
MIKE FLETCHER & ANNE-MARIE NUTTALL

Snowy Summits in East Greenland

(Plates 22–25)

The 1995 Alpine Club Symposium on mountaineering in Polar regions provided the motivation we needed to start making serious plans for an expedition to Greenland. We were looking for snowy peaks rather than big walls, and quite fancied the idea of going to a group of mountains where no one had climbed before. East Greenland seemed the perfect destination. Although the idea of approaching by sea had the feel of genuine exploration about it, we were keen to maximise our climbing time by flying in to the mountains. After some research, we established that for a month in the field, with a charter flight from Iceland by Twin Otter, we would need a team of five people to make the trip financially viable, and if anyone dropped out, it would be seriously expensive for everyone else.

A friend who had been to Greenland the year before suggested that we contact Paul Walker of Tangent Expeditions. Paul has been organising trips to Greenland for a number of years, and offers a logistics service. As a small team, we lacked any leeway to enable us to continue if anyone changed their plans, but the figures Paul sent us indicated that it wouldn't cost any more to go as a group of two and let him do the the logistics than it would cost to do it ourselves.

There followed a period of soul-searching about the pros and cons of letting a commercial organisation sort out the detailed planning of our trip. On all previous expeditions each of us had been on, we had done the planning ourselves, which gave us a greater feeling of involvement and an opportunity to prepare mentally for the trip. We were concerned that leaving the planning to someone else would mean missing out on part of the experience, but in the end this was the only practical way we could make the trip, so we decided to give it a go. Paul organised two weekends where participants could get to know each other and discuss various aspects of the planning. Logistically, the two of us could be completely independent once we got there, and this flexibility was very important to us.

It is a debatable point whether we comprised one expedition or several. The two of us stayed for six weeks, having arrived with twelve others on 20 July. For the first half of the trip, a group of six of us headed off to climb together. The rest of that group left at the midpoint of the trip. For the second half, when a new group arrived, four of us travelled and climbed together until we got back to base camp to be picked up by the plane. To us

it felt as if we were on two consecutive expeditions, the first with six members and the second with four members.

From Reykjavik we flew to Kulusuk, the airport for the town of Angmassalik on the east coast of Greenland. Later the same day we were picked up by a ski-equipped Twin Otter and flew about 200km north into the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerger* where we landed at an altitude of about 2500m. The flight was spectacular and we passed some fantastic-looking mountains on the way. We also flew over a lot of frighteningly loose and surprisingly steep rock peaks and we were glad to fly onwards to more snowy peaks.

For the first three weeks, the weather pattern was stable: three days of snow followed by two good days. We were constantly digging the tents out, and the corridors between the tents ended up with walls above head-height. We also dug a huge communal snow-hole where most of us cooked and chatted and lamented the weather conditions during the bad periods. Steve Houghton earned the nickname of the Human JCB for his prowess with a shovel. Occasional games of football and volleyball in knee-deep snow alleviated the boredom when three-day storms made climbing impracticable. In retrospect, it might have been better to choose a landing site nearer to the coast. The mountains there, although lower in altitude, were bigger in climbing terms as the glacier level was lower, and we would have had the benefit of more freeze-thaw to improve both the climbing conditions and the surface of the snow for pulk-pulling.

After a few days and a couple of climbs near base camp, a group of six of us – ourselves plus Steve Girt, Steve Houghton, Humphrey Deman and Ralph Atkinson – ploughed a deep furrow with our skis and pulks over to a horseshoe on the opposite side of the main glacier, about 8km from base camp. The conditions favoured doing as much as possible on skis. Even using the skis we were often up to our knees in fresh snow, and breaking trail was exhausting. Our climbing in this area was limited by well-loaded avalanche-prone slopes, and we did manage to set one avalanche off from a ridge we were traversing. Nonetheless, between sitting out the periods of snow and whiteout, we got up a number of mountains.

