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At the End of the World

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Actually, we should have been content, happy even. For days we had been climbing on this wall that rose 700 meters from the ice. For days our world had been tilted vertical. For days we had laboured, suffered, feared and

hoped. Until we had reached the highest point of the “Bastions”, a granite tower on the east coast of Baffin Island.

The wind had lulled as we sat in the sun on the summit plateau. No human had been here before us. No one had yet looked out from here over the Buchan Gulf, over the Cambridge and the Quernbiter Fjord, and the Icy Arm. In the east, the flow edge marked the boundary between the ice pack and the open sea. And further out, beyond the Baffin Bay, lay Greenland. For more than an hour we enjoyed the view, the peace. Then we started to rappel down to base. Actually, a load should have fallen from our shoulders now.

But Klaus Fengler, Holger Heuber, Mariusz Hoffmann, Robert Jasper and I knew very well that our lives would be depending on a shattering fundament. We had no more than 20 days to reach Clyde River, 350 kilometres away, each of us lugging a 75-kilogram pulka over melting ice.

Four Weeks Earlier

Looking out the window of the small Twin Otter, I felt like staring into a giant freezer and I realized that you can’t only feel the cold, but you can also see it. For hours we had been flying over a shimmering surface of snow and jumbled fjords. We were on the way to the end of the world in an environment not made for us humans. In the high north of Baffin Island, beyond the polar circle.

Our thermometer showed minus 29 degrees Celsius when the expedition team climbed out of the turboprop-machine at Pond Inlet. After a few breaths the dry cold air started to burn in our lungs. On the way down to the settlement our noses began to bleed. It was that cold! All the same, children were playing football in the ice covered streets, the fur collars of their jackets wide open. Nobody was wearing a hat. This was – said the Inuit – the first warmer day after a long hard winter, the beginning of spring.

About 1500 people live at Pond Inlet that counts among the northernmost settlements in Canada. Their houses stand in rows like grey, green and yellow matchboxes. Beyond the bay, the glaciers and snow capped mountains of Bylot Island seem to be standing on the ice pack. The Tununermiut that live here call the Pond Inlet “Mittimatalik” in their language.

History

Even before the Viking Leif Eriksson sailed from Greenland to the coast of Baffin Island in the summer of 1001, the local Inuit had brought their kayaks to water at what was now the “landing place” of Pond Inlet. They hunted for seals and whales. They chopped holes in the ice to fish in winter. They followed the herds of the caribou through the artic tundra. They lived in igloos and seal skin tents. Their nomadic life was tough. But they managed to survive on the fifth largest island of the world. It was later named after the British explorer William Baffin, who had sailed along the south coast of the island in 1615. He was followed by the brave captains Martin Frobisher, Henry Hudson, John Ross, William Edward Parry, John Franklin, Robert McClure and Roald Amundsen, who on their quest for the Northwest Passage also explored the coastal shape of Baffin Island.

It took until the nineteenth century, however, for Pond Inlet to become a significant port, when an increasing number of whalers became active in Baffin Bay.

A lively trade developed between the sailors and the Inuit. And the white wooden cross with the figure of Christ on the hill high above the village gives proof that it did not take long for the first missionaries to arrive in the high north.

Both the exchange with the Europeans and the policy of the Canadian government caused the Inuit to give up their traditional lifestyle by the middle of the twentieth century. Around 1965, both a dayschool and a boarding school were founded in Pond Inlet. More and more of the Tununermiut gave up their nomadic life and settled down. For centuries they had done without the comforts of a secure home, but they could not put up with the separation from their children. When the American anthropologist John Mathiasson visited Pond Inlet in 1963, only teachers, missionaries and a few government officials were living there. Ten years later, there was not a single Inuit family that had stayed „on the land“.

