

# the giraffe route el trono blanco, mexico

Without a doubt, North America has the finest selection of big walls in the world. From Alaska to Mexico, these walls encompass the extremes in terms of size, remoteness, and prevalent weather conditions. From the idyllic granite walls of Yosemite to the flawless sandstone cliffs of Zion to the bizarre and intimidating Black Canyon, all levels of commitment and challenges abound.

Early in the winter of 1993, I travelled with Jeff Hollenbaugh to Baja, Mexico and the 1,600-foot granite wall of El Trono Blanco – pictured right. Except for an ancient article by Scott Baxter called Poor Man's Patagonia, published in *Climbing* in 1974, little information has appeared on this area. Actually called Canyon Tajo, it is like a smaller version of Joshua Tree with many great crags found among the granular exfoliating domes. The largest of these is El Trono Blanco, which extends into the Laguna Salada valley and whose big wall faces away from Canyon Tajo, requiring a careful exploratory-type drive into the area, and then a hellish descent to the base of the wall.

Jeff and I were considering a new route on the face, although neither of us had ever seen it. I had sketchy information from various people, several widely varying maps, and topos of some of the routes – the Pan American, the South Face, and the Happy Hooker. We knew of the Giraffe only from a speculative line drawn on the photo from Baxter's article from someone who had once attempted the Pan Am route, and that John Long, Billy Westbay, and Hugh Burton had established it sometime in the early 1970s.

It took us two full day's driving on rough 4WD roads to find the area, which required many miles of wandering lost on unmarked roads. Our maps, at least a decade old, were of no use, as they



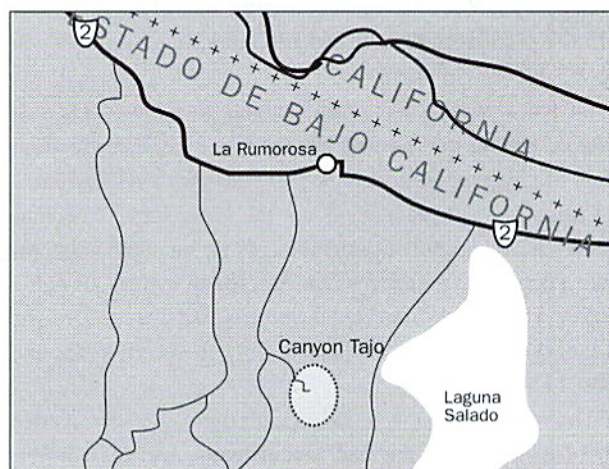
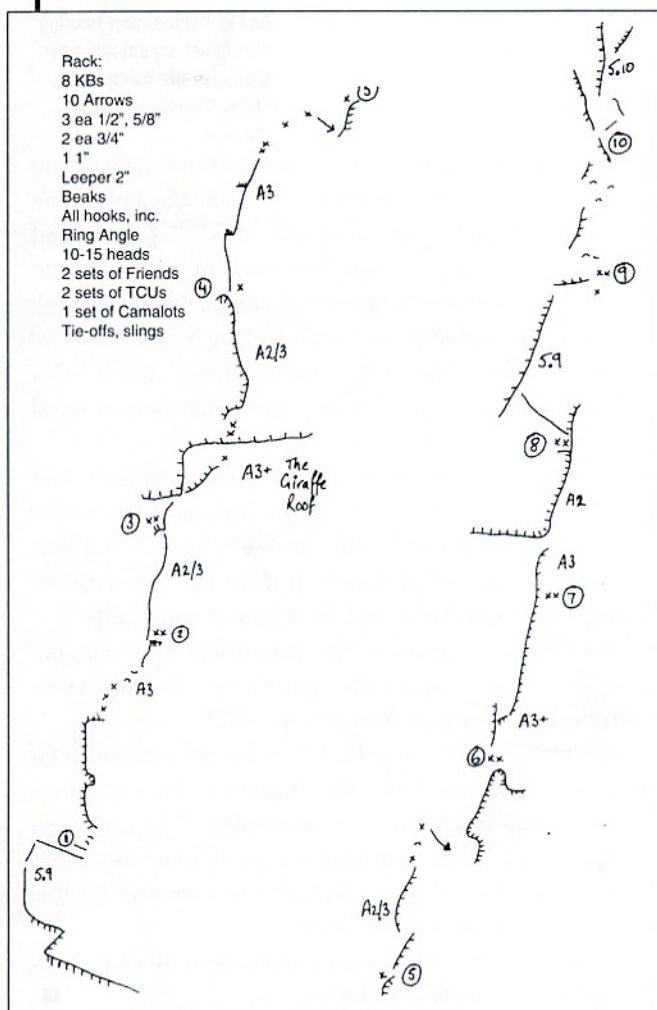
MIDDENDORF

