



AAC Publications

Ololokwe, south face, Mirage

Africa, Kenya

From the top of Mt. Kenya, 70 miles to the north, one can see a silhouette rising nearly 1,500' above the desert of Kenya's northern frontier: Ololokwe (a.k.a. Sapache, "the overhanging head"). This impressive block of gneiss has been in the crosshairs of climbers' ambitions since the 1960s. Early attempts resulted in failure, mostly from heat and dehydration. Then, in 1965, Robert Chambers and Henry Mwongela established a route to the top along a rising, grassy ramp. A nearby, palm-filled chimney was climbed three years later by Ian Howell and Roger Higgins. However, this pristine mountain has long awaited a more fitting line. [Ololokwe is an approximately 2,000m-long cliff averaging 400m of relief. See Alex Fiksman's feature article, "Kenya's Rocks," in AAJ 2005 for more information about Ololokwe and climbing in Kenya.]

In 1971 Howell and Iain Allan came to Ololokwe to attempt a very attractive route on the eastern side. In true Kenyan fashion, their approach was blocked by an angry rhino who gave chase, and fortunately, for them, failed. Having recovered, the two men camped below the stunning wall where a giant flake peers out from the vertical face about halfway up. The cycads growing from behind the flake gave a hopeful sign of much-needed water. They named the face the Oasis Wall, and their brave attempt ended after about four pitches up where the wall put forth an unprotected, vertical defense.

There are not many unclimbed faces of Ololokwe's magnitude in the world, so about 10 years ago I started paying more attention. Looking at it from the air, checking it out on foot, photographing and studying enlarged images—I guess mine was becoming a typical climber's obsession. But self-doubt is a strong force, and I could always find excuses not climb it: accessible climbing near Nairobi, honing my skills, climbing overseas, getting over an injury.

Finally, in April 2013, in the company of Fish Shah and Tom Gilbreath we went in search of the Oasis. But we returned to Nairobi a few days later with our tails between our legs. Having not even reached Iain and Ian's highpoint despite our modern gear, we were too ashamed to show our faces among the handful of Kenyan climbers. Yet, having failed, I somehow felt vindicated: My thoughts were free to roam from Ololokwe onto more attainable objectives. So when a few climbers organized a climbing trip to the northern frontier in April 2014, I had no reservations. After all, the pressure to climb Ololokwe was off and I could focus on the multitude of smaller, hopefully more exciting problems. There was only one catch: To reach our camp, we would have to drive the full one and a half miles along Ololokwe's base.

Not much had changed. These are impenetrable looking walls, most capped by overhangs, with long arches ending several hundred feet below the top and the intermittent bush-filled section. Vultures in great numbers soared on the thermals above the rock. I spent the entire next day scouting the area—do obsessions ever fade? Fueled by wine the following evening, I started chatting with confidence and an exaggerated imagination around the campfire: I'd love to see what the features are like up close. I'd bring a rope if anyone were keen to tie in with me...

Johannes Oos had moved to Kenya from Germany a year prior. I knew him as someone who liked his beer and smokes, and who throws as much climbing into the mix as possible. Johannes took no time to commit. It couldn't hurt for one addict to have another for company.

The following morning, April 19, a two-hour walk had us at the base of the southern part of the wall by about 9:30 a.m. A fine groove revealed itself on the southern (left) side of Ololokwe. Above us, about two-thirds of the way up the face, a giant nose hung down, forming a huge roof. At 10 a.m. we set off with a couple of liters of water, some bars, and a pack of cigarettes. We went up four pitches of lovely, varied climbing on sound rock. The wall was not yet fully vertical, so we knew the deciding pitches were yet to come. The fifth pitch was the first to give us pause. After climbing 40m I found a stance below the steep headwall above.

Perched beneath a thin, vertical crack with some features on either side, I could not hide my excitement: Here was a crack that might hold the key to the climb. Slaves to time, with night encroaching, we could not just turn back without seeing what it had to offer.

The crack was thin, and only marginally protected, forcing the occasional piton. My body was pretty worn out, and my mind made use of that fact, creating all sorts of excuses why I should hurry back to camp for a warm dinner and a fire. But a few aid moves brought me to a pigeonhole where I was able to fit myself and establish a belay. "Why don't we sleep on the ledges and carry on the following day?" I asked Johannes. At first he rejected the idea. But a short discussion—marinated in the prospect of achievement, spiced by mutual drive, and digested through reluctance of having to set up a descent—took care of his apprehension. All logic was off.

Nights in the desert are surprisingly cold: The wind blows from all sides, unleashing a piercing chill on the sun-baked and weary. Teeth chatter and bones rattle when laying out after a day in the heat. We slept atop the fifth pitch on a grassy, sloping ledge behind a giant flake. With a rock for a pillow and too much exhaustion to feel uncomfortable or hungry, we settled in for the night. Hyenas whooped on the plains below; a starry night and the occasional scream from cramp-induced pain were enough to keep our minds occupied for eight hours.

Morning brought a feeling of optimism and even a bit of warmth. What it didn't bring was another two liters of water. We made the most of very little as Johannes grabbed the bottle and gulped with great exuberance. I wanted to slap him, but I too made a good show of it, with an animated exhalation. We laughed, closed the lid, and carried on with our minds fooled but our throats lined rough like sandpaper.

The route continued beautifully to a giant roof that hung above a lovely ledge, showing signs of old vulture nests. One could see these massive birds gliding within arm's reach, carrying twigs or just soaring to and fro. Their beaks and talons met us at eye level now, and their beauty and power were impressive. We climbed through the easiest break in the roof (5.10c). There was not much left in us, just the desire to be on top and off the face.

We were around the nose of the cliff by early afternoon, reaching a terrace 1,000' from the ground. It was richly overgrown: a lush garden of vines and cycads, acacias and aloes. After climbing five more pitches, with increasing vegetation, we reached the top, 32 hours after beginning this journey. We called our route Mirage (1,400', 5.10+ A2). Most of the climbing is sustained in the 5.9 to 5.10 range. Barely able to sit upright, we shook hands and shared a cigarette in the hope that the sensation of smoke would in some mysterious way mimic the feeling of moisture filling our mouths and throats. We had no clear idea of how to get down. It was now 5 p.m. and two hours of daylight remained.

We knew that Samburu cattle herders had taken their livestock to the top of the Ololokwe, so a walk-off must be possible. *But how far?* We stumbled along in the direction of camp. What followed was a five-hour ordeal, barely illuminated by our depleted torches. Through the darkness we'd see the occasional light or a line of lights indicating a road in the distance. *A mirage perhaps?* We'd follow cattle trails and then lose them, only to find others going in similar directions. We'd come to huge precipices and descend on our tangled ropes. Every now and then one of us would sit without warning and we'd take a miserable break. The distant lights never seemed to move. Our words became few. Demoralized, we kept on toward the lights. Suddenly there was shouting in the distance. It was our