There is a simple reason, that – after seafarers, traders and clergymen – it is the climbers that have chosen Baffin Island as their goal: The vast potential of unclimbed rock walls. Only 15 years back, photographer Eugene Fisher made this fact known to the small world of expedition climbers. After surveying

Baffin Island by plane and bringing back a thorough photographic documentation, Fisher wrote: “Under the polar sun lies an island, forgotten by time and untouched by men. Double the size of Great Britain, this giant of the north guards a wonderful secret. 560 kilometres to the north of the polar circle the coast of Baffin Island is formed by wild fjords and glaciated valleys, hiding some of the highest and steepest rock walls of the world. It is almost unbelievable that in a time without boundaries such a vast, unexplored arena is waiting for the coming generation of climbers.”

Starting out

We lingered in Pond Inlet for five days. To get used to the cold that crept into bone and marrow. To sort 750 kilograms of material – freeze dried food, shoes, climbing gear, tents, sleeping bags, skis, und kites – into 35 packsacks. And to gather information: on the best route south over the ice, following the coast to the rock walls in the Buchan Gulf and further down to Clyde River. Not even the oldest Inuit had ever strayed so far from their settlement. But they could help all the same. Bending deeply over our map, they instructed us about the ice of winter, its thickness, its expanse. The Inuit in their language Inuktitut have a word for this knowledge: „Qaujimajatuqangit“. It stands for the experience that has been passed on from generation to generation because it is imperative for their survival in the ice.

We wanted to advance by dog sledges to the fjords fraying the east coast of Baffin Island – a romantic concept that has nothing to do with the real life of the Inuit.

They moved over the ice on motor sledges called “Skidoos”. Only the luggage is transported on old sledges, the „Qamutiiks“, whose long wooden skids are loosely tied to the horizontal stays so the sleighs can torque without breaking.

Packed into down jackets, the hands protected by thick gloves, and our caps pulled down deeply into our foreheads, we squatted on the Qamutiiks. Our journey took five days. Five days of freezing. And being jarred continuously on the uneven surface of the ice. Tossed up by maritime currents and winds, the sea formed meter high barriers of ice floes, freshly fallen snow and crevasses:

rough ice, on which the Qamutiiks regularly tipped over, having to be righted and newly packed.

The Goal of Yearning

It almost felt like deliverance when we finally started to get close to our goal, the Buchan Gulf. There, up to thousand meter high rock walls were said to grow out of the water. In 1937, a British expedition assigned by the Royal Geographical Society to explore and survey the Canadian Arctic sailed into this bay. One of the fjords was christened “Quernbiter” by the scientists. This was the name of the sword that – according to a legend – had been given to King Haakon of Norway (920– 961). A sword with a handle of pure gold and so sharp that its owner cold split a millstone. And there could not have been a more suitable name for the "Quernbiter" fjord, whose smooth walls seem to have been cut by the sharp blade of a mythical sword. No doubt that in this magic place a worthy goal was waiting for us.

Actually, at the beginning of our adventure we had no way of knowing if we would find a rock face that suited our expectations. Discovering a wall before you can climb it, to me is an essential component of modern rock climbing expeditions. We wanted this rock face to be as a high as possible, as steep as possible and as featureless as possible. We were not certain at all that such a project actually existed. But we were prepared to set out, to expose ourselves to the cold, the ice and the sea because of our hope and enthusiasm for these “undiscovered” regions. And thus add a small, but interesting chapter to the history of discoveries.

The Juwel

We were not disappointed. Entering Buchan Gulf we already saw the Bastions, whose south face looked as if it had been treated with sand paper. Like a shark's fin it jutted out of the ice, vertical from the first meter.

