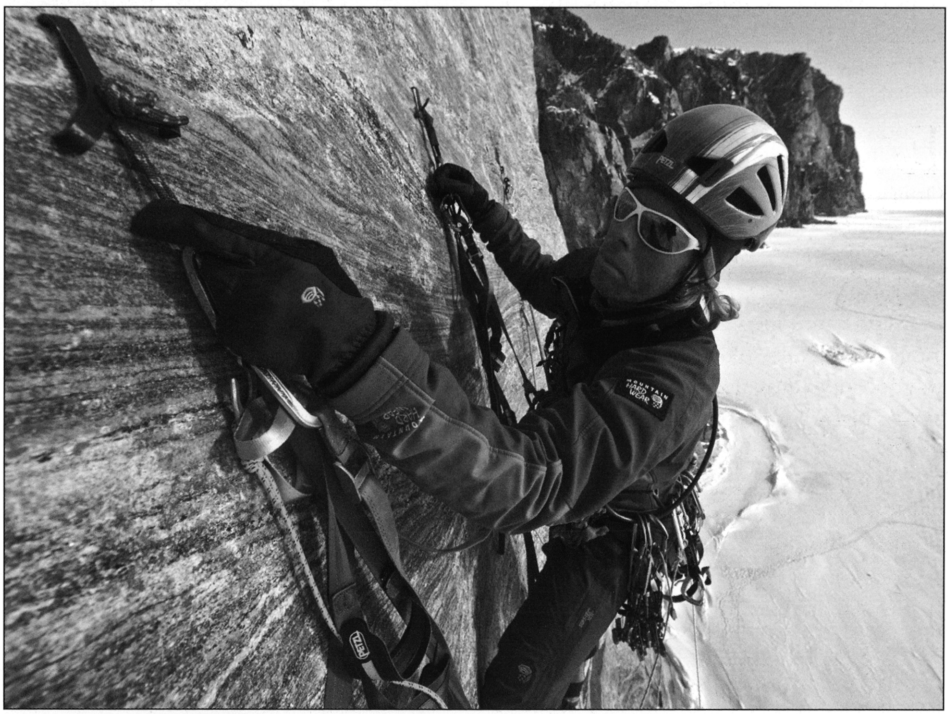
Take the Long Way Home

The first climb in Baffin Island's super-remote Buchan Gulf.

Stefan Glowacz

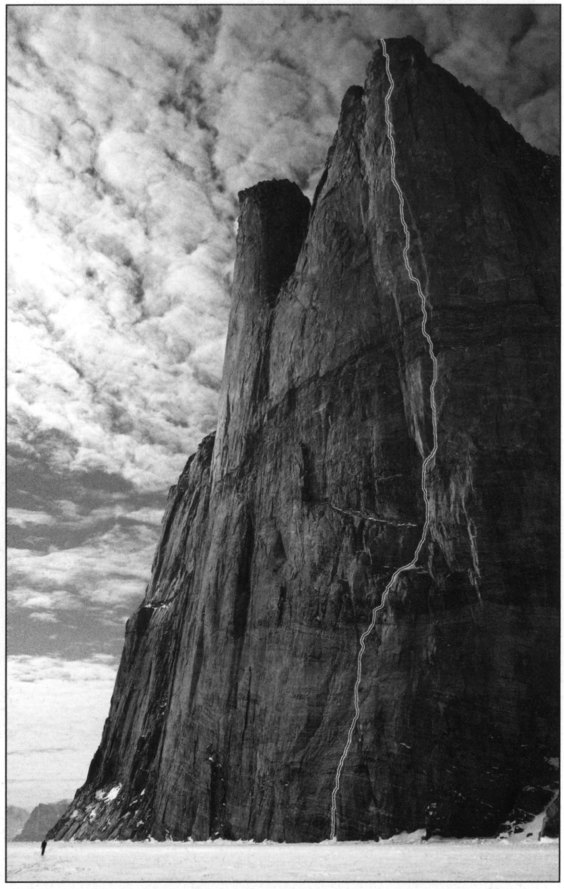


Robert Jasper on the third pitch, south face of the Bastions. The 21-pitch route combined difficult aid with exceptional free climbing for an Arctic route. *Klaus Fengler*

We should have been content. For days we had been climbing a wall that rose more than 600 meters from the frozen sea on the east coast of Baffin Island. For days we had labored, suffered, feared, and hoped. Now we sat in the sun, in calm air, atop the highest point of the Bastions, a row of imposing granite towers.

