



## AAC Publications

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### Look Out! Danger!

A plea for restraint in the Fisher Towers of Utah

I dreamed I was in the Fisher Towers, walking on a ledge a couple of hundred feet up. I kept stumbling into pieces of angle iron bolted to the rock. These were, I realized, anchors. Peering below, I saw what seemed to be climbs every few feet—each defined by a vertical procession of broken cables, bent pitons, and half-fallen-out bolts. Somehow, I knew each climb had a name and a history. Yet they were so close to each other, so alike, they had no meaning.

As I woke, I wondered what the dream reflected of my recent experiences in the Fisher Towers. I've climbed around the deserts of southern Utah for almost 30 years, and I've always felt there was a reasonable consensus about ethics on new desert climbs, about conforming to the rock and leaving an enjoyable challenge for the next party. Last spring, while hiking around the Fisher Towers, I was confronted with a new route that shattered that assumption: the ugliest aid climb I've ever seen, a line of fresh holes and new-but-decaying hardware on the Titan. During the same hike, another new route caught my eye: Far subtler, it forged a graceful arc up the east face of Kingfisher. Both routes were established by the same team: David "Pelut" Palmada and Esther Olle?, from Catalonia in northern Spain. Why did these two routes appear so different from existing climbs, and from each other? What was going on?

In the Spanish magazine *Desnivel*, Palmada suggested that his August 2009 route on the Titan, Oju, Peligru! ("Look Out, Danger!") might be the hardest aid climb in the world. For comparison, he used his earlier ascent of Jim Beyer's Intifada, on Cottontail Tower in the Fishers, originally rated A6. The Spanish Mountaineering Federation (FEDME) awarded Palmada its 2009 award for big-wall climbing, with a prize of 2,000 euros, for the "proposed A6+" route. This was followed the next year by a prize of 2,500 euros for Palmada's first ascent, with Josep Esquirol, of a 1,400-meter big wall on Baffin island. At home, Palmada is an enthusiastic and respected member of a small but energized aid-climbing fraternity.

Mystified by these climbs, I decided to repeat Hot-Parad-Ice, Palmada's August 2012 route on the Kingfisher. In March 2013, I found myself roping up under a pitch that looked right at the limit of possibility. Something that might be feasible. Small hints of weaknesses emerged and shyly vanished. Which side of feasible would it be? Sheer genius? Contrived and trenched? I gently tapped a No. 1 Pecker into a tiny seam and stepped up.

**Cutler sandstone usually forms** bland slopes, lost in the vast space of the Colorado Plateau. But in the Fisher Towers, the Cutler has weathered into a riotous labyrinth of gothic cathedrals and castles, dark and foreboding, with fantastic, convoluted buttresses and flutes. There are five major formations and myriad smaller ones.

In 1962, Layton Kor, Huntley Ingalls, and George Hurley climbed the largest tower, the Titan. Kor, who led every pitch, freed what could be freed, used pitons where there were cracks, and placed bolts where the cracks ran out. Soon after, Harvey Carter summited the other four big formations: Kingfisher, Echo Tower, Cottontail, and the Oracle. In the 1960s, just reaching these summits was seen as challenge enough.

During the 1970s climbers began looking for harder routes with few bolts. One person took this as far as it could be taken: Jim Beyer. From 1976 to 1989, climbing solo, he created a singular, spectacular

legacy: 14 new routes, most of which were of unprecedented difficulty. His early lines followed big, natural features. Next he was drawn to the spaces in between. Sometimes these held seams that could be nailed—if only just—but sometimes the features ran out.

Beyer wanted to keep the bolt count low and the seriousness high, so, notably on World's End (1987) and Intifada (1988), where the rock did not yield "natural" placements, he drilled shallow holes and hammered copperheads into the resulting slots. Such "trenched" placements were quick to place; they held body weight but not long falls.

In Yosemite Valley, Jim Bridwell and Peter Mayfield had experimented with one or two such trenched placements during the first ascents of Zenyatta Mondatta and Aurora, in 1981. At the time, Bridwell and Mayfield kept quiet about what they had done, understanding that it may have crossed a line, beyond an honest attempt to take on the natural challenge of the rock. Or perhaps, by playing with it, they defined this line. In 2006, Mayfield wrote at Supertopo, "If you are good, you know when artistry turns to a travesty and you take the other path."

A new generation in Yosemite, including Walt Shipley, Steve Gerberding, and John Middendorf, rejected trenching. If there were no cracks or other natural features that could be pitoned, headed, hooked, or free-climbed, they believed a bolt or rivet should be installed. In the softer Fisher Towers rock, trenched placements deteriorated fast from erosion and repeated use, requiring subsequent parties to carry a drill. Which led to another problem: Because a drill was needed to maintain these placements, the drill might, by accident or design, be used on previously natural placements as well.

