

# D4 Octapod: A unique portaledge that is lightweight, low-profile and easy to set up



Before I fell deeply in love with the Octapod portaledge—made by visionary climber John Deucey ("Deuce") Middendorf for his company, D4—I was beginning to hate it. I'll explain, but first some background....

I acquired the Octapod to tackle an unclimbed big wall in Cochamo, Chile, that I had been dreaming of for years. Why the Octapod? Because few people know portaledges as well as Deuce does. After all, he invented the classic A5 Portaledge that facilitated multiday big-wall ascents in such harsh environments as Polar Sun Spire on Baffin Island, the North Face of Trango Tower in Pakistan, and Cerro Escudo in Patagonia, among other big walls around the world, including his own route in 1992 with Xaver Bongard, The Grand Voyage on Great Trango Tower using an experimental A5 titanium two-person portaledge. The [A5 and Deucey](#) were so ahead of the technological curve that the company was bought by The North Face in the late 1990s. But after a few years and a company-wide restructuring, Deucey and A5 were out.

"I had a non-compete so I couldn't continue my dream of creating even better ledges," Deuce told me, "so I moved on."

Fortunately for adventurous climbers, he was back at it by 2015. Together with his friend Chris Trull (and based out of Australia now), he started designing a

new line of D4 portaledges. It was immediately obvious to me that these were state of the art: the ledges include lightweight materials and ball joints, as well as shock cords for seamless self-assembly; and there are no finicky spreader bars. And they were even making these funky unconventional designs such as the octagonal-shaped Octapod.



Chris Kalman enjoying the comfort of the D4 Octapod portaledge at the top of the third pitch of Moonlight Buttress (V 5.12+) in Zion National Park. [Photo] Nelson Klein

"The new 'weird' shapes," Deuce told me, "are driven by seeking maximum ergonomics with minimal packed size. The whole concept of a continuously shock-corded, eight-piece frame with all frame sections the same overall length [that] fold compactly took some discovery...and it is the key to the D4 design."

I lugged the Octapod all the way to Southern Chile, up into the Cochamo Valley, through some of the densest forest I'd ever braved, and a few pitches up a slab. My friend Neha Khurana carried it on her back (along with food, water, and sleeping gear for a few days) while following those pitches of 5.7 friction. We made it one pitch higher before wet conditions and unprotectable stone made bailing the only sane option.

For the next few months, the ledge sat in my camp in Cochamo, and then my

garage, reminding me of a mounting debt of promises. Promises I had made to *Alpinist* and Deuce to review it; promises I made to myself to use it. I was pretty bummed to leave Cochamo not having made good on those.

In early June, I found myself with a rare opportunity to disappear off the grid for an entire three-day weekend. So I planned a trip to Zion with my friend Nelson Klein, to establish a new route in the Kolob Canyon area. Kolob seemed to be a trove of potential new lines. But after Nelson, his girlfriend Coral, and I dragged our *first* load of gear (ledge not included) through a four-hour approach—a steep hill of unrelenting scrub oak toward a beautiful-looking line—we were stunned to see bolts glistening in the sun high up on the headwall. Who in god's name had been up there and climbed it already, I have no idea. Might have been Deuce himself. Even if the line had been untouched, the approach was so gnarly that the idea of returning with the ledge, food and water was almost unthinkable.

This was the time at which I was hating that ledge. All responsibility. No fun. I was sick of carrying it around, both physically and emotionally. I'd never used a ledge on any of the 20 or so Grade III, IV, and V first ascents I'd done over the years. Probably because I'm a free climber, not an aid climber, which lends itself to the kind of terrain a person prefers not to haul on. "Fast and light" had always been my preferred style in the mountains. And even though I had my hands on one of the fastest and lightest portaledges in the world (this was before G7 launched their Kickstarter campaign for an inflatable portaledge), it still felt awfully slow and heavy compared to my typical new-routing kit. This, I would argue, is a salient point.

As light and easy as the D4 is, I wouldn't recommend it for an alpine-style push meant to last two, three, or even four days. Unless you are climbing an incredibly sheer face with no natural ledges at all—and if you're climbing something like that, you're probably aid climbing anyway, so who cares about an extra ten pounds?—just suffer through the night(s). You'll move much faster, and have better chances at success.