referred to non-existent roads and signs, and long-changed temporal features like 'fence' and 'burned-out area'. After solving the puzzle and finding the domes, the approach to the base was just as much a mystery, and after picking one of many gullies just because it 'felt right', we loaded up our gear and provisions for five days and went for it.

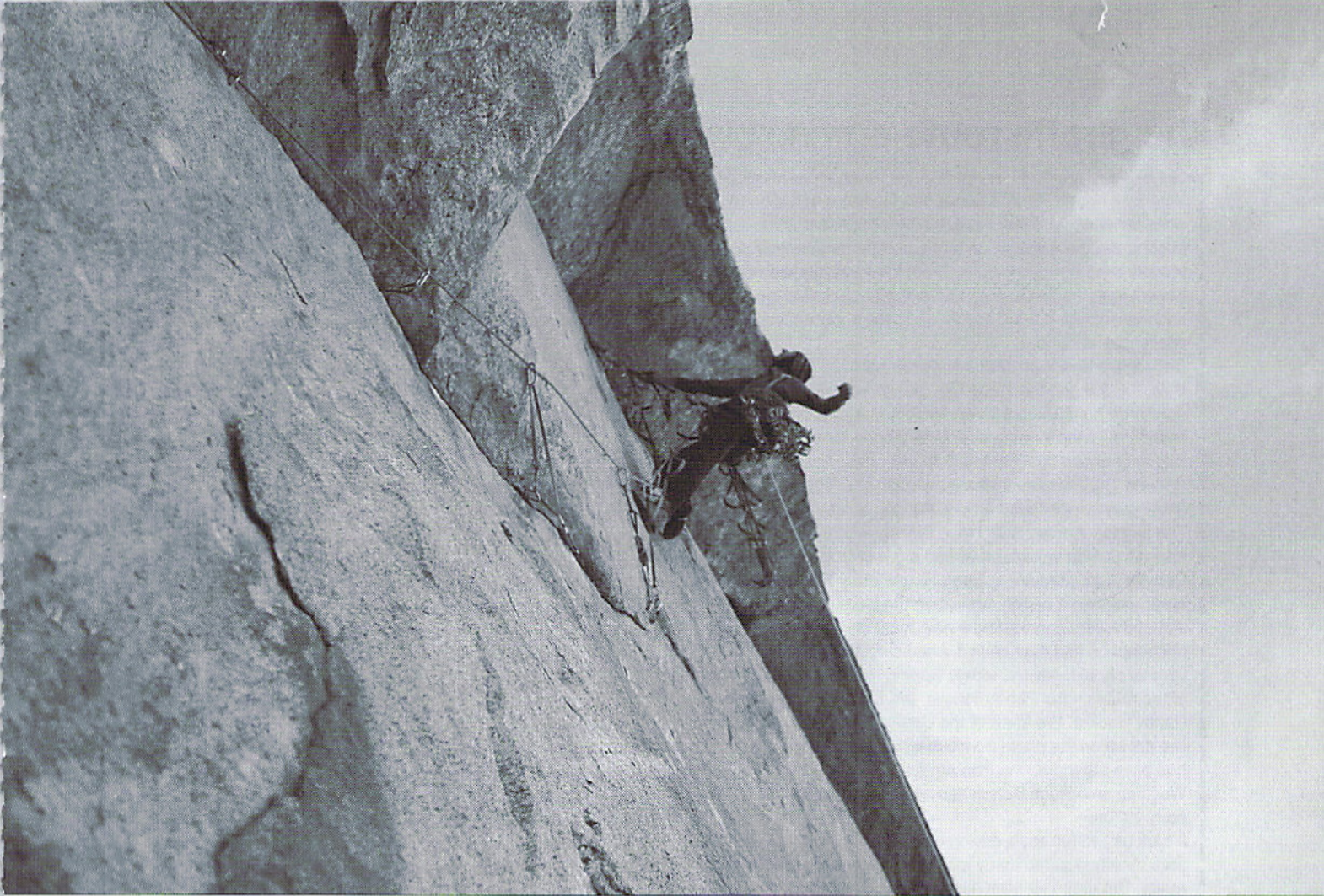
The descent was hell on Earth. It requires wicked bushwhacking down vertical gullies thrashing around in a maze of monster-sized boulders, with huge cliff drop-offs encountered at every turn. Each section of the way had to be first explored without the mondo haulbags.