There are almost 30 climbing routes in the 26 fjords of Baffin Island's east coast. In the summer of 2008 we were the only team visiting the northern fjords of Baffin Island. At the foot of the Bastions we set up our camp. In comparison to the vast camps of Himalayan expeditions, our three tents on the merely a few centimeters thick ice crust was a sorry sight. We established

one pitch after the other, gaining between 50 and 150 meters a day. We climbed up shaky flakes, crept over smooth slabs. Wedging our fingers, hands, shoulders and entire bodies into cracks – after extricating the ice. In the evenings, we fixed the ropes at the highest point, and rapped to the crusted sea. There we could more ore less recuperate and wait out the storms that raged over Baffin Bay on one day of three, gathering speed unhindered on their way over the ice until they slammed against the wall of the Bastions. On such a day any thought of climbing was preposterous – and it remained cold on the fine days. But luckily, on the wall itself a favorable microclimate of about zero degrees Celsius developed. The rock really heated up.

Sunday, May 11th

About two thirds up the wall, a girdle of iron crystals wrapped the Bastions like a rusty belt. It was about half a meter wide: Enough to stand on, but too narrow for sleeping. We set up our Portaledges to spend the following three nights high on the wall of this gigantic refrigerator, each of us snoring into the ear of his neighbor. Our sleeping bags, down jackets and -pants for weeks had been put to a tough test. When one of us turned over, some other thought he would fall out of the Portaledge. Everything somehow had to be tied to the rock. The white gas stove on which we arduously melted snow. And also the white plastic ton together with the countless packsacks filled with snow hauled up from the icy surface. Toilsomely, one at a time, we got ready for climbing in the morning, putting on overpants and jackets, climbing shoes and helmets. We forced down a fast cup of coffee and some granola before setting out. Along a thin finger crack, we initially had to climb on aid. Then we followed a white vein of quartz: jubilating and squealing alternately as the crystals offered superb jamming but bit into our hands without mercy leaving deep cuts. After we had severed our connection to terra firma, the weather remained stable for four days. Long enough to reach the summit. And long enough to climb most sections of the route redpoint. We managed to free even the tricky finger crack. At 5.13c/A4, the route may offer the hardest free climbing on Baffin Island.

May 15th

Wistfully, our thoughts wandered back to the fortnight we had spent on the Bastions. In the endless expanse of the arctic the wall had been a form of refuge. A form of support that had made bearable the surrounding unrealness: The sea of fog, forced to the ground by a lid of cold air. The midnight sun shining red on the granite. The pure, untouched, blue shimmering ice. That very soon would be gone. Just a few hours after setting out for Clyde River, the march became unendurable. Our hipbones were rubbed raw by the straps of the pulkas. But more than pain and deprivation, uncertainty was worrying us: “What will happen if we get pinned down by a blizzard? If we lose too much time? If the ice shatters?“ No one could have come to our rescue: We could not have been reached by skidoos over the ice. And the boats of the Inuit are not sturdy enough to travel the open sea. A rescue would have been very unlikely.

An ice cold wind blew from the northwest, whirling clouds of spindrift over the frozen surface. Although it plastered our hair and our beards with rime, we were full of glee. For now we could unpack our kites: eleven square meter sails, maneuvered like parapents, with which we whizzed over the ice on our skis at a breathtaking speed of up to 40 kilometers. On those days we easily made 20, 30 or even 40 kilometers. We sailed past icebergs, jumping over cracks though which already the seawater was welling up. We steered past holes filled with melt water and unfathomable viscous blue lagoons. Until, in the livid light of midnight, we made up our minds to call it a day and put up our tents.

19 Days Later

Almost no one took notice of the five dishevelled, bearded men approaching Clyde River.

Only the sledge dogs started to bark wildly. The light was sallow, dark clouds were gathering. Another storm was moving in, but we didn’t care any more. We were only happy to have finally reached our goal. We named our route on the Bastions “Take the Long Way Home" as it was only after the end of climbing, that the true adventure began. For me it was an important lesson in humility. To move over the ice for hours without getting closer to the next

landmark. For this frame of mind, the Inuit have word: "Taulittuq" they call the experience when you are resolutely moving towards a goal, yet filled by a sense of never reaching it. It is a word we are sure to remember – as it may describe our life better than any other term.

More information, text and images at:
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