Neha Khurana following the opening slabs with a haul bag and portaledge on her back on an attempted new route in Cochamo with Kalman. Wet, vegetated, unprotectable rock eventually forced them to bail. [Photo] Chris Kalman

IT WAS NELSON'S IDEA, I think, that we climb Moonlight Buttress as a backup plan. I had always wanted to try Moonlight, but not until I felt that I was in very good Indian Creek shape. With six consecutive 5.12 pitches, I didn't expect to have the stamina to go ground-up on it in a day. Nelson suggested that by spending two days on the route, I might stand a better chance, and also get the ledge review off my back. Kill two birds with one stone. Brilliant!

And now, for the part of the review where I fall in love with the D4 Octapod. How do I love the Octapod? Let me count the ways.

First, the Octapod is so small that it fit *into* a medium-size haulbag, along with a double rack and personal climbing and sleeping gear.

Second, it was light enough that I could carry that haul bag without buckling the waist or chest belts. Both these points were crucial for crossing the swollen Virgin River, which was running about five times higher than usual. I very nearly fell into the rushing water during that crossing.



Third, the Octapod is incredibly easy to set up. Nelson and I started climbing around two in the afternoon. We hauled to the top of Pitch 3 (Pitch 4 of the free line). Since I knew what cinch it was to assemble the Octapod, we didn't pause there, but instead rode our momentum two pitches higher. I onsighted the first 12a, and almost onsighted the crux pitch. Too exhausted to fancy another burn that night (again, key point here), we rapped back down to Pitch 3, put the Octapod together in a jiffy, and settled in for a long and comfortable night.

Fourth, the Octapod is really comfortable! It's super short (I'm 5-foot-5 and my feet hung off the end), and with no spreader bar or center partition, I expected Nelson (who is 5-foot-8) and I to be spooning in the middle. But I couldn't have been more wrong. We slept head to foot, and both had plenty of room. We brought inflatable pads, which were crucial for head and feet (these otherwise would rest directly on the aluminum frame). I was more comfortable on the Octapod than I have been on any previous wall bivy. To be honest, it was even more comfortable than the previous night in the back of my Subaru Outback.

Fifth, I have to credit the Octapod (and Nelson, who selflessly carried all the food and water on the second day), for my send of Moonlight Buttress. Literally. No faux climber humility here. Had we been trying to climb the route in a day, that first fall would have completely annihilated any hopes I had of sending. But the ledge gave me a huge surplus of time and comfort to recover—something I had never experienced when trying hard multi-pitches. On the second day, after a good night's sleep, I sent the crux pitch, and then onsighted the rest of the route. Nelson, who started the day following the crux with three liters of water, a heavy camera, and all of our food, also climbed exceptionally well. I am certain I wouldn't have sent if I'd carried my own fair share of water and food.



Kalman crossing a swollen Virgin River after climbing Moonlight Butte. The Octapod fit neatly inside the medium-size haul bag seen here, along with sleeping gear, personal climbing gear, a rack, helmet and poo bag. [Photo] Nelson Klein

I GOT THE OCTAPOD for big backcountry first ascents. I still think it would be a great tool for those. But you have to find a steep wall, and if you're hauling and carrying a ledge, you'll go slow, which means more food and water, which means (probably) multiple carries to the base, which means slower still. All of these variables and logistical concerns make the margin for using the Octapod for the



purpose I had intended very slim. You need a lot of time, a lot of patience, and a little bit of luck, too. The issue is not so much with the Octapod, but with the external variables—variables I have limited time and patience for as I grow older.

But weekend warriors looking for a portaledge for big wall trade routes close to the road would do well to consider the Octapod. Both set-up and take-down are easier than any other ledge I've seen, and the weight and size leave no room for comparison. For platonic partners under 5-foot-9, the ledge (which appears tiny at first) was plenty big. For spooning partners, it would undoubtedly be downright dreamy.

*Kalman is a former Alpinist intern, an editor for the American Alpine Journal, and the author of [As Above, So Below: A Climbing Story](#). You can find more information about his work and climbing endeavors at [chriskalman.com](http://chriskalman.com). He has been climbing since 2000.*



Kalman settling in for a long comfy night on the D4 Octapod portaledge. You can see that, at 5-foot-5, Kalman's feet are hanging off the end. While short, the unique shape of the ledge accommodates "spooning mode." [Photo] Nelson Klein

## Pros

Super light (3.5kg w/o fly, just under 5kg with)

Super small (packs down to about 24 inches tall by 6 inches in diameter)

Super comfortable, Easy to set up. Rating: 5 stars.