After a full day of thrashing, we made it, luckily finding water there, and scoped out the routes for the first time. The Pan American is an obvious corner system up the centre of the face. It looks like it will eventually go all free. The Giraffe is on the left and steeper side of the wall, and is the only viable line on the east face of El Trono Blanco, standing alone in a sea of granite. We abandoned plans for a new route for an ascent of the Giraffe.

Each pitch of the route is excellent nailing, generally difficult – A3 and harder – and goes through some spectacular features and roofs. We were amazed at how the natural features linked up to produce a continuous route. Below the top, as I was leading an aid corner that was becoming progressively more and more awkward and was leading into a wet and ugly section, I was about to yell to Jeff that we finally had a stinker pitch when I was suddenly able to step around the corner on a thank-god, horizontal ledge to moderate free climbing. The moment typified the climbing on the Giraffe – intimidating and improbable from afar, but all there up close. When we finally escaped, the non-stop adventure of the past week was soon celebrated with some fine Mexican beers.







**Above: Middendorf leading during his ascent last year of the Giraffe route on El Trono Blanco – see over.**

to make not only the pitches difficult but the belays technically difficult to set up as well. It's like Bonatti said, bolts are the murder of the impossible.'

Bolts added to the Kali Yuga by Bill Russell and Pete Takeda during the first ascent of their new route the Vodka Putsch which joins the last leads of Kali, upset Middendorf:

'They added over 25 holes,' says Middendorf. 'They bolted around this flake that Walt freed, but the worst tragedy is that the last pitch – which Walt led – went completely no holes and it overhung possibly 50 feet in 75 of climbing. It was sketchy A3 pins in these horizontal layers. It was really strenuous and really awkward. It was a masterpiece. They shouldn't have been on it. They should have done some other variation where they could've drilled their way up.'

Takeda defends himself by saying he drilled only one bathook placement. Russell did add numerous rivets but was unavailable for comment.

'I have a pretty clear conscience as to what I did,' said Takeda, adding that he was not leading or calling the shots when the rivets were added. 'I can't speak for anybody else.'

Chiselled head placements are the other major Yosemite trend that Middendorf doesn't like. While he admits his new route Flight of the Albatross on El Capitan has about half a dozen chiselled head placements, it's a technique Middendorf has used only twice, only in recent years and doesn't endorse.

'The reason I have a problem with them' he says, 'is that they are easiest for the first ascent team. And then it gets

trashed for subsequent ascents. Manufactured difficult aid climbing is just bullshit. Obviously you can take any section of blank rock and chisel head and hook placements and make it as hard as you want. The name of the game is to find the natural A5 climbing without altering the rock. I think that's what all climbing's all about – seeking natural lines.'

Great Trango, incidentally, averages fewer drilled holes per foot than most 'natural' lines – including some of Royal Robbins' routes – in Yosemite.

'He's really gone a long way with that Trango Tower route,' says Shipley. 'He's really accelerated out of the norm.'

