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JACOB COOK

# Time Is a Construct

First Ascents in the Arctic



After four days stuck on portaledges pictured below, Jacob Cook takes advantage of a brief window on Qaersorsuaq, also known as Sanderson's Hope, on the west coast of Greenland, to push for the summit. (*Jaron Pham*)

Over 65 days, our team of six travelled 350km north along the west coast of Greenland via inflatable sea kayaks and established new routes on some of the giant granite cliffs rising straight out of the Arctic Ocean. The team included my wife Bronwyn Hodgins and four of our friends from Squamish, British Columbia: Zack Goldberg-Poch, Kelsey Watts, Angela VanWiemeersch and Jaron Pham.

I don't love using terms like 'fair means', 'self-propelled' or 'self-supported' to describe our trip. Ultimately, all of these expeditions are pretty arbitrary; for me, the reason to go on an expedition like this is not to tick a box in



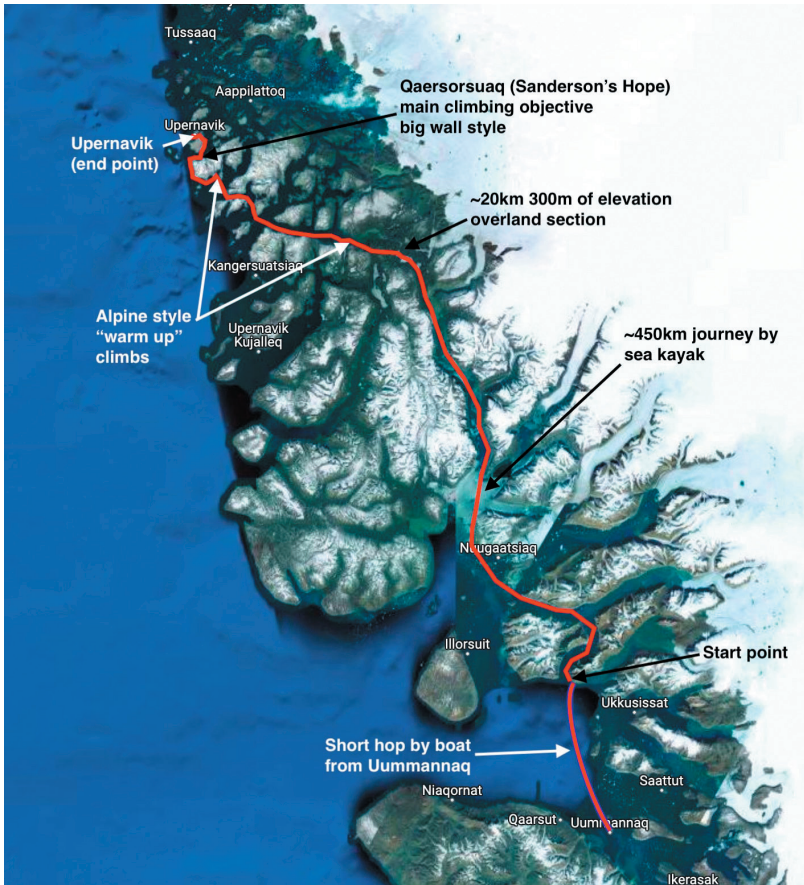
Jacob Cook paddling the 450km sea-kayak approach starting just north of the abandoned community of Nuugaatsiaq. (Jaron Pham)

someone else's style rulebook. Rather, it's to have a smaller, more personal experience. I wanted to go with this particular group because I knew we aligned on the type of experiences we were seeking. For all of us, the goal was to experience the landscape on its own terms. To move slowly. To feel small. A small group of friends in a giant landscape.

Due to a slight delay in the arrival of our shipment of food and gear, we opted to take a short boat ride from Uummanaq on 5 July to set us on schedule. From 6 to 16 July we kayaked north past the former community of Nuugaatsiaq, abandoned due to lasting hazard after a fatal tsunami in 2017, and up to the northern tip of Ukkussisat fjord. On 16 and 17 July we dragged our kayaks upstream through tidal mud flats and from 18 to 24 July we portaged 20km across land connecting a series of small lakes, the larger of which we paddled across. Each leg of the portage required three loads per person, meaning we covered about 100km on foot.

When we reached the ocean on the north side of the portage, we immediately noticed a change in the landscape. The huge and chossy granite walls to the south had been replaced by beautiful red granite domes. We allowed ourselves a well-deserved rest day and then climbed two of these domes across from our camp, in two teams of three. It felt amazing to be finally climbing after over a month's journey with the kayaks. Angela, Zack and Jaron established *Fish Are Friends* (200m, 5.9+), while Bronwyn, Kelsey and I put up *Wears Your Paddle?* (250m, 5.11).

