ANDY CAVE

Ecstasy

Simon Nadin and I abseiled through thick, cascading mist down the south face of the Simelistock. It was summer 2002 and we had just climbed *Agony*, a Kaspar Ochsner masterpiece on impeccable rock. The final abseil was free hanging and out to the left a line of ancient cord fixed to withered bolts fidgeted in the wind. I vowed to track down the route and return, but I never made time for it; there were so many big trips to do and whenever I was in the Alps I was always working as a mountain guide. As the years passed I began questioning whether the route even existed. Maybe I had imagined it. After all, I couldn't find any information about it.

I assumed that if it was an existing climb it must be an aid route and that to free it we might need to place bolts. I had only ever placed one bolt before, on an unclimbed wall in the Karakoram to hang a tent from. It's the only time I have ever carried a bolt kit, a hand drilling set-up borrowed from Paul Nunn. I had clipped plenty of bolts mind and I had respect for some of the long committing routes established in Switzerland that mixed the use of traditional gear with bolts and kept the climbing engaging. Whilst climbing such routes on the walls of the Rätikon and the Wenden, you probably weren't going to die if you fell, though at times it might feel like it.

Over the years, my memory of the line on the Simelistock dimmed, but the flame was never quite extinguished. Perhaps I realized that even to attempt it I would need to be in great shape. *Agony* had felt hard and this climb looked steeper. More recently I had been doing a lot of rock climbing, I was doing F8a's quickly and then fired an F8b. Life in the old dog yet, I thought. I have never been one for writing lists of objectives, but recently I've scribbled a few. I kept writing 'Swiss Thing' right at the top. Eventually, I emailed Twid Turner, one of the keenest and most accomplished wall climbers anywhere. He is strong, addicted to adventure, loves to see things through and has a sense of humour. We would need all of those qualities.

It is only when you arrive at the Engelhörner hut in the Bernese Oberland that the potential of these peaks is revealed.

'Locals call it little Patagonia,' Twid said.

'Such a wild place,' I said, staring at the tight cirque of spires and walls.

The solemn guardian, Bruno, didn't seem interested in our probing, but eventually passed us an old guidebook.

'That must be it,' I said. 'The *Keusen and Burkli Route*, 1972, A2/3.'

'Bruno, do you know of this climb?' Twid asked.

'Argghh you should not go there, very bad equipment. Nicht gut.'

I felt the hunger growing. We filled up our water bottles then continued,

125. Andy Cave seconds pitch one of *Ecstasy*. *(Andy Cave)*

126. The Engelhörner south walls from the Engelhörner hut, Bernese Oberland. *(Andy Cave)*

weaving our way up a damp gully and across a sweep of slabs until beneath the base of the bulging wall. We decided the best plan would be to climb it as an aid route first. Twid led off, veering left of the original route over two big overhangs, placing some new bolts along the way before joining the aid line at the first belay. It was late now. Abseiling off, Twid landed 10 metres out from the base; and the next pitch looked savagely overhanging too.

For the next few days the air was cold and damp and to add to our trials the original fixed protection was mainly marginal golo-bolts interspersed with the occasional better looking specimen. We had to place more bolts than originally planned and our already blunt drill bit stopped working. We retreated to the valley to relax and to visit a DIY store – not an experience I had previously tasted on an alpine holiday. Returning to the mountain, we made it to the terrace a couple of pitches beneath the summit. The next day started cold and dreary, but we had no choice but to try and free climb it; I had to fly home from Geneva that evening.

After a couple of false starts and with freezing fingers, Twid valiantly freeclimbed pitch one. This pitch itself was world class, tiny fingerholds to start and technical before two tiring bulges and a final sting in the tail to gain the belay.

'Right, are you feeling strong?' Twid joked as I arrived.

We craned up at the bulging wall.

'I'm going to crush it,' I said. Inside I felt stressed and rushed.

I tightened my boots and then powered up to clip a Leeper peg that hung upside down from a hollow flake. I bounced to an edge, clipped an old bolt and then moved swiftly to a decent hold. Forearms swelling rapidly, I began the first crux sequence reaching for a one-finger layaway and then jumped rightwards. Suddenly I was off, arcing backwards down the wall. I hung on the rope, pulled back up and placed small dabs of chalk where I thought I needed to place my feet next time. I went back down to the ledge and pulled the ropes.

127. Mike 'Twid' Turner approaching the south face of the Simelistock, left, Vorderspitze to the right. *(Andy Cave)*

We both felt this pitch would be the key to unlocking the climb. Just one move that is too difficult could mean failure. I had to put this fear of failure out of sight and stay focused. An hour later I made it through the first hard section and pounced from two tiny pockets to a razor sharp ramp. My shoulders were tiring, the skin was thin and we had two more steep pitches. I caught the very edge of the ramp. Somewhere on a wall to the right a couple of Swiss climbers shouted encouragement. I felt my fingers uncurling. Off!

'Argghh!' I hung on the rope dejected.