'A great achievement,' adds Bridwell. 'One of the best achievements in the last decade. It ranks up there with the south face of Cerro Torre. And the style was impeccable.'

'But,' Bridwell continues, 'the thing I like about him the most – and I don't give a damn about how he climbs – is he's a really nice person. Real honest, too.'

Bridwell's comments point to something perhaps even more legendary than Middendorf's ability to beak it out on desperate A5 horror shows – his personality.

'Has anyone told you John's a really generous guy?' Shipley asks. Nearly every climber's first comment for this article concerns Middendorf's generosity.

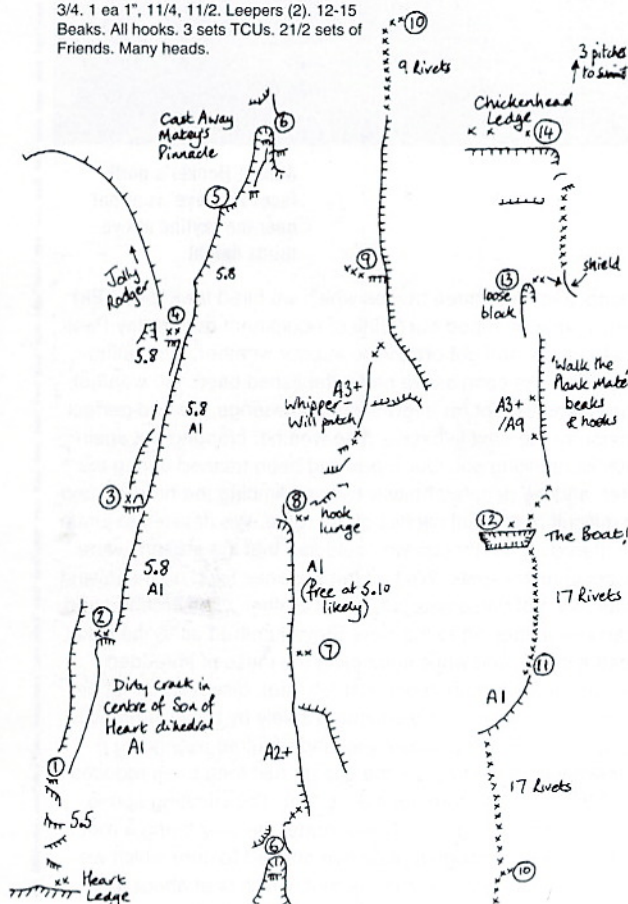
'God bless John,' says longtime friend Steve Bosque. 'He's one guy who really deserves it.'



# flight of the albatross el capitan, yosemite

I had pieced this route together over years of scoping out sections. In the mid 1980s, I had seen the middle part, 450 feet of good cracks rising from Grey Ledges well into the Shield Headwall, to where it blanks out for 220 feet. Several pitches below Chickenhead ledge – 500 feet below the summit – a huge canoe-shaped flake which seemed to defy gravity was attached to the headwall, and from there, a clearly visible crack went to Chickenhead Ledge. When I climbed the Salathé for the second time just prior to this ascent, I saw a 500-foot crack system which was not part of any other route splitting the centre of the

Rack: 10KB. 15 LA. 3-4 ea 1/2, 5/8, 2-3 ea 3/4, 1 ea 1", 11/4, 11/2. Leepers (2). 12-15 Beaks. All hooks. 3 sets TCUs. 21/2 sets of Friends. Many heads.



100-foot-wide dihedral which forms the bottom part of the famous Heart formation on El Cap. Final observation with a telescope revealed a flake system spitting the blank section on the Shield headwall. All in all, it turned out to be 180 feet of blank rock requiring rivet ladders in 1,400 feet of new climbing. El Capitan, with over 60 routes and variations, is so criss-crossed with lines that it is hard to imagine squeezing more in without extensive drilling, and since the last really good lines were bagged in the late 1980s, new routes have required more and more drilling through large blank sections to link natural features. Many new routes on El Capitan have required over 100 holes to complete, though many have required fewer – the Atlantic Ocean Wall, for example, required 58 new holes for bolts and rivets. I estimated that we could do this new route with less than 75 holes total, so my ethical reservations were resolved.