No human had been here before us. No one had yet looked out from such a high point over Buchan Gulf, over Cambridge and Quernbiter fjords, and the Icy Arm. In the east we could see the flow edge marking the boundary between the ice pack and the open sea. For more than an hour we enjoyed the view, the peace, and then we started to rappel down toward base camp. The weight should have been lifted from our shoulders.

But Klaus Fengler, Holger Heuber, Mariusz Hoffmann, Robert Jasper, and I knew very well that our lives still depended on an overwhelming fact. It was mid-May, and we had no more than 20 days to reach Clyde River, 350 kilometers away, before the breakup of the sea ice might make travel impossible. We would be traveling on skis, each of us lugging a 75- to 100-kilogram pulka over the melting ice.



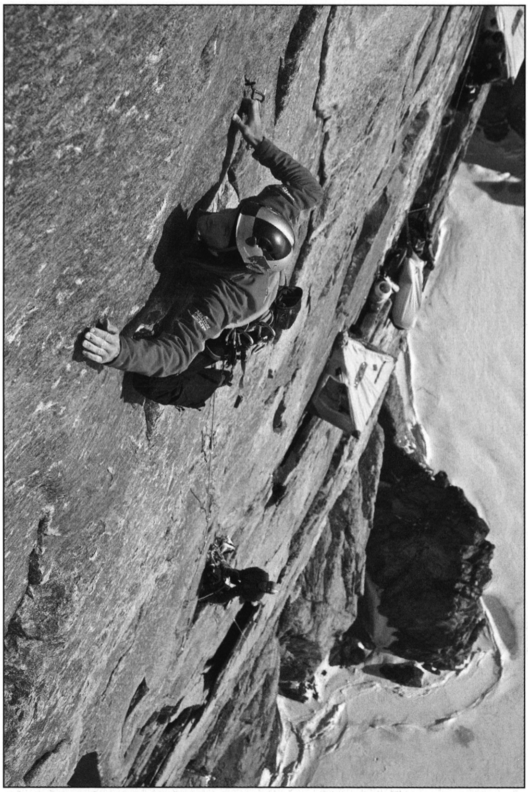
The line of Take the Long Way Home (ca 650m, 5.13b A4) on the south face of the Bastions. *Klaus Fengler*

Four weeks earlier. Looking out the window of the small Twin Otter was like staring into a giant freezer, and I realized that you not only can feel the cold, you can also see it. For hours we had been flying over a shimmering surface of snow and jumbled ice. We were on the way to the end of the world in an environment in which humans struggle to survive.

Our thermometer showed –29°C when the expedition team climbed out of the turboprop plane at Pond Inlet, in the far north of Baffin Island. 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. Meanwhile, children played football on the ice-covered streets, the fur collars of their jackets wide open. Nobody was wearing a hat. The Inuit said this was the first warmer day after a long, hard winter—the beginning of spring.

About 1,500 people live at Pond Inlet, their houses standing in rows like gray, green, and yellow matchboxes. Beyond the bay, the glaciers and snowcapped mountains of Bylot Island seem to stand right on the ice pack. Long before Leif Eriksson sailed from Greenland to the coast of Baffin Island around 1001, the Inuit hunted seals and whales here from kayaks. They chopped holes in the ice to fish in winter. They lived in igloos and sealskin tents. It was not until the 19th century that Pond Inlet became a significant port, when an increasing number of whalers visited Baffin Bay.