'Let's go to the top and maybe try it again on the way down,' Twid suggested.

The next two pitches were superb but intricate and it was late by the time we reached the terrace. We descended and dashed to the airport making a promise to return at the end of the summer.

The forecast was variable for our second visit, but we felt this was it; we simply had to do it. It had not been easy to stay fit through the summer: Twid had been guiding a lot and I had been nursing a shoulder injury. Alistair Lee joined our team, hoping to get some images and film footage. Al is a great guy, but undoubtedly the camera brought extra pressure.

'So how are you feeling right now?' Al held the camera just a couple of metres away as I tightened my boot before the fierce second pitch.

Twid had climbed the first pitch well. Now the sun beat down on the sea of tiny holds that disappeared up above.

'I feel stressed,' I replied.

But something inside of me wanted to do this. The first glimpse of it all those years before, the attempt earlier in the summer and now this. I was ready for

it. After one or two attempts, I would be exhausted. It would be ideal to climb it straightaway. From the one finger layaway I jumped right and grabbed a small horn of rock, yelling with relief. From the two tiny pockets I had to wait for Al to move out of the way and then slapped the ramp. I rested and then attacked the next section, even managing to find an unplanned rest. With each move the thought of falling became more unpalatable. Then I started to traverse back right past the old bolts, feet pasted on smears, hands straining on faint undercuts, heart beating wildly.

129. Andy Cave at the crux on the first ascent of *Ecstasy* (F7c+, 250m) on 13 September 2011. *(Alistair Lee)*

'Come on Andy!' willed Twid.

Trying to control movement when you are at your limit is not easy, but without control all is lost. Twice I started to fall but pulled back in. The sweat ran across my cheeks as I chalked fingers.

'Keep going!' urged Al, as the lens flew from his camera, narrowly missing my head. As if I didn't have enough to deal with for goodness sake. I clawed and fought, blowing until I reached the belay. Sheer elation.

Twid took a while to climb the next pitch and was frustrated at having to make a very difficult move above old rotten bolts, only being able to clip the new one afterwards. But his tenacity was impressive. I congratulated him at the belay. Our finger tips were sore and numb from pulling on so many small sharp holds, but there was no way of stopping us now.

'We've done it!' I shouted down the wall.

An airy arête and ridge led to the summit where we scrawled our names in the book and then paused to admire the magnificent views; Meiringen behind us, the giant Kingspitze north face straight ahead. Finally, the 'Swiss Thing' had come alive.

Summary: *Ecstasy* (F7c+, 250m) , first free ascent of the *Keusen Route* on the south-west face of the Simelistock (2482m), Engelhörner, Bernese Oberland, 13 September 2011 by Andy Cave and Mike 'Twid' Turner.

128. 1972-style ironmongery. *(Andy Cave)*

DAVID PICKFORD

Fjord Fandango

North

Waking in the dawn light at quarter to five, last night's traffic silenced and gone, I smell the midsummer air coming off the streets and the harbour and the dirty wild flowers that grow along the edges of the tramlines. I open my eyes and birdsong drifts through the open window of our tiny flat in downtown Gothenburg. In a swish of bright red hair she's already up and the smell of fresh coffee fills the room as the day breaks outside. Here, I wake to a different life.

The solstice just past, we're drawn north towards Norway's magic islands and the land of the midnight sun. Our road north is long. Bags are quickly checked and packed again with last minute thoughts – an extra chalkbag, an extra set of cams, another roll of tape – and in a flurry we're out the door and jumping in the van, hands full of kit and coffee and maps.

Uddevalla. Trollhättan. Fredrickstad. Oslo. The names on the signboards make bold signals as we pass beneath them, music loud, all sense of being at home already gone. Running north from Sweden's south-west coast for almost a thousand miles, the E45 is one of Europe's longest roads, connecting Scandinavia's fertile south with the barren tundra of Arctic Norway. We reach Östersund at noon and by evening we're leaving the shuttered windows of Storuman hunkering down behind us, as if the town itself were already preparing for the long isolated months of winter. Shutting out the forest's gloom, those bolted windows also protect the townsfolk from its vicious mosquitoes, the rank smell of endless bogs and an impossible vastness.

Midnight. The sun's rolling along the horizon by the time we reach the unmistakable marker of the southern edge of northern Scandinavia, and the point at which forest dramatically gives way to tundra. Huddles of reindeer have long replaced passing cars as our travelling companions; small groups break as we pass, the animals trying to shake off mosquitoes with our slipstream.

3am. Malin's driving the graveyard shift as we climb the slow hill before Kiruna. I open my eyes just as we crest the bluff and the sun hits the central extraction tower of the world's largest iron mine, which looms over the town like a monstrous UFO, the Arctic summer light sparking off the quartz shards that litter its humped slagheaps. As we turn across the sun, the reflected light from the mirror of mine debris covering the mountain fills the windscreen, blinding us for a moment, then melting across the dashboard into pools of quicksilver and burnt gold. It is a moment of such