There were two small peaks near our camp that we climbed during one of the storms (*numbered 4 and 5 in the table on pages 45 and 46*). In a clear spell we had taken a compass bearing on the col between them and we skied blindly towards it on this bearing, roping up as we got closer. Visibility was so bad that whoever was leading used ski sticks to check the ground ahead, like a blind person using a white stick. Steve Girt, who was in front at the time, located the col only when his ski tips were overhanging the edge above a steep drop. Luckily there was no significant cornice, but he was very glad to be roped up. We left skis at the col and made our way up to each of the summits with ski sticks to guide the way. We didn't get a view from the summits, but it was great fun.

* See also Philip Bartlett's 'Undiscovered Mountains of the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerger' in *AJ98*, 142-146, 1993.



Left

22. Greenland: the Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge. Changing from skiing to climbing equipment for the ascent of Pt 2740 (*No 3*).
(*Anne-Marie Nuttall*) (p39)

Below

23. Toby Richards and Tom Keely approaching Pt 2680 (*No 28*).
(*Anne-Marie Nuttall*) (p44)



A few days later, Humphrey and Mike had a try at a lovely looking ridge line which had been the subject of considerable admiration from base camp. It took about an hour of skiing to reach the base of the ridge. Having left the skis, we waded in waist-deep snow up past the bergschrund onto 45° hard blue ice for a couple of rope-lengths before the ridge narrowed to a knife-edge of snow, angled upwards at about 25°. We continued, through thigh-deep snow, to the first minor rocky gendarme. Going round either side would have been easy enough in reasonable snow, but neither of us fancied the idea of dicing with a potential avalanche, so we took the rock direct. Above the gendarme, the knife-edged snow ridge continued, gradually increasing in angle to another larger gendarme. Again we climbed this direct to the continuing snow ridge above. At the top of this, the summit was guarded by a rock wall of perhaps 150m. We could see lines of weakness in this and, over to the right, there were tongues of snow leading all the way through to the summit area. However, the slopes seemed worse in terms of avalanche risk, and the ridge was now corniced. To reach either the rock wall or the tongues of snow leading through it would have meant taking a significant risk, and we decided it wasn't worth it. It took us longer to get down than it did to get up, and by the time we got back to the foot of the ridge we both felt relieved that we could forget about avalanches for the ski back to the tents. (This peak was later climbed by a different route by another group, who set off a big avalanche to the left of our ridge.)

All too soon it was time to meet up with the other groups back at base camp for the halfway changeover. The six of us had got on extremely well, and we were sorry that the others were leaving. However, their departure was delayed a couple of days by the continuing unstable weather. While waiting for the plane, we passed the time by extending and improving the snow-hole and building an indoor loo in an igloo, which was greatly appreciated in bad weather. As yet more snow fell, the entrance to the snow-hole got further and further below the surface and the entrance passageway got longer and steeper. It became like a helter-skelter ride, and considerable skill was required to negotiate the entrance carrying a mug of hot chocolate.

So the two Steves, Humphrey and Ralph departed. When the plane finally arrived to collect them, it had some trouble taking off again. The pilots had to taxi to and fro three times before the deep snow of the 'runway' was consolidated enough to take off. That same afternoon, making the most of the good weather, we headed off to climb two nearby peaks (*16 and 17 in the table*) with Tom Keely, who had just arrived, and Toby Richards, the expedition doctor. We set off at about 2pm, skiing in quite deep snow. The peaks were at opposite ends of a spectacular narrow snow ridge which was well adorned with cornices on one side. By careful zigzagging over a couple of shoulders we reached the ridge near to the right-hand peak. We continued up the broad summit plateau to the top, where a daunting view awaited us

of the fluted and corniced connecting ridge. Anne-Marie led most of the way along the right-hand side of the ridge, away from the cornices, with a few icy spots requiring the protection of an ice screw. A lot of horrendous waist-deep snow hung tenuously onto the mountain, above cliffs which dropped away five or six hundred metres to the glacier below. We traversed most of the way over to the other peak; but then the angle altered ominously and we could see from the debris on the glacier below that the slope ahead had recently avalanched. Following the crest was impossible owing to the cornices, so once again we decided to turn back, frustratingly close to the summit, and with no technical difficulties to overcome.