A few days further along the journey, our next objective became clear as we rounded a point and observed a majestic red cliff rising 400m straight out of the ocean. It's no wonder the few teams of climbers who had explored this area by sailboat had already established some lines on this face,



The approach route. (Bronwyn Hodgins)

known as Red Wall by climbers, but Agparssuit by the locals, which translates to ‘where the gulls stand in a row.’

The rock quality was phenomenal. We scoped some lines and then camped on a beach about two kilometres away to rest and prepare. The boys repeated a stunning continuous crack system up the central prow in 28.5-hour push from camp. This route, *Seagull’s Garden* (5.11+) was put up in 2011, the work of Nico Favresse and Ben Ditto who accessed the cliff from Bob Shepton’s sailboat. Beginning their route was particularly tricky. I aid climbed about 10m in my dry suit and water shoes and the other two followed on jumars. Then the three of us hauled the kayak to the low anchor, deflated the boat and stashed it there. The rest of the route was climbed free and on sight. From the top, we hiked down to our campsite in the bay west of the wall.

Meanwhile the girls set off on a new line on the unclimbed right part of the wall. In a 50-hour push with an unplanned bivy, they established *Time is*



Angela VanWiemeersch brings her kayak ashore during the approach.  
(Jaron Pham)

*a Construct* (400m, 5.11, A2). The 24-hour daylight and the seemingly never-ending climb added to the feeling of timelessness as they pressed on for the summit.

Our major climbing objective was to attempt the first free ascent of *Qaersorsuaq*, also known as *Sanderson's Hope*, rising 900m straight out of the Arctic Ocean. The cliff lies about 15km from the town of Upernavik (our final destination) and had been successfully aid climbed twice before by an Italian team in 2000 and a Canadian team in 2002.

We set up camp across the 2km-wide channel facing the wall so we could study the formation. Our team chose to climb a new line on the right part of the wall, following nearly continuous cracks from sea to summit. There were two blank crack switches in the middle of the wall, which posed major question marks. We then spent the next 10 days climbing the lower half of the route, leaving fixed ropes in place and stocking a wall camp at about 600m height where there was a small natural ledge.

Several days of rain slowed our progress on the lower half of the wall. With the temperatures dropping, we knew we didn't have long before the cliff could become covered in ice and snow as the short summer season ended. The Italian team had spoken of climbing through rime ice in the upper pitches in late August. The weather continued to look unstable, but we decided to commit to the wall regardless, since we could wait out a storm in our portaledges with their expedition flies.

We jumared a final load to our high camp and, seeing as the sun was still shining, Kelsey, Zack and Angela pushed the ropes three pitches higher before we settled into our ledges for the night. We spent the next four days confined to the portaledges sitting out two storms. At least we were able to



In mid July the team hauled their kayaks for two days across tidal mud flats before portaging 20km through a series of small lakes. They walked 100km covering this section. (*Jaron Pham*)

collect as much water as we needed since our route became a full waterfall. During a small window we attempted a push for the summit but were forced to bail in a blizzard.

On our fifth day on the wall, the rain and snow stopped but the rock was soaked and camp was engulfed in thick cloud. I announced I wanted to climb, and Kelsey and Bronwyn joined me pushing the rope higher with numb fingers on wet rock. At the top of the third pitch, however, we miraculously popped out above the clouds and were greeted with sunshine. We were above the storm. We radioed for the other three to jug the ropes and then all six of us pushed for the summit. The entire route went free at 5.11+, with the crux pitch being the very last, a wildly exposed slab crux followed by a steep hand crack right to the very summit. We went from our wall camp to the summit and back in a continuous 24-hour push on 21 August.

Next day, after 12 hours collapsed in the portaledge, we rappelled the route and cleaned our ropes, leaving only the minimum gear as rap stations on the way down. Bringing all our belongings down the face to our stashed kayaks and then across the channel, we returned to base camp via a 28-hour push and within minutes of the start of the next storm. In total our team hand drilled five bolts, four at belays and one on lead to protect the very last pitch. At other anchors we left behind rappel stations of nuts and cord at roughly 60m intervals to descend the wall.

Our route *Sea Barge Circus* is one of the best moderate adventure climbs of its type I have climbed anywhere in the world, rivalling the *Scott-Hennek* on Mount Asgard and the Lotus Flower Tower in the Cirque of the Unclimbables. It could easily be repeated in a long day by a strong team of two.



