A magnet of a mountain, it was only unclimbed because of poor ice conditions on the crux in 1993. Deep ice couloirs are a feature of the Lemons, where eroded bands from a soft rock intrusion split the faces of a number of the mountains. On the Actress in 1999 we found several pitches of Scottish Vice: what was in store here? Climbing a nearby mountain to survey the route, we could see the whole line except a small part hidden by a buttress. It looked fine, in fact it looked no more than Scottish III or IV, even if it was 700m long. But what was behind that buttress? I was also concerned about the top of the peak: vertical rock from the couloir top to the summit. At the time I thought we had been quite thorough recce-ing the route, but as we skied to the foot of the climb my heart hit my mouth. The ice behind the buttress was vertical and the rock beneath the ice was also vertical, so falling off the ice could be iffy. To get there we came in from the side: delightful climbing on mixed III ice and rock up a meandering ramp. Round the corner and there it was, a large icefilled slot, cut deep in the buttress. In I went, up 40 metres of 45-60° water ice, my axes biting into the plastic surface. Bridging out across the chimney I found plenty of pro and climbed with confidence towards a small boulder for a belay. I looked at the boulder, put a sling around it and gave it a tug. It promptly moved down, onto my shoulder. During the next few sweaty minutes I tried to push the rock back onto its ledge, but it felt like the whole mountain was trying to send me down the gully. Shouting to the others I told them to get out of the way while I guessed what would happen when the rock fell. Quite apart from bouncing off the chimney into them, it would almost certainly hit my rope and take me down too. There was nothing I could do; I gingerly took my weight off the rock and stepped aside, expecting the worst. Three crumbs of gravel held it in place. The world felt fluffy again. Looking across the chimney I saw the obvious belay with Bonington's sling. If I was a half-decent mountaineer I would have seen it ages ago. Time wasted, I brought Rupert up and he set off up the wall above. Unluckily for him things were not nearly as consolidated above as they were for me, a lattice of icicles covered snow that barely supported his weight. We could see why our predecessors were repelled in warmer conditions. Unluckily for me I was at the unprotected stance below, while Rupert - the ice destroyer - smashed his way upwards. Wham! Bam! Crunch! Everyone swore at Rupert while envying his excellent Scottish V lead.

Was that it? Above the falls things looked a lot simpler: a long broad

gully stretched up as far as I could see. Off I went only to discover it was soft snow on ice; we moved together, but it was hard work and we weren't going as quickly as we hoped. As we sweated our way up, the snow thinned until we found ourselves again on beautiful hard grade III ice, pitches and pitches of the stuff. Lovely climbing but we'd now been going for 11 hours and my enthusiasm for kicking steps was starting to wane. I also had a horrible feeling that we wouldn't be able to get out of the couloir at the top. I wished I could stop worrying and enjoy what were superb conditions near the top of one of the finest unclimbed peaks in the area and one of the finest peaks I have ever climbed. Funny how it takes until you're sitting in the pub to realise that. At the top of the couloir we saw our way through. The rock was easy after all and we sped to the summit.

Good rock-climbing was something we had come to the Lemons for. There are no shortage of beautiful spires, towers and faces to climb. There are many, many unclimbed lines waiting for their first ascent. It seemed sacrilegious to me to go cragging when there were so many unclimbed summits, but some days there's nothing better than soaking up the sun on a 50-metre corner. Although scanning the route with binoculars, we were often way out on scale. That pile of rubble? Those are 60-metre slabs. What look like crack lines are arm jams, and off-widths turn into giant chimneys.

One of the peaks we 'worked' was the Castle, so called because of its four impressive looking turret-like buttresses. We camped right beneath it and scoured the rock for lines. Pippa and Tom were the first up on the SE Turret, climbing four fine pitches of 5c and 6a up a single spiralling crackline called *Never Mind the Crocodiles* (ED1). Four others attacked the twin summits of the castle from the west. Nic and I found a lovely four-pitch VS on the North Summit (*Cam-a-Little*, D) and watched Tom and Lucy on a very airy VS (*Cam-a-Lot*, D–) to the summit opposite. Our third pitch was a superb rising 4c hand crack right on the outside of the arête. I was almost laughing as I found move after move on beautiful rock, especially as it was really Nic's lead but she'd sent me up to remove a stuck friend and I kind of carried on. Watching Lucy and Tom on their 80° tower opposite, the feeling of the scale and space behind us was stupendous. Miles and miles of nothing between us and the Steeple in the distance.