The ski back to base camp was breathtakingly beautiful. By now (mid-August) it was starting to get reasonably dark for a short time each night. We were treated to a fantastic display of oranges and reds as the sun set over the ice cap in the west. We four agreed that this was by far the best time of the day to be out. Until the very end of the trip there was no perceptible variation in snow conditions between night and day – having never consolidated, the snow was soft and dry all the time – so there was no real benefit to be gained from making an alpine start.

The following day, the four of us set off from base camp with most of our remaining food and fuel to do a 12-day circular trip with four camps. The weather was still fine – our second good day – so we were expecting it to turn again at any minute. In fact we were blessed with about 14 days of sunshine without a break. Moreover some strong winds caused the glacier surface to harden up, making for much more favourable travelling and climbing conditions. These didn't change again for the worse until the very end of the trip.

The first mountain we climbed on this foray was a particularly attractive snow peak (*18 in the table*) which had a huge cornice overhanging one side. Our route was a straightforward climb up a blunt snow ridge leading directly to the summit. Although not as high as many of the other mountains we climbed, we found this one amongst the most satisfying because of its aesthetic simplicity, standing on its own some distance from any other peaks. The panoramic view from the summit encompassed innumerable mountain ranges to the north and south, icebergs visible in the sea some 40km to the east, and the vast flat ice cap stretching away to the west. Day after day we climbed more and more peaks, with snow conditions improving all the time. The avalanche risk receded, and the surface was so good that we could now ski ten or fifteen kilometres to climb a peak without great difficulty. Determined to make the most of the good weather, we took few rest days.

After a few days at this camp, we headed over to a set of spectacular mountains which were about 15km towards the coast from base camp. The glacier elevation here was less than 2000m, and the summits were approaching 3000m, giving a much more satisfying length to the climbs. These mountains were notable for the elegant ridge lines falling directly



