



AAC Publications

Organ Mountains, complete south-to-north traverse, Organ Saint Traverse

New Mexico, Organ Mountains

From April 25–27, Glen Melin, Jon Tylka, and I made the first recorded traverse of the Organ Mountains skyline, climbing from south to north. The Organ Mountains form the rugged barrier between the Tularosa Basin and the Mesilla Valley in southern New Mexico, rising more than 5,000' from the valley floors. The highest point is Organ Needle (8,990'), and from there the rounded peaks of the South Organ Mountains roll toward Texas, while the jagged peaks of the Needles/Squaretops, High Horns, Low Horns, and Rabbit Ears march northward to San Augustine Pass and range's terminus in the north.

After a storm forced Jon Tylka and Aaron Hobson to abort their attempt to complete a south-to-north traverse in July 2011, Jon, Glen, and I were determined to complete the endeavor in an unsupported push. We planned to start on the west side of the range at Modoc Mine, climb the initial 4,000' to Organ Needle, then traverse north along the ridgeline to the last major peak, North Rabbit Ear, before descending to the valley floor on the east side of the range at Aguirre Springs. The total traverse would encompass 22 peaks, 10 miles of climbing, and 9,000' of cumulative elevation gain.

We began the traverse in excellent spring weather on the morning of April 25. Faced with a forecasted windstorm and time constraints, we had a 36-hour window to reach Aguirre Springs. Beginning with a fourth-class scramble to the summit of the Retaining Wall, we then worked north along the ridgeline, following third-class to moderate fifth-class routes to the top of each major peak. During the first day we completed the Organ Needle/Squaretop and High Horns complexes, summiting the Retaining Wall, Organ Needle, Squaretop, Little Squaretop, Squaretop Massif, the Wedge, Lost Peak, Third Peak, Dingleberry, Wildcat, Razorback, and the Spire. Unfortunately, the windstorm arrived earlier than expected, with 70mph-plus wind gusts, which forced us to bivvy for seven hours in the saddle between the High Horns and Low Horns.

With the wind unabated on the morning of April 26, we elected to continue climbing through terrible conditions. By 1 a.m. on Sunday, April 27, we had completed the Low Horns and Rabbit Ears in a brown-out dust storm, summiting the Low Horns, Rabbit Ears Massif, South Rabbit Ear, Middle Rabbit Ear, and North Rabbit Ear. At 3 a.m. we finally arrived at the Aguirre Springs, after 34 hours of climbing.

While the traverse is technically rated only 5.8 (two pitches on the Spire and three pitches on Middle Rabbit Ear), we would emphasize that its greatest challenges are in the routefinding difficulties and overcoming the harsh high-desert environment. With very little human traffic, there are no established trails and moving from peak to peak involved dodging cholla, agave, sotol, yucca, and rattlesnakes. Additionally, completing the traverse required complete self-sufficiency and speed, as there are no water sources along the route. The need to move unroped across exposed technical terrain leaves little room for error. Favorable conditions and a now clearly defined route should allow for a traverse in less than 24 hours by future climbers. [See PDF extra for detailed maps and route overview.]

Jon suggested the route's name based on a quote from Dick Ingraham, father of Organ Mountains mountaineering, who stated that the Organ Saint is "by definition, a person so enamored of the harsh beauty of the Organs that, far from minding the length of the approaches and the hostility of the terrain, he actually lies down with the cholla and blesses the rattlesnakes."

If you like to suffer, you'll love the Organ Saint Traverse.

Nathan Fry

Images



Glen Melin, Jon Tylka, and Nathan Fry (left to right) with the Rabbit Ears in the background.



The Organ Mountains, viewed from the west. The Organ Saint Traverse climbs the skyline from south to north (right to left).

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