Will Oxx and I began in fine spring weather, fixing up to Heart Ledges and hauling gear up. Like most big wall routes, this one had its most difficult moments getting started the first few days.

Will dropped my Swiss army knife the first night from Heart Ledge, and I went into a foul mood. The pitches from Heart to Grey were largely filled with dirt and mud, making for some unpleasant A1 climbing. At Grey Ledges, we were hit by a raging storm for about eighteen hours, and we got soaked in our low angle, ledgeless location at the top of Greys. We still had enough ropes to fix down to the Mammoth Terrace, where we suspected we would still find some other party's fixed ropes to the ground. Luckily we had a small espresso maker and stove to allow us a diversion from the cold, soaked conditions, otherwise we may have bailed. While we were getting hammered by the storm, huddled in our portaledge, we envied the team above us on the Shield Headwall who were not even using their portaledge rainfly, due to the overhanging wall above.

Above Grey, the climbing got steeper and more difficult. One of the pitches was a superb Wheat Thin type flake, which is mostly invisible from the ground because of its profile. Will then led a hard and steep A3+ pitch which took us onto the Shield Headwall proper. The pitch, which we named the 'Whipper Will', overhung about 50 feet in all. From there an A2 lost arrow crack led to the sea of blankness on the headwall. We drilled for 100 feet, climbed a 40 foot flake, and drilled for 80 more feet to the Canoe, the huge detached flake resting on a sloping stance up there. This was a perfect bivouac – flat, two feet wide, and 40 feet long, though I made the mistake of hammering a pin behind it as part of the belay. After a few hits, the entire block – which must have weighed fifteen tons – shifted a bit. We left the pin without cleaning it. Above the Canoe, a thin A3+ or A4 seam continued up, requiring many beaks and No1 and No2 copperheads. The dangerous ledge fall on this pitch precludes this route from becoming an immediate classic, but besides this and the Whipper Will pitch, all the climbing was of moderate difficulty. In unsettled weather, we finished from Chickenhead on the Shield, regretting later that we did not do an obvious direct finish to the right. The direct finish is recommended for subsequent ascents of this fine route up El Cap.

**Difficulty:** 5.10, A3+/A4, seven days spent of the first ascent.

**Will Oxx on the 'Whipper Will' pitch of Flight of the Albatross**



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# the third eye mount hooker, wind river mountains

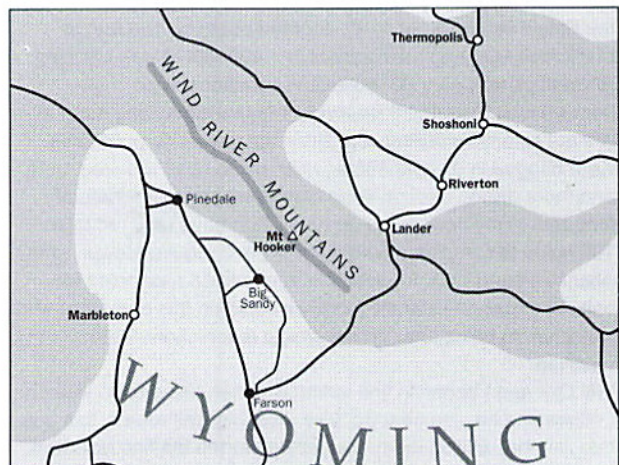
Mt Hooker is the premier big-wall monolith in Wyoming's Wind River range, with a 1,800-foot, just-off-vertical north face. The granite in the Winds is often well featured, allowing for classic long free routes, but the north face proper of Mt Hooker is largely steep and split only by a few cracks. The wall now has four big-wall routes on the main part of the north face. The Robbins Route – now all free – takes a line on the north-west edge of the monolith, and a shorter free route takes a line up the far left side of the north face. Steve Quinlan is the expert on this aspect of Mt Hooker, with a new solo route, a repeat of one of the other lines, and countless other attempts on the wall spread out over a period of twelve years. He and I had climbed some routes in Yosemite, and as he is a summertime guide in the nearby Tetons, he suggested that I come up to climb a new route he had picked out. In 1991 we attempted the line, only to be beaten off by a wicked snowstorm. The Wind Rivers has a short season in July and August, the other months being uninhabitable, let alone climbable. We were banking on having a short period of nice weather in early September, between the summer rains and winter, which begins in early to mid-September. Our second attempt the next year was foiled again by the onset of winter, with three feet of fresh snow dropped on us after weathering out a two-day storm on the wall. Each year we got our ropes a little higher – two pitches the first year, and to the top of pitch four the second. Each two-week expedition to the remote Mt Hooker required extensive planning, a twenty-mile hike with horses, establishing ourselves on the wall and the forced retreat, followed by a tedious hike out with 90lb loads. This summer we wisened up, going in a little earlier during mid-August despite the rains. We hiked in with our horse-