24. Mike Fletcher near the summit of Pt 2680 (*No 28*). (*Anne-Marie Nuttall*) (p44)

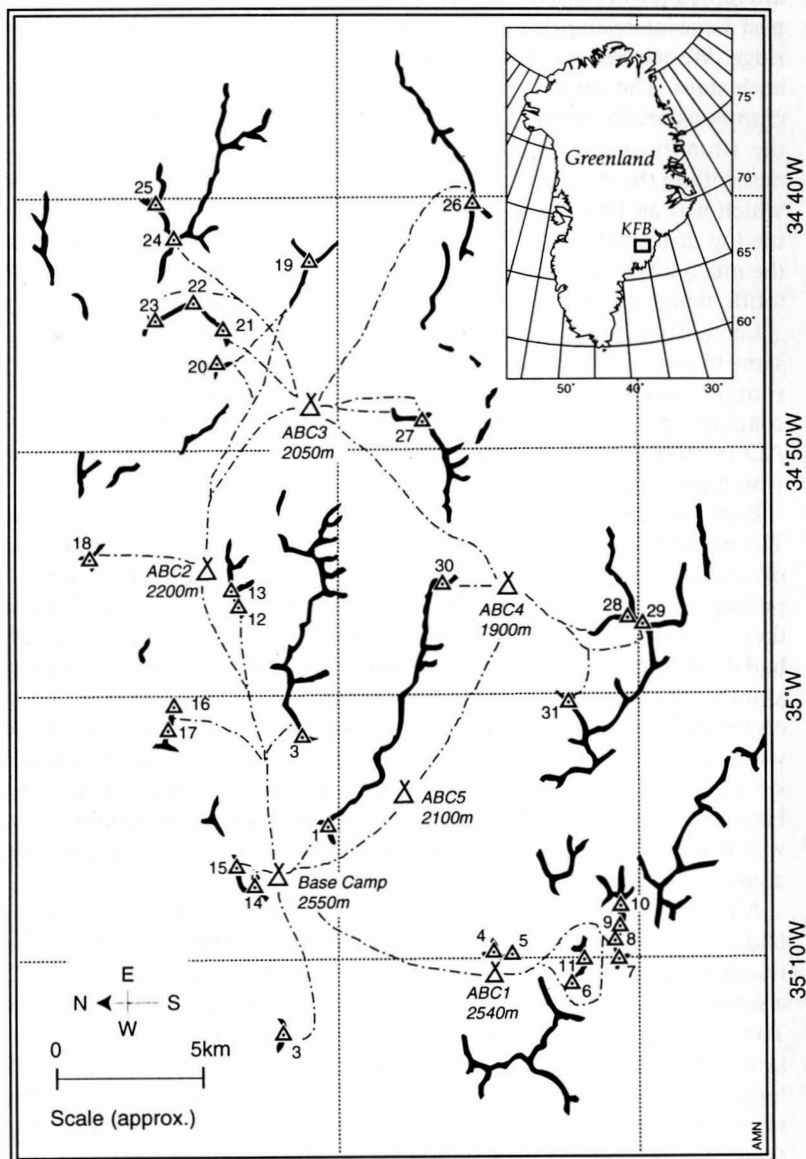


25. Pt 2760 (*No 31*) was climbed by the diagonal ridge from left to right, reaching the main ridge at approximately half-height. (*Mike Fletcher*) (p44)

67°15'N

67°10'N

67°05'N



Sketch map of southern Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge, East Greenland, showing peaks climbed by the authors. Many other peaks in the area were climbed by members of the trip.

from summit to glacier. The first, and most aesthetically pleasing line we attempted (*28 in the table*) consisted of 45° ice in the lower sections leading past some interesting (but stable-looking) séracs to meet the narrowing snow ridge. We weaved our way up this with the exposure growing rapidly on both sides. The summit area was made up of concrete-hard blue ice that crampons hardly scratched. The route was technically straightforward but the situation was splendid. We completed the traverse of the peak by descending the easier ridge on the far side. We descended to a col, above which was an interesting tooth of rock about four metres tall perched on the top of a small peak (*29 in the table*) and looming above a huge drop to the much lower glacier on that side of the massif. Anne-Marie led up this tooth, which gave the only bit of proper rock climbing on the whole trip.

Later, Toby and Mike climbed the mountain on the opposite end of the same massif (*31 in the table*). The route consisted of a long ridge line to the summit, with two significant rock towers which we turned to the left. This challenging route involved 800 vertical metres of climbing. It was a good AD or maybe a D-, with nothing much over 50°. With perfect névé it would probably be much easier.

Faster than we would have liked, the date for our departure drew near. The weather was starting to turn, and the evening before we planned to set off for base camp it started to snow lightly. After our earlier experiences of pulling pulks through deep fresh snow we decided to pack up there and then and head for home, despite the fact that it was nearly dark. The weather had deteriorated to a full-blown whiteout by the time we set off. The person at the back of the group would shout directions to keep the front person on the right bearing. We were glad to have the Global Positioning System with us so that from time to time we could check our position and how far we had travelled, and have an instant back bearing on the old camp site. Having a GPS made a huge difference to our feelings of confidence and well-being. Finding a tent in a whiteout on a flat featureless glacier 10km across without a GPS would be tricky!

All went well for the first few hours, then Tom's ski binding broke. He had a brand-new set of Diamir mountaineering bindings. The longitudinal titanium bar which is the main structure of the binding simply sheared. In a step-in binding this was a catastrophic failure. We tried to carry on with Tom walking (the snow was only mid-calf deep), but then one of Toby's skins came off, so we decided to stop and camp there. In the morning light, we repaired the binding using a tent-peg as a splint, and using medical tape and a few prussik loops to bind it together. The repair worked well for the rest of the journey back to base camp.