Bronwyn Hodgins at the portaledge on Qaersorsuaq during the first ascent of *Sea Barge Circus*. (Jacob Cook)



Belaying in mixed weather from the portaledge. Three pitches were fixed above this point before two storms closed the team down. (Jacob Cook)



A last throw of the dice was rewarded as the team climbed three pitches through cloud on wet rock to be rewarded by clear skies above. (*Jaron Pham*)



Angela VanWiemeersch on the first ascent of *Sea Barge Circus*. (Jaron Pham)



Kelsey Watts climbing. (Jaron Pham)

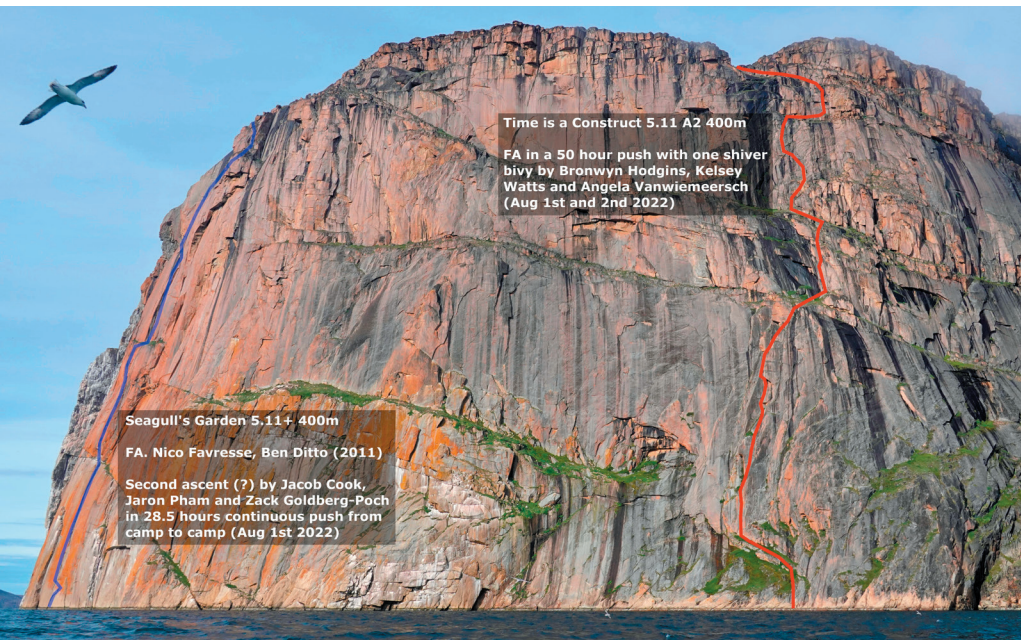


**Sea Barge Circus**

**5.11+ 900m**

Climbed over 20 days in August 2022  
by Bronwyn Hodgins, Jacob Cook,  
Zack Goldberg-Poch, Angela  
Vanwiemeersch, Kelsey Watts and  
Jaron Pham.

The impressive wall of Qaersorsuaq with the line of *Sea Barge Circus*. (Jacob Cook)



**Time is a Construct 5.11 A2 400m**

FA in a 50 hour push with one shiver  
bivy by Bronwyn Hodgins, Kelsey  
Watts and Angela Vanwiemeersch  
(Aug 1st and 2nd 2022)

**Seagull's Garden 5.11+ 400m**

FA. Nico Favresse, Ben Ditto (2011)

Second ascent (?) by Jacob Cook,  
Jaron Pham and Zack Goldberg-Poch  
in 28.5 hours continuous push from  
camp to camp (Aug 1st 2022)

The two routes climbed on Red Wall earlier in the expedition. (Bronwyn Hodgins)

**Summary**

First ascent of *Sea Barge Circus* (900m, 5.11+) on Qaersorsuaq (N 72°42'56.2" W 56°06'07.7") by Bronwyn Hodgins, Jacob Cook, Jaron Pham, Zack Goldberg-Poch, Kelsey Watts and Angela VanWiemeersch over 20 days with seven days camped on the wall for the summit push in August 2022.

First ascent of *Time Is a Construct* (400m, 5.11, A2 with sections followed cleanly up to 5.12d) on Red Wall (N 72°39'23.9" W 55°52'52.7") by Bronwyn Hodgins, Kelsey Watts and Angela VanWiemeersch over a 50-hour push on 1-2 August 2022.

Repeat of *Seagull's Garden* (400m, 5.11+, Favresse-Ditto, 2011) on Red Wall by Jacob Cook, Jaron Pham and Zack Goldberg-Poch over a 28.5-hour push.

First ascent of *Wears Your Paddle?* (250m, 5.11) at N 72°30'00.2" W 54°38'10.7" by Bronwyn Hodgins, Jacob Cook and Kelsey Watts on 26 July 2022.

First ascent of *Fish Are Friends* (200m, 5.9+) at N 72°29'20.9" W 54°35'51.0" by Jaron Pham, Zack Goldberg-Poch and Angela VanWiemeersch on 26 July 2022.