I'm in awe of Beyer's resume of hard routes in the Fisher Towers. But not his trenching. On a first ascent, my partners and I strive to leave a route that can be enjoyed by others, without forcing them to drill. A route where we conform to the natural challenge presented by the rock, leaving solid bolts where no placements are to be had. And, fortunately, new lines in this style keep getting put up in the Fisher Towers.

In 1996, with nine ascents of the big Fisher Towers via existing climbs under my belt, I decided to attempt a new route on the enormous west face of the Oracle, with Chip Wilson. I geared up, free-climbed to a ledge 15 off the ground, and placed a Birdbeak. Above was a vast, vertical ocean. I could not bring myself to step up onto that piton. I came down, Chip declined to try, and we walked away.

A year later I returned with Dave Levine. We spent hours staring at the cliff with binoculars from different angles and at different times of day. For a new route to be worth doing, it has to have a low bolt count, and that means the line has to have mostly continuous cracks. After studying the face, we finally saw the full line. This time I stepped up with confidence on the first Birdbeak, placed another, stepped up again, and kept going. Our line, Beaking in Tongues, was a first-ascent dream: We placed bolts at the belays, but otherwise followed seams and cracks for seven independent pitches.

Of course, we have it easier today than Beyer did. In 1989, just as Beyer stopped climbing in the Fishers, John Middendorf's A5 Adventures began selling the Birdbeak. This tiny piton had a nifty drooped-pick design, like a minuscule ice axe. With Birdbeaks (and the more recent Peckers and Tomahawks), previously unusable seams like those on the Oracle were now open for business.

In 2007, Jeremy Aslaksen did the fourth ascent of Beaking in Tongues, 10 years after the first. He reported that the route had held up well. "We couldn't even see where the original placements were, let alone find widened slots," he said.

Aslaksen and Paul Gagner have established most of the recent hard new routes on the big Fisher Towers. Their campaign began on the east side of Kingfisher, with a long sequence of Peckers in a crack system that was mostly hidden by a mud curtain. How many Peckers? Aslaksen recalls, "24? More? Most were kind of A-frame style, when you have two or three teeth into the rock and the base is

balanced on a nubbin below. Only good for a bit of a downward pull.” Gagner calls Weird Science (A4) his favorite Fisher Towers route “because of how improbable it was, and because it came together with minimal drilling.”

In March 2010 they started up a route on the Titan. Gagner, hiking near the tower, pulled a huge boulder onto his foot, crushing his toes. A week later, Aslaksen, at home in Albuquerque, pulled a boulder onto his toes. Not until August did the pair reassemble in the Fishers to finish the climb, Gimp Warfare (5.9 A3). In September 2011 they completed Trick of the Tail (5.10+ A3), which meanders up the enormous, heavily corrugated west face of Cottontail. On a roll, a few months later Gagner led the serious first pitch of a new route on the Oracle, working up sloping 5.10 ledges right of Beaking in Tongues to access an excellent crack system. In April 2013 they completed another new line on the Kingfisher, this time on the west face [see Climbs and Expeditions.]

All of these routes ranged between A2 and A4. In this context, Palmada’s unrepeatable, supposedly A6+ route on the Titan was an anomaly. Had a pair of European climbers, under the noses of the locals, found a line that was harder than any existing Fisher Tower climb?

**In the spring of 2012**, Oju, Peligru! on the Titan was repeated by Richard Jensen, a highly experienced aid climber who also had repeated Beyer’s Intifada. He wrote an extensive blog about the experience ([www.conclusivesystems.com/danger/](http://www.conclusivesystems.com/danger/)). Did he tell a tale of struggle and fear, of admiration and respect? Not at all. Jensen suggested a rating of A3, at best, and claimed that Oju, Peligru! was a “completely manufactured ‘route,’ with virtually every placement requiring drilling.”

Jensen found trenched heads of aluminum and lead, and wood dowels stacked against tiny pitons in trenched holes. Unsustainable, unpleasant. Presumably, these are techniques that work well for aid climbs on pocketed Spanish limestone. But could they be transferred successfully to the Titan’s blank sandstone? No, they could not.

During his ascent, Jensen made an odd decision. Rather than struggle with the flared holes and rotting fixed heads Palmada had placed, he drilled new bolts alongside them. Adding bolts during a second ascent would normally be regarded as poor style, but Jensen asserted that Palmada and Olle? had been “methodical and calculating,” and what he encountered was not “climbing.” As such, he felt no obligation to use their placements.