Exchange with Europeans and the policies of the Canadian government caused the Inuit to give up their traditional lifestyle by the middle of the 20th century. Around 1965, a day school and a boarding school were founded in Pond Inlet, and the Tununermiut people gradually settled in town. When the American anthropologist John Mathiasson visited Pond Inlet



Stefan Glowacz on the crux 5.13b pitch of Take the Long Way Home. The team free-climbed about 85 percent of the route, but some of the free pitches were not redpointed because of poor rock or inadequate protection. *Klaus Fengler*

in 1963, only teachers, missionaries, and a few government officials lived there. Ten years later, not a single Inuit family lived "on the land" away from town.

There is a simple reason that climbers come to Baffin Island: vast unclimbed rock walls. It was photographer Eugene Fisher who revealed the potential in the fjords north and west of Clyde River to the small world of expedition big-wall climbers. After surveying Baffin Island by plane and bringing back hundreds of photographs, Fisher published articles in the 1995 *American Alpine Journal* and in *Climbing* magazine (No. 147), where he wrote: "Under the polar sun lies an island forgotten by time and virtually untouched by modern man.... It seems impossible that in this age of shrunken frontiers there could be such an unexplored arena waiting for the next generation of aspiring climbers."

Twenty-six fjords, from 18 to 70 miles long, split Baffin's coast. I had probed one of these fjords in 2000, when four of us paddled sea kayaks from Clyde River to the end of Eglinton Fjord. We carried our gear to a small valley where we climbed a wall on an unnamed mountain, and then paddled back to Clyde River. During the late 1990s and early years of this decade, climbers pushed farther to the northwest, traveling to Sam Ford Fjord and ultimately Gibbs Fjord and Scott Island by snow machine. Now we proposed to explore the walls of Buchan Gulf, more than 125 kilometers farther from Clyde River than anyone had tried to climb before.

We lingered in Pond Inlet for five days, getting used to the cold that crept into bone and marrow. We had to sort 750 kilograms of material—freeze-dried food, shoes, climbing gear, tents, sleeping bags, skis, and kites—into 35 pack sacks. And we tried to gather information on the best route south and east over the ice, following the coast to the rock walls in Buchan Gulf, and then over sea ice and snow-covered land to Clyde River. Not even the oldest Inuit had traveled all the way to Clyde River over the ice. But they could help all the same. Bending over our maps, they instructed us about the winter ice—its thickness, its expanse. The Inuit have a word for this knowledge: *qaujimajatuqangit.* It means the experience that has been passed from generation to generation because it is imperative for survival on the ice.

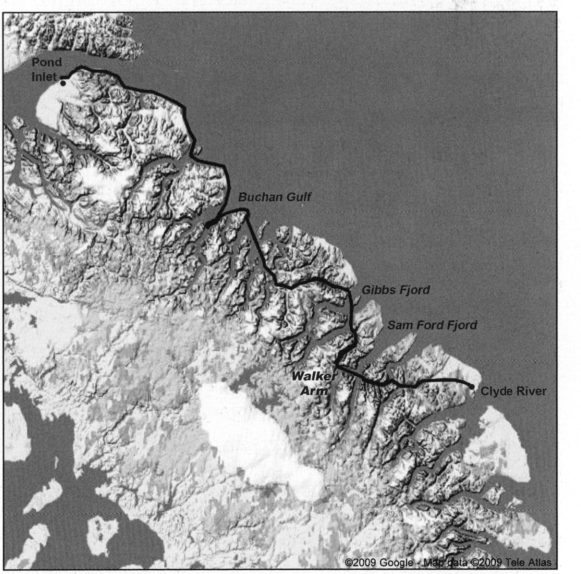
We had hoped to travel by dog sled to Buchan Gulf, a romantic notion that has nothing to do with the real life of the Inuit. They move over the ice on snow machines. Only the luggage is transported on old sledges, the qamutiiks, whose long, wooden skids are loosely tied to horizontal stays so the sleighs can torque without breaking.

Packed into down jackets, our hands protected by thick gloves and our caps pulled down over 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 by maritime currents and winds, the sea formed meter-high barriers of ice slabs, freshly fallen snow, and crevasses. The qamutiiks frequently tipped over and had to be righted and repacked.

It felt like deliverance when we finally approached Buchan Gulf. There, up to 1,000-meter-high rock walls were said to emerge from 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 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 could split a millstone. And indeed the smooth walls of Quernbiter Fjord and the surrounding bays seemed to have been carved with the sharp blade of a mythical sword.

