

EAST GREENLAND (SORTEBRAE) 2007



We left the UK for Greenland on 2 June 2007, bound for an unvisited glacier in the Sortebrae area of East Greenland. Our expectations were high, our minds full of unclimbed alpine peaks and what we would achieve. Achieve them we did, but there was an Arctic Odyssey awaiting us....

After a series of delays caused by mechanical failure and a lengthy period of bad weather, our advance party left for our Greenland landing site almost a week late. The flight to Greenland was one which will live long in our memories. Words cannot do justice to the beauty of the ice flecked sea, eventually meeting the mountains and the glaciers under a curtain of mist. The flight felt too short, too rushed to allow us to feast our eyes on the spectacle and drink in its beauty, its remoteness, its splendour. This was the Arctic, and there was no doubt that it was everything we had expected. Months of poring over aerial photos paid off as we were able to pick out key features, though acknowledgement was brief - every new vista revealed something even more beautiful, more breathtaking, that demanded we feast our eyes until the next spectacle loomed on the horizon



The reverie was broken when we landed. Down, but travelling at a rate of knots, the plane stopped violently as it encountered soft snow and buried itself in the glacier. Two days of digging and a reinforcement of mechanics saw the plane back on the level, and it returned to Iceland for the second half of our party, who were landed c.30km from our position, and reunion filled the next few days.

We then split into two parties, exploring separate subsidiary glaciers for a route onto the icecap. The forays were successful, with both teams getting members onto the icecap, from which three new peaks were climbed at F and PD-. We returned in murky weather to find a fresh supra-glacial river cutting off our tents, necessitating a long detour. The following day we raced the sun for the snow bridge to move base camp to a safer position, the abnormally warm temperatures beginning to be a factor of real concern.

The new position brought access to new peaks, and ascents were made of some incredible mountains, black spires upon a knife edge against a background of endless, smooth white glaciers. The rock was generally avoided in favour of faces and ridges in incredible situations, at about PD in standard. Ski descents were made from the base of some routes, on snow of varying condition. At the same time, another party travelled to retrieve the equipment a previous expedition had been forced to abandon, encountering crevasse falls and worryingly bad snow conditions before returning with more fully loaded pulks.

A growing realisation that the Twin Otter would not return for us in our present position forced another move, this time very heavily laden, for higher ground. The plane returned for the excess kit, only to bury its nose in the glacier once again, and requiring our (now expert) extraction techniques. The situation was less serious than the first burial, and the plane was on its way in the early hours – though too late for us to set out on the hill. The following day, teams struck out for Borgetinde and two nearby unnamed peaks, one unclimbed. We skinned through alpine terrain made more serious, more beautiful by the vastness and the silence of the Arctic, passing impressive seracs and the debris of huge avalanches. Teams reached a high point on the Borgetinde summit tower and retreated from a sentinel peak at the mouth of the Borgetinde glacier in bad snow conditions. A new peak was climbed by a third team, following a knife edge snow arête with a kilometre of empty space clutching their feet on the one side, and the Borgetinde plateau area shimmering below on the other. From the summit (2559m) we could see the sea. The ski descent, believed to be the first from the Borgetinde plateau, was one of the best mountain experiences of my life. Floating down powder, gliding on neve, we passed under huge walls and between immense seracs and crevasses carving the face of the mountain, the only sound the scrape of our skis in the vast silence of the Arctic mountain-landscape. Eventually we were spat out onto the main glacier, antlike against the splendid backdrop. This was one of the most incredible experiences of my life, something beyond that I can imagine experiencing in a less remote place. There is something about the Arctic, something that I glimpsed that day, which will be with me forever, calling me back.



Repeated plane burials meant Flugfelag would not land for us in our current position. We needed to move to a position on the edge of the icecap, over 30 km away, fully laden, in two days. This immediately after a 16 hour day on the mountain in which we had covered 32 km. A routine of 1 hours pulking then 5 minutes rest saw us there in time, passing through completely unvisited areas, climbing ever higher. The focus on achieving the objective left little time for dwelling that our trip was coming to an end, the arrival of the Twin Otter heralding a strangely subdued atmosphere. We could have stayed there much longer.

With our thanks to the Arctic Club for the Arctic Club Award. A comprehensive report will be published in late September.