



AAC Publications

Socotra Island, Various Ascents

Yemen

In March my wife, Brittany Griffith, and I traveled to Yemen's Socotra Island, an incredibly diverse oval of isolated land in the Arabian Sea. Often called the "Galapagos of the Arabian Sea" for its 300-plus endemic species of flora and fauna, Socotra is actually closer to Somalia than Yemen, and due to the country's tumultuous economic, political, and tribal issues, it sees few visitors. Photographer Andrew Burr accompanied us on the trip.

Over the course of 10 days we did four new routes up to 5.12 on the rock spires of the Haggier Mountains, which dominate the skyline above the main town of Hadibo. We placed no bolts or pitons, and left only slings or single-nut anchors for rappels. Two of the spires were previously unclimbed. Our fixer/translator, Sammi, tried to ascertain for us the locals' names for the towers, but ended up with two or sometimes four different names for the same formation—different villages had different names. The sole exception was the central 800-foot tower in the massif, which everyone referred to as Mashanig. Heat was the chief concern, with temperatures breaching 100°F by 10 a.m. every day.

After establishing ourselves at a high camp, two hours of epic bushwhacking up a steep hillside brought us to the base of a clean, orange tower. Two pitches of 5.10+ later, we were on the virgin summit. We named our route Licking Pots and Chewing Qat, in reference to the freshwater crabs that would clean our dishes each night and for the mildly narcotic qat leaf that every man in Yemen, especially on the mainland, chews throughout every afternoon.

The following day we headed directly for an unclimbed gem we had scoped during the hike to camp: a 900-foot arrow of sheer granite on the right side of the massif. We climbed an impressively continuous corner system on the west-northwest face and topped out near sunset. Far below, the Arabian Sea quickly faded from blue to black and we rapped off in the dark. It was one of the most inspiring and dramatic summits of my climbing life. We named our 5.12 route Battling Begonias, due to the flowers that sometimes choked the otherwise clean cracks

After three days of exploring the island's stunning variety of sights, we returned to the mountains and climbed new routes on the two summits of Mashanig. [Editor's note: The first known ascents of these towers were in 2009, by Josh Helling and Mike Libeck, who called them Daddy and Daughter towers (AAJ 2010). However, Libeck reported finding very old cairns on top of the larger tower, suggesting it was ascended generations earlier. The smaller undoubtedly has been climbed by locals as well.] **First we climbed the main summit in the broiling sun via a 650-foot 5.11 we dubbed Hammy Time. I suffered badly from dehydration but still managed to enjoy the stunning summit views in every direction. The following day we climbed the northern summit via a 420-foot 5.11 line we called M.O.G. in the Fog, in reference to the "Man of Girth," Burr, rappelling through the swirling fog for photos. The route started off a dramatic rock bridge that spans the chasm between the two Mashanig towers and followed obvious clean cracks directly up the east face.**

We spent the final three days of our trip absorbing all we could of the island's world-class beauty: snorkeling with dolphins, hiking sand dunes, eating fresh lobster (and not so fresh lobster), deep water soloing, exploring kilometers-deep caves big enough to drive semi-trucks through, strolling down empty white-sand beaches, and enjoying the amazing dragon blood and desert rose trees.

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Images



Brittany Griffith leading M.O.G. in the Fog (5.11) on Mashanig's north tower.

Article Details

Author	Jonathan Thesenga
Publication	AAJ
Volume	88
Issue	56
Page	247
Copyright Date	2014
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions