



AAC Publications

Mt. Kinabalu, Extremely Difficult Sport Climbs at Altitude

Borneo

In the winter of 2011, Yuji Hirayama sat down with James Pearson and me at our annual meeting at the North Face to discuss expedition ideas. Yuji proposed a trip to Mt. Kinabalu (4,095m) in Borneo, Malaysia. He showed us a photo of a 100-meter, overhanging thumb of granite near the summit, filled with perfect holds. This easily convinced us to go, even if we only tried this one route. According to Yuji, there was plenty more to be done.

I didn't really know what was in store. I had done plenty of high-altitude bouldering in Colorado, but only for daylong trips. Our base camp on Mt. Kinabalu would be the Sayat Sayat Hut at 3,668m. Here we would stay for 17 nights, with limited electricity and water, no TV, shower, Internet connection, cell reception, or washer and dryer (just to list a few everyday essentials). The nighttime temperature averaged -7°C . Our mission, along with the French climber Caroline Ciavaldini and filmmaker Chuck Fryberger, was to develop new routes in the area, both challenging and easy. Mt. Kinabalu is famous for guided hikes up Low's Peak (the highest point in Malaysia) and a high-elevation via ferrata. Rock climbing was still a new concept, and that is where we came into play. An abundance of easy routes would attract people to learn how to climb (throughguides, of course).

In 2003, Yuji had come close to completing a two-pitch project on Oyayubi Peak. The first pitch is 5.13a climbing for 65 meters, delivering you to a hanging belay. Yuji thought the 35-meter second pitch felt like 5.14d, depositing you on top of the thumb feature. The climbing is resistant, broken down into a 13d intro to a strenuous rest, a six-move V10/11 boulder problem, and an endurance 5.13d finish. Oyayubi is at nearly 4,000m, and after just a few minutes of climbing, the pump started to kick in. Yuji had to learn how to control his breathing and heart rate to prevent this. He spent a week acclimatizing on "easier" routes, before attempting his main goal, and on June 19 he completed the first ascent of Pogulian Do Kododuo (5.14d).

A day later, Yuji had another vision on the West Donkey's Ear formation. The line was 40 meters long and slightly overhung. It began with eight bolts of technical 5.13c, leading into an overhanging dihedral rest. From here, the climbing becomes much more bouldery. Yuji was able to figure out most of the moves on the lower boulder problem, but not the rest. There was speculation that the upper moves might not go. One night at the hut, Yuji and Chuck suggested I try, considering my bouldering background. I was hesitant at first. But sending a technical arete that I had previously bolted (Enter the Void, 5.14b) gave me enough confidence for a recon mission on the project.

The lower half went well, and after a few attempts I was able to link the first crux moves and go on to the two-move second crux. I had to take a right-hand sidepull, paste my feet on minuscule foot chips, do a long lock-off to a left-hand, two-finger sloping crimp, place my right heel next to my right hand, lock off, and do a powerful crossover to a right hand flat edge. The distance between these moves was large. I could do them individually, but linking them was another story. I left it at that and moved onto the final crux. This involved mini-compression between slopers, gaining two small crimps, and finishing with a downward dyno to a jug. I was able to figure out the beta and connect the dots. To my surprise, the project seemed possible. All that remained was a technical 5.12b/c slab to the top. Overall, the boulder section broke down into 13 moves of V10, two moves of V11, and 10 moves of V10. Resting was not possible between these sections.

The next day, starting from the bottom of the route, I fell two times on the final boulder problem.

Climbing so hard at 4,055m made it difficult to breathe, and caused cramps in my legs and forearms. Yuji advised me to use slow, deep breaths to control my heart rate, which helped a lot. Two days later I came back. When I arrived at the dihedral rest, mist started to roll in, but luckily it lasted just a few minutes. Everything clicked this burn, and Tinipi (5.15a, "dream" in Malay) became a reality. I thank Yuji for giving me an opportunity to try his creation. He later tried the route and was unable to put together one of the moves. He will be back!

James spent three days on an incredible double-are?te compression route, with very precise and technical climbing, before making the first ascent of Excalibur (5.14c), one of the coolest lines I have seen. Caroline bolted and climbed Apuri Manan (5.13d), with a very tough double dyno at the end, and Alanga, a three-pitch 5.13d. In total, we bolted 20 new routes, leaving a good spectrum of grades for people to play on.

The trip was monumental. I think we all had to adapt to the difficulties the mountain presented us. Once we understood, our dreams were made possible.

Daniel Woods, USA

Images



Daniel Woods climbs the extremely technical Enter the Void (5.14b) on Mt. Kinabalu.



Woods on Tinipi (5.15a) at over 4,000m.



Tinipi (5.15a).



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