Life on a four-mile wide glacier had a few surprises, like where to go to the loo when there are no convenient bushes, or where to put down your mug of tea. Living on an enormous block of ice means you can't drop your jumper on the floor, and sleeping on anything thinner than a Therm-a-rest can be rather chilly. We soon got more savvy: metal poles from our sledges doubled as clothes hangers, and stuffing shopping bags with bubblewrap from the airdrop made warm seats. We also had a superb mess tent which we dug two metres into the snow. It was just big enough for all eight of us to squeeze in, and was pretty cosy when the stoves were going. It was great to be able to eat together and chat about the routes of the day, or the state of Tom's dreadlocks.

Not all our climbing went to plan; we kept having problems with north-facing snow routes. The night temperatures weren't as cold as we would have liked which meant the north faces which get the weak midnight sun didn't consolidate properly. We were particularly disappointed to fail on the Scalpel, an evil blade of a mountain with a superb twisting ice gully running vertically up its north face. Only one pitch of rock is needed to access the gully, but we were deluged in water as we tried to climb it.

The Lemons are adjacent to one of the biggest fjords in Greenland, Kangerdlugssuaq, which is so large you can see it on every map of Greenland, two-thirds of the way from Ammassalik to Constable Pynt. There's something about the combination of mountains and fjords that's just magical; the starkness of the mountains combined with vivid colours of the coast and the contrast between mighty peaks and flat sea. With our explorers' hats on we went off to find the fjord, setting off from camp on ski with our bivvy gear to a remote peak at the foot of Sarah Glacier. Apart from the Scandinavians, I've never seen anyone Telemark ski with confidence, and our drunken path down the glacier was no exception; even gentle slopes look sinister in soft leather boots. Going uphill again we were back in control of our legs; we skied almost to the summit.

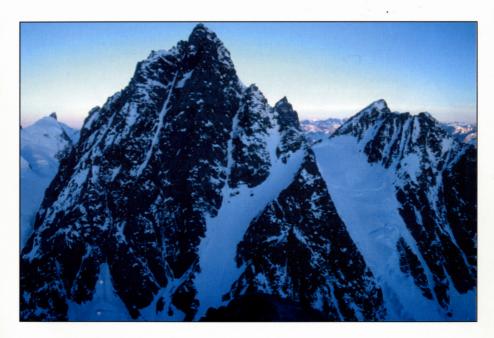
It was possibly the most chilled-out bivvy in the history of Greenland; we drank whisky and chatted in our sleeping bags while thousands of icebergs groaned in the fjord below our feet. A peachy glow from the low sun reflected off the Greenland Icecap to our right while we scanned the horizon of hundreds of unclimbed mountains waiting across the fjord. The scale of our vista was incomprehensible; the smallest of the glaciers across the fjord were several miles wide, the smallest mountains had 400m faces, and the tiniest icebergs were several storeys high. So how many thousand kilometres of icecap could we see? How many million tons of ice was floating in the fjord? It was one of those occasions when I felt I might have an impression of the real size of the Earth.

As the end of the expedition drew near, we were drained. Sore hands, aching legs and general lethargy set in. To begin with we kept going; saying that seeing as it was another nice day, we ought to make the most of it, then rest when the weather clagged in. Not that we wanted it to snow, but at least it would be a good excuse to stop. It was lovely lying around at camp, but somehow it felt wrong under a perfect sky. Then again, as I soaked up the Greenland sunshine, and took in the views, the weather would surely be good for another day – and those unclimbed peaks could wait. Next time you're fighting through in a blizzard, or reading the back of a Mars Bar wrapper in your tent, have a think about the Lemon Mountains. Maybe it's time you planned a trip there.

Reports from both 1999 and 2000 expeditions are at: www.wayupnorth.clara.co.uk



 Chisel (*left and centre*) and Sheridan Peak (*right*) seen from the Chisel Glacier, Lemon Mountains, Greenland. (*Richard Pash*) (p31)



5. East Face of The Steeple. The line taken by Pash and partners follows the left-trending ramp just above the left snowfield, then into the obvious snow gully towards the summit. (*Richard Pash*) (p31)



6. Exploring crevasses on the Sarah Glacier. (Richard Pash) (p31)



7. Ski mountaineering in the Lindbergh Fjelde, north of the Lemon Mountains, with Jatteborg in the background. (*Richard Pash*) (p31)



8. This wide crevasse was crossed during a ski tour to the Lindbergh Fjelde. (*Richard Pash*) (p31)



 Nic Faulks on the penultimate pitch of The Castle's South Summit, Lemon Mountains, Greenland (Richard Pash) (p31)