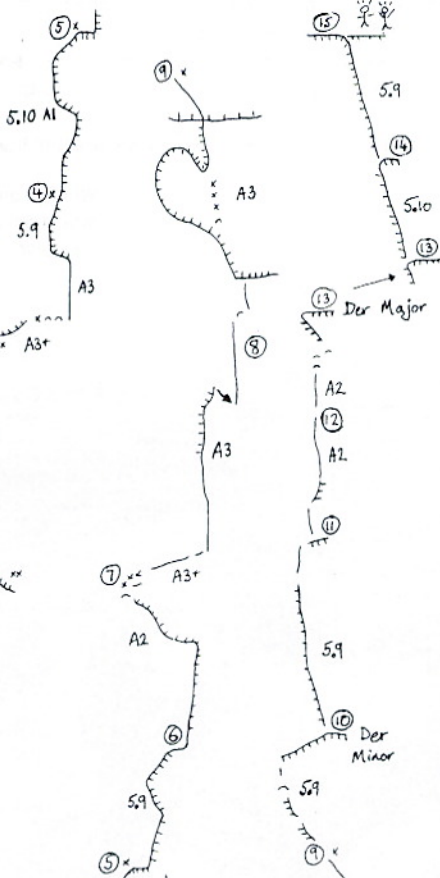
Above: Hooker's north face. The 'eye' is a roof near the skyline at two-thirds height.

packing guide and three horses which we hired for \$150 at Big Sandy Lodge, humped our 200lb of equipment over Haley Pass to base camp, and got organised in poor weather. Our timing was perfect. As soon as we had established base, the weather cleared, and except for a few slight showerings, we had perfect weather for the next five days. The weather crapped out again as we were hiking out. Our ropes had been trashed during the winter, and we debated heavily over reascending the hard-earned and difficult (A4) initial pitches of the route. We decided to jumarm the tattered ropes, though we could see that the sheaths were fully cut in many spots. We had left two lines fixed on the lowest section. One of these was cut, and the other was shredded and hooked on a flake off to the side. Steve jumared up to the flake, placed a belay, and while untangling the mess of shredded ropes above (whereupon one just fell free), discovered that he had been jumaring on a rope anchored solely by being jammed in a flake. The next jumarm was mine, and required ascending a completely shredded core – the sheath had long been reduced to nothing – for 200 core-squeaking feet. The climbing above our fixed ropes was generally moderate, the crux being a roof which Steve led through a huge eye-shaped feature which we named the route after. Above the roof, which is at about two-thirds height, the route went mostly free on excellent rock – a fine alpine big wall in a remote location.