The Twin Otter had been due to pick us up on Wednesday 28 August. By the time it finally managed to land on the Saturday, several people had already missed their flights back to the UK, including Toby who was due to start a new job on the Sunday morning. The pilots were almost as keen as we were to get home, and they suggested that we try to take everything

in one go instead of the planned two flights. We piled all the pulks and rucksacks and 12 people into the tiny plane and kept our fingers firmly crossed as we started to taxi. The pilots rated our chances at only 50:50, and so there was a big cheer as we gradually pulled away from the ground. None of us wanted to be asked to get out and wait a couple of hours. After six weeks on the ice, two hours can seem like a long time.

Summary Mike Fletcher and Anne-Marie Nuttall climbed in Kronprins Frederiks Bjerge in East Greenland during six weeks in the summer of 1996. Over thirty first ascents were made despite poor weather early in the trip, and soft snow conditions.

Peak no.	Date '96	GPS Reading	Altitude (m)	Grade	Climbers
1	23.7	N67 10 58 W35 05 05	2700	F	AMN MF SG HD RA TR SH
2	25.7	N67 11 41 W35 13 43	2570	F	AMN MF SG HD RA SH
3	26.7	N67 11 54 W35 01 36	2740	AD	AMN MF HD RA
4	1.8	N67 08 33 W35 10 36	2680	F+	AMN MF SG SH HD RA
5	1.8	N67 08 23 W35 10 51	2660	F	AMN MF SG SH HD RA
6	3.8	N67 07 21 W35 12 00	2640	F+	AMN MF SG SH HD RA
7	4.8	N67 06 36 W35 10 42	2920	F	AMN MF SG SH HD RA
8	4.8	(Note 1)	2850	F	AMN MF SG SH HD RA
9	4.8	(Note 1)	2850	F+	AMN MF SG SH HD RA
10	4.8	N67 06 35 W35 08 40	2990	F+	AMN MF SG SH HD RA
11	5.8	(Note 2)	2800	PD-	AMN SG SH RA
12	8.8	N67 12 13 W34 56 11	2580	F	SG SH MF
13	8.8	N67 12 16 W34 55 28	2625	F	SG SH MF
14	9.8	N67 12 12 W35 07 35	2730	AD-	AMN MF SG SH RA (Note 3)
15	9.8	N67 12 15 W35 07 27	2670	F+	AMN MF SG SH
16	13.8	N67 13 23 W35 00 19		F	AMN MF TK TR

Peak no.	Date '96	GPS Reading	Altitude (m)	Grade	Climbers
17	13.8	N67 13 30 W35 00 50		PD+	AMN MF TK TR
18	15.8	N67 14 26 W34 53 42	2480	PD	AMN MF TK TR
19	16.8	N67 11 06 W34 42 40		F+	MF TR (<i>Note 4</i>)
20	16.8	N67 12 30 W34 45 59		PD+	MF TR
21	17.8	N67 12 35 W34 43 49		AD-	AMN MF TK TR
22	17.8	N67 12 51 W34 43 37		AD	AMN MF TK TR
23	17.8			F	AMN MF TK TR
24	18.8	N67 13 20 W34 40 57	2510	F	AMN MF TK TR
25	18.8	N67 13 17 W34 40 28	2520	F	AMN MF TK TR PW LW JG SG
26	19.8	N67 08 05 W34 39 59	2350	AD	AMN MF TK
27	20.8	N67 09 17 W34 49 09	2450	AD+	MF TR (<i>Note 5</i>)
28	22.8	N67 06 10 W34 57 31	2680	AD	AMN MF TR TK
29	22.8	N67 06 01 W34 57 38	2600	AD+	AMN MF
30	23.8			PD+	AMN MF TK
31	24.8	N67 06 55 W35 01 42	2760	AD+	MF TR

Note 1 Points on ridge between pts 2920 and 2990

Note 2 Located between pts 2640 and 2920

Note 3 First ascent was by Mark Thrush, Paul Endersby and Craig Cook. Our ascent was by a new route.

Note 4 First ascent (same route) by Paul Walker, Lucy Walker, Jim Gregson and Sandy Gregson, earlier the same day.

Note 5 First ascent was by Paul Walker, Lucy Walker, Jim Gregson and Sandy Gregson. Our ascent was by a new route.