After exploring and photographing the walls of Buchan Gulf and the radiating fjords, we returned to the foot of the Bastions, at the mouth of the gulf, to set up our base camp. The formation's south face jutted like a shark's fin from the ice, vertical from the first meter, and we were satisfied from our exploration that it offered the best possible route. Soon our Inuit helpers sped away on their snow machines, and we were left in silence. In comparison to the vast camps of Himalayan expeditions, our three tents on the ice were a sorry sight.

With no time to waste, we began climbing immediately. We gained between 50 and 150 meters a day, climbing up shaky flakes and creeping over smooth slabs. Often we had to extract ice from the cracks before wedging in our fingers, hands, and shoulders. In the evenings, we fixed ropes at the highest point and rappelled to the crusted sea. There we could more or less recuperate and wait out the storms that raged over Baffin Bay one day out of three, gathering speed until they slammed against the wall of the Bastions. On such days any thought of climbing was preposterous. It remained cold on the good days, but



The climbers used snow machines to travel 265 kilometers from Pond Inlet to Buchan Gulf. After the climb, they trekked and kite-skied 350 kilometers to Clyde River.

The climbers started for Clyde River across frozen Buchan Gulf the day after they topped out on the Bastions. The journey lasted 19 days. *Klaus Fengler*

luckily a favorable microclimate of about 0 degrees Celsius developed on the wall. The rock really heated up.

About two thirds of the way up the face, 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 here to spend the final three nights of the climb. We had hauled a white plastic barrel and several bags full of snow to melt for water. The weather remained stable during the next four days, giving us enough time to reach the summit and to free-climb most of the pitches. In all, we free-climbed about 85 percent of the route, although not all of the free pitches were redpointed, because of poor rock and very difficult protection. We did redpoint the hardest pitch at 8a (5.13b), which may be the hardest free climbing on Baffin Island.

Back at camp at the base of the wall, we prepared for the trek to Clyde River. Wistfully, our thoughts wandered back to the fortnight we had spent on the Bastions. In the endless expanse of the Arctic, the wall had seemed like a refuge.

Just a few hours after setting out for Clyde River, the march already seemed unendurable. Our hipbones were rubbed raw by the straps of the pulkas. But more unsettling than the pain and deprivation was the uncertainty. In the summer of 2008, we were the only team visiting the northern fjords of Baffin Island. What would happen if we got pinned down by a blizzard? If the sea ice melted and made travel impossible? Although we had the tools to communicate with the outside world, a rescue seemed unlikely.

On the fifth day after starting, an ice-cold wind blew from the northwest, whirling clouds of spindrift over the ice. Although it plastered our hair and our beards with rime, we were full of glee. For now we could unpack our kites: 11-square-meter sails, maneuvered like parapentes,

with which we whizzed over the ice on our skis at breathtaking speeds of up to 40 kph. On those days we easily made 20, 30, or even 40 kilometers. We sailed past icebergs, jumping over cracks through which seawater welled up toward the surface. We steered past blue lagoons of melt water. In the livid light of midnight, we finally called it a day and put up our tents. These were exhilarating days, but, unfortunately, we were able to use the kites only five days out of the 17 that we trekked.

Almost no one took notice of the five disheveled, bearded men approaching Clyde River. Only the sled dogs noticed and started barking wildly as we arrived. Another storm was moving in, but we didn't care. We had finally reached our goal.

We named our route Take the Long Way Home, because it was only after the end of the climbing that the true adventure began. For me it was an important lesson in humility to move over the ice for hours without feeling any closer to the next landmark. For this frame of mind, the Inuit have another word: *taulittuq*. This is what they call the experience when you are resolutely moving toward a goal, yet filled with the sense of never reaching it. It is a word we are sure to remember, as it may describe our lives better than any other.

See photos of other walls in Buchan Gulf on the next page.