**Difficulty:** 5.10, A4, 3 days were required for the final ascent with four pitches fixed.



- Rack:  
3 Beaks  
2 Rurps  
8 KBs  
12 LAs  
3 ea 1/2, 5/8  
2 ea 3/4  
1 ea 1, 1 1/4, 1 1/2  
2 sets Friends 1-4  
1 No4 Camalot  
1 4" Bong  
2 sets TCUs  
2 sets stoppers  
2 sets brass nuts  
2 hooks

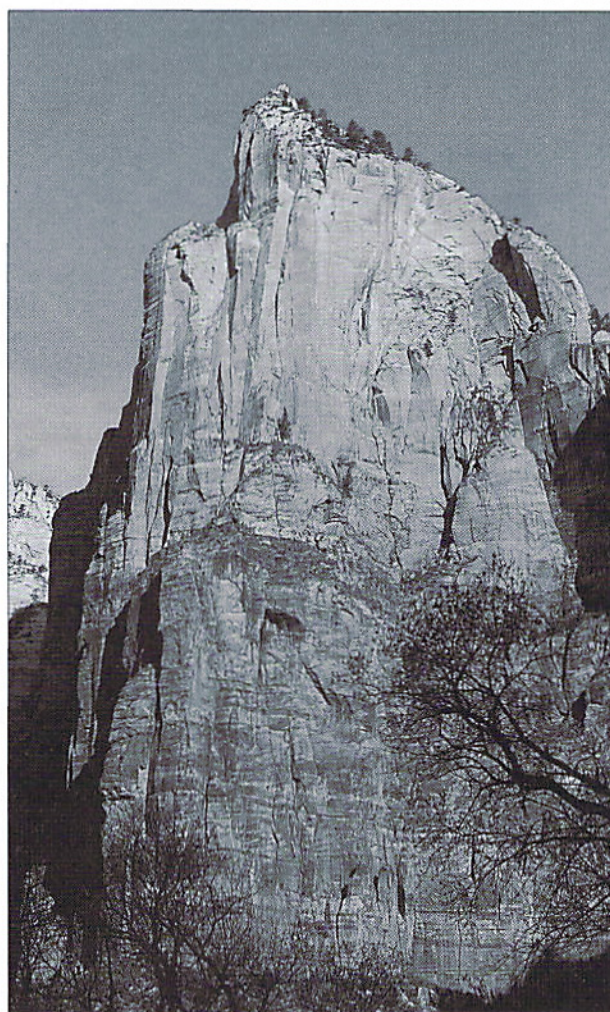




# tricks of the tramp isaac, court of the patriarchs, zion

Also in the spring of 1993, Brad Quinn, the photographer Bill Hatcher and I climbed a new 1,800-foot big wall route on Isaac, the centre Patriarch in Zion National Park. Zion is host to many great sandstone walls, ranging from 800 to 2,200 feet and spring is one of the best seasons, before the searing heat of summer, though the spring rains can often be a problem. In fact, we were rained off the route several times before the ascent. The route is split by a huge football-field-sized meadow halfway up. Because of being chased off by the rains, we ended up fixing ropes on much of the lower part, which climbed difficult off-widths and chimneys. On our final push, we were able to collect firewood on the midway ledge, and build a nice fire and drank Jack Daniels from a hospital IV bottle during the bivouac. Above the midway ledge, a splitter 800 foot crack system pierced the slightly overhanging and mostly flawless buttress above. Unfortunately, the lower 250 feet of the crack was knifeblade thickness, precluding free climbing. As an alternative, we climbed two full-length pitches left of the main splitter, one pitch of 5.10+ offwidth, and one pitch of 5.10+ overhanging hand and finger crack. Then we drilled several bolts to the right, pendulumed 80 feet back down and right, and joined the main crack 50 feet below where it opened up to finger size. After aiding at A2 for 60 feet, the crack opened up for free climbing and some spectacular pitches in a big-wall environment were had by all. We bivouacked amid snow on the summit, and descended the next day, which was an adventure in canyoning in itself.

The route is likely to become an all-clean and possibly all-free route as the remaining 60 feet gets nailed a few more times. Like all sandstone nailing routes, the character of the route



BILL HATCHER

changes rapidly with hammer ascents. It is the responsibility of climbers to be aware of the rock destruction caused by pitons and do their best to 'scar constructively' – that is, only clean pitons in an upward direction so stopper placements can eventually be had. With due care and attention by both leader and cleaner of the aid pitch, this route could go all clean with one or two more nailing ascents.

**Difficulty:** 5.10+, A2 (only 60 feet of aid on the whole route). Five days were required for the first ascent with one bivouac on the final push.

