

# HUT TOWER COULOIR

SCOTTISH GRADE VII, ED2, A1, 1500FT

Alaska's Ruth Gorge is home to many of the most futuristic mixed lines in the world. It's also home to terrible weather and some of the most nightmarish steep snow around.

**Olly Metherell** and James Mehigan paid a visit to find their bad dreams come true yet still left with a fine new route.

**D**avid gunned the engine of the Beaver Cub and with a piston roar, the tiny aeroplane accelerated down the Ruth Glacier and took off towards Talkeetna, the sound of its engine making an eerie sound as it echoed off the walls of the Gorge. James Mehigan and I had the entire Ruth Gorge to ourselves. Standing beside four weeks worth of climbing equipment and food we watched the tiny aeroplane until it faded into the blue sky, the sound of its engine replaced by a deafening silence.

James and I had met when we were climbing bums together out in Chamonix and since then, he'd somehow managed to combine a PhD, and a barrister pupillage with regular Alpine binges. He'd been on successful expeditions to Greenland and Patagonia and we'd been training for the Alaskan trip together in Scotland and the Alps for nearly a year. Our eyes met. Between us, we'd climbed on five continents but we'd never been anywhere like The Ruth Gorge before. The cliffs on the west side of the Gorge were a vertical mile high and, it was said, that the interior of the Gorge was so massive that a Boeing 747 could circle in its depths.

Suddenly, all our bold talk in the pub about how we were going to Alaska to pioneer new routes seemed a lot less likely now. Located near Denali, the highest mountain in America, the Ruth has long been a climbing backwater. Until 1997, only a double handful of climbers had visited the Ruth. In the last 10 years, it had become more popular, with the establishment of routes like *Snow Patrol* (by Brits Chinnery and Sharpe), *The Gift that Keeps on Giving* (by Americans, Blitz, House and Twilight). Now the Gorge was no longer the preserve of climbing geeks.

In my hands, I held a black and white photocopy of a topo that Yvonne Sibbald had sent me from the Alpine Club library. Just before we left, the American Alpine Club had published a topo that contained an updated list of every single route that had been climbed in the Ruth to date. As I read the article back in Edinburgh, my heart raced. Clearly, there were still acres of unclimbed territory in this part of the Gorge. But it was an intimidating place. The first uncharted terrain that caught our eyes was the massive, soaring buttress of Mount Johnson. A route that is, according to the guide, 'one of the most beautiful unclimbed faces in the Alaska'. And that's not the only line that is still unclimbed. There's the East Face of Mount Church, a massive wall split by a big Gully. Not to mention the unclimbed Nisbet Line on Dickey and most infamous of all, the fabled 'Laser Line' on Mount Dickey.

I got the chance to meet a Ruth Gorge pioneer at the International Meet in February called Freddie Wilkinson. "Yeah man," he drawled in his American accent, "there's a lot of 'big' lines in the Gorge, but the thing I've learnt over the years is that they aren't often in condition. Everyone knows where they are,

but they're kinda like community projects," he said. "They only come into condition once every 20 years. If they are not in, then avoid the big lines. What you want to go for is a series of interlinked features. Over the years, I've learnt that that is the kind of objective that you are more likely to be successful on."

For our first few days, we skinned around looking for something to climb. To be honest, we needed a bit of time just to get used to the scale of the place. We found windslab on the approach to 747 Pass – the col between Dickey and Bradley. The approach to Mount Church needed three people to make it safe. Mount Wake looked amazing, but the bergschrund on the approach was gaping wide open. "No way" said James. "Looks to me like a waste of a day." Twice we attempted to walk up to The Mooses Tooth. Both times we were turned back by snow. We had now been in the Ruth for 11 days and we had nothing to show for it except two rather full 'Clean Mountain Cans'.

The regularity of the weather was astounding. Every night it would snow and we would spend the morning shovelling out the area around the tent. It then brightened up in the afternoon and we'd prepare ourselves for climbing the next day, only to be foiled by another fall of snow as we slept. Our jokes were also without variety. Radio reception was awful in the remote gorge and every time we heard the country twang of Nashville's finest music from the only station we could find on the dial the punch line was the same. "We've got both types of music here," we said. "Country. And Western."

However, it wasn't all bad. The place where David dropped us off was next to a palatial snow cave. In fact, with its snow-saw built walls, like a snow-constructed version of the Great Wall of China, it was more like a World War One trench complex than a Base Camp. It had a generously proportioned snow cave for storing food, the 'garden', for gearing up and storing the skis. Not to mention the six-foot hole for the tent, a dedicated toilet area and generous shelter from the wind. It had been built by a local mountain guide whose client was unable to climb for their entire stay, so trench building was the order of the day.

Finally, we got a mini-weather window. On 13th April at 7.30am, James and I were at the foot of a narrow couloir that snaked up between the Werewolf and Hut Towers. We had looked at the route while skiing the previous day and seen a line of white that went up the entire length of the couloir. This enticing line of white was not the widest, but from a certain angle, it looked intact. We hoped that it was steep gully ice. Already having been warned about what the Alaskan mountains can throw at you we had to be prepared for anything. We both had our fingers crossed that it would be solid enough to climb.

When we started the route we could not believe that such a stunning looking line was still unclimbed. The first 300m consisted of Grade II gully bashing and as I left the ground for the first technical pitch the névé squeaked like styrofoam as I punched my axes into it. The terrain steepened and my axe went light. I'd punched through the snow into a black cave and I realised, to my dismay, that this line of white was a far cry from the pleasant Chamonix style gully bashing that we'd been expecting. Behind the snow was a huge and completely unexpected dark space. It was like a bit like doing some minor DIY to a room only to accidentally knock through a wall and find an unanticipated, vault-like, empty space behind it. This climb was making its own rules. Feeling a bit queasy, I realised, that our chosen route consisted of a curtain of unconsolidated snow that veiled a spectacular and sometimes overhanging fault.

But it wasn't all bad. Running through the powder were these octopus-like tentacles of semi-hardened snow. "There has to be a way around this" I thought. Then I remembered watching Mick Fowler making an ascent of an overhanging gully in Scotland. "If you're going to climb ice," he quipped, "you have to use your head." He then started smashing down the overhang by headbutting the ice. Inspired by this creative technique, I lifted my hood over my lid and started headbutting the veil of snow-ice.

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