SUMMARY:

AREA: Buchan Gulf, Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada

ASCENT: First ascent of Take the Long Way Home (ca 650m, 5.13b A4, 21 pitches) on the south face of the Bastions, by Klaus Fengler, Stefan Glowacz, Holger Heuber, Mariusz Hoffmann, and Robert Jasper, May 2–14, 2008. The climbers fixed ropes to about two-thirds height, and then climbed from a portaledge camp for four days to reach the summit. They approached Buchan Gulf from Pond Inlet by snow machine (five days), and after the climb they skied for 17 days (plus two rest days) to reach Clyde River, 350 kilometers to the southeast.

A NOTE ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

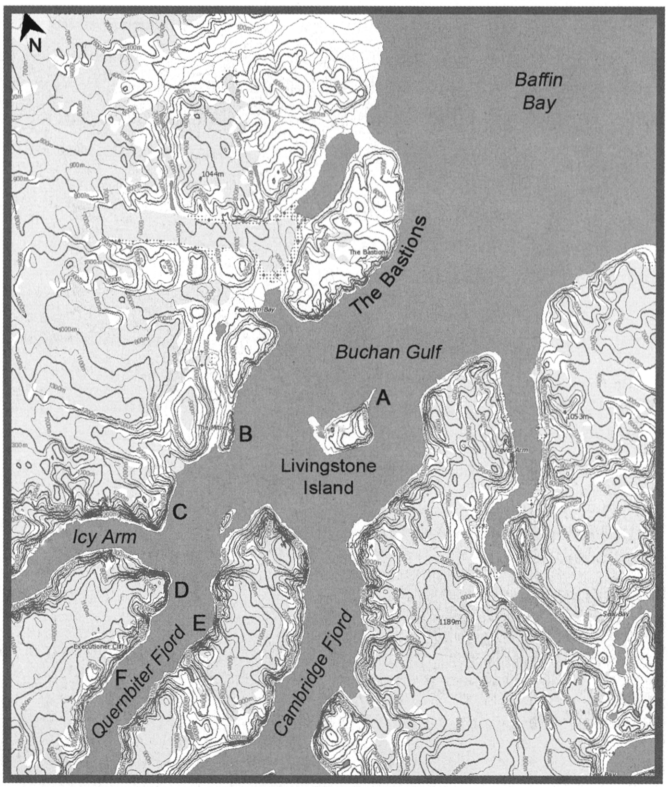
A former champion sport climber, Stefan Glowacz now focuses on adventurous climbs around the world, from Antarctica and Patagonia to far northern Canada. Born in 1965, he lives with his wife and five children in Garmisch Partenkirchen, Bavaria.

This story was cowritten with Tom Dauer. A different version of the article appeared in Geo, Klettern, *and* Desnivel.

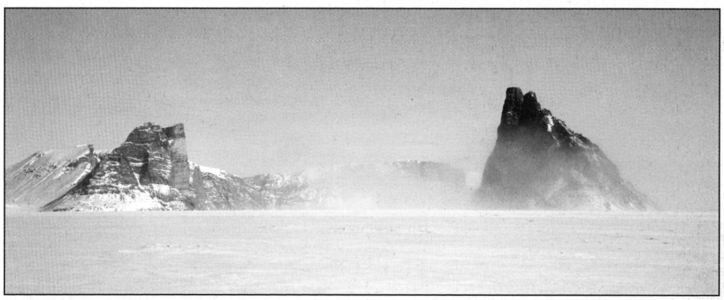
The team at Clyde River: end of the road. From left, Holger Heuber, Robert Jasper, Stefan Glowacz, Mariusz Hoffmann, and Klaus Fengler. *Klaus Fengler*

THE WALLS OF BUCHAN GULF

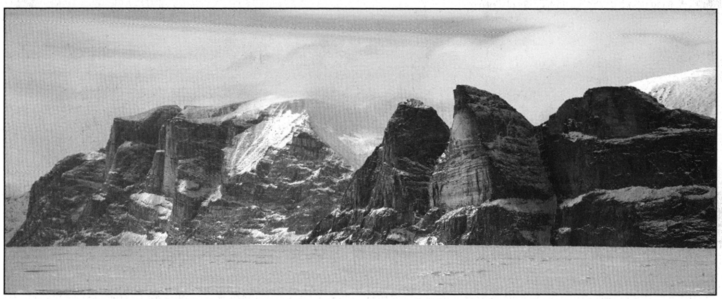
Before beginning their new route on the Bastions, the German expedition explored the walls lining Buchan Gulf, Icy Arm, and Quernbiter Fjord. All photos by Klaus Fengler.