Jensen’s blog includes a video of the belay atop Palmada’s first pitch, touted by the first-ascent team as an anchor from equalized hooks, followed immediately by hard, serious climbing—thus the proposed A6+ rating. The video shows that the three hooks in question were seated in drilled holes. Palmada’s own video shows the rightmost hook being cleaned with multiple blows from a hammer—more solid and secure than the word “hook” usually suggests. Several other placements, perhaps drilled, were used at this belay, and it appears that the placements immediately following this belay were trenched into blank rock, making the seriousness rather contrived. Jensen skipped this belay entirely during his ascent, continuing to an anchor in a good crack 170 feet off the ground. But Jensen’s “second ascent” was equally contrived, and did not conform to the challenge left by the first ascent.

In an interview with the magazine *Desnivel*, Palmada said he based his style and rating on what he found on Intifada: “Yeah, Intifada for me is the WAY!” But Intifada had extensive drilling and chiseling, perhaps more than any other route in the Fisher Towers.

What do other Fisher Tower climbers have to say about such tactics? Paul Gagner said, “I’ve never trenched a head,” and that if there are no natural placement options, your only choices were to “drill a hole or to bail.” Gagner and Aslaksen did exactly that when the second pitch of a line they attempted on the east side of the Oracle proved to have no crack to follow. They retreated rather than manufacture placements or drill an excessive bolt ladder.

Duane Raleigh, responsible for two new routes on the Titan, both unrepeated, said, "I've only ever nailed or nutted conventionally, or placed a bolt—not counting lasso tosses or hooking with an ice axe, which in my mind is fair." He added, "I've always believed that rivets, trenching, and any sort of technique that didn't leave a solid, repeatable placement didn't have a place in the Fisher Towers."

**When Chip Wilson and I** repeated Hot-Parad-Ice in March, we found it immensely enjoyable. The first pitch, in particular, is a superb, heads-up affair, wandering up a subtle groove for 130 feet. About four or five fixed alumi-heads poked out of tiny, trenched holes. (Since Palmada seldom reached farther than 18 inches between his placements, these were easily bypassed.) The first solid placements are in a tiny dihedral about 50 or 60 feet up. Compared with his route on the Titan, Palmada's second new route in the Fisher Towers was a vast improvement.

But Hot-Parad-Ice was still seriously flawed: It featured Pecker placements in blank rock. I emailed Palmada and asked how he made these holes. He replied: "Where sections are blank, what I do is look for the softer rock, trying various places with a sharp Pecker, and where it starts to sink easily because the rock is not as strong, I finish nailing there."

Is looking for an area of "softer rock" and pounding a Pecker into it a viable part of the game? Aslaksen said, "You're still drilling a hole, but you're using Birdbeaks. A beak's a drill if you whale on it enough times. It's utterly manufactured." For me and, I think, for every other local Fisher Tower first ascensionist of the last 25 years, the line between "artistry and travesty" is defined by whether the rock offers a weakness, a crack or seam, or a pocket—a placement.

In the early 1950s, Jerry Gallwas was a pioneer of forging pitons that were harder than the soft-iron versions that had been available for decades. He chose not to make his steel too hard. "You want a certain amount of malleability, or else you just destroy the rock," he told me in 2007. Birdbeaks, Peckers, and Tomahawks are no harder than other chrome-moly pitons, but they are designed with such a tiny, sharp tip that they can, sometimes, be pounded directly into desert rock. But this is not "placing" a piton. It's using a piton to drill a hole. If there's a hole, it should be filled with a bolt or rivet.

Climbing in the Fisher Towers is a free-for-all, as it should be. Climbers from Utah, California, Catalonia, Estonia—all over the world—are free to do what they want. But with this freedom comes a responsibility to understand the ethics and expectations of the locals, who have learned to work with the soft sandstone to create fine, sustainable climbs. It pains me to write a critical article like this. If I try to dictate how others should climb, I'm contradicting and denying the very freedom that attracted me to climbing in the first place. And, yet, it pains me even more to see the travesty that is, or was, Oju, Peligru!

In the year 2013, drilling large numbers of holes to create a route—whether by hand or power drill, chisel, or Pecker—is no longer acceptable. Bolt ladders went out of favor in the late 1960s. Trenching with a drill went out of favor in the 1990s. Trenching with Peckers? We can do better. And if we can't, we should walk away.

## **About the Author**

Steve "Crusher" Bartlett has been climbing for nearly 40 years, in the U.K., Europe, Mexico, Canada, and Morocco. His favorite place, by far, is the Southwest desert, where he has climbed about 150 towers, including 30 first ascents. His coffee-table history book **Desert Towers** (2010) was a finalist at the Banff Mountain Festival and the Kendal Mountain Festival.

Joel Peach and George Urioste provided translation assistance with this article.

## Images



The Fisher Towers, with 50 years of aid-climbing history, are one of the last places in the United States where new nailing routes are still being put up.

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