Base map: © Department of Natural Resources Canada.

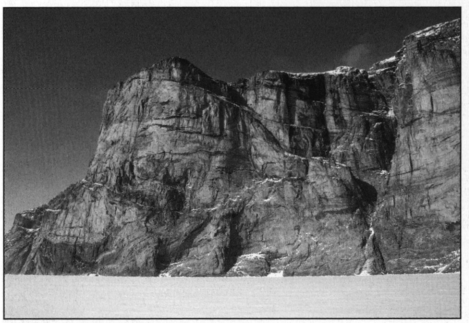


A. Walls on the east and south sides of Livingstone Island rise at least 600m above the sea ice. Beyond, ca 1,200m walls near the mouth of Cambridge Fjord.

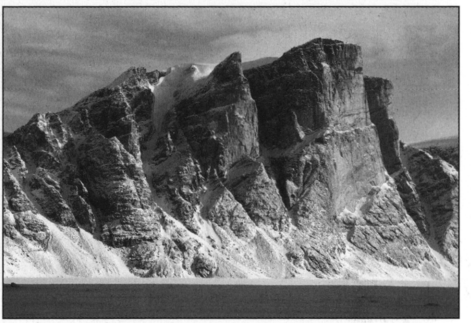


B. The Mitres (ca 600m), with the unnamed walls at the entrance to Icy Arm to the left.

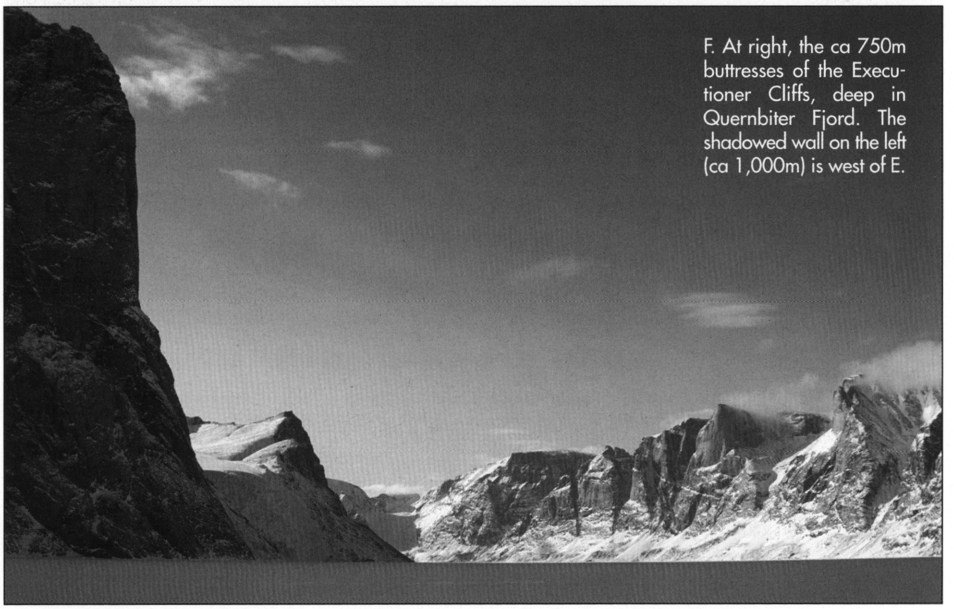
C. The team practices kite skiing in front of the 750m to 900m walls near the mouth of Icy Arm.



D. The imposing, southeast-facing Executioner Cliffs (up to 950m), near the mouth of Quernbiter Fjord.



E. A ca 1,000m northwest face on the south side of Quernbiter Fjord.



F. At right, the ca 750m buttresses of the Executioner Cliffs, deep in Quernbiter Fjord. The shadowed wall on the left (ca 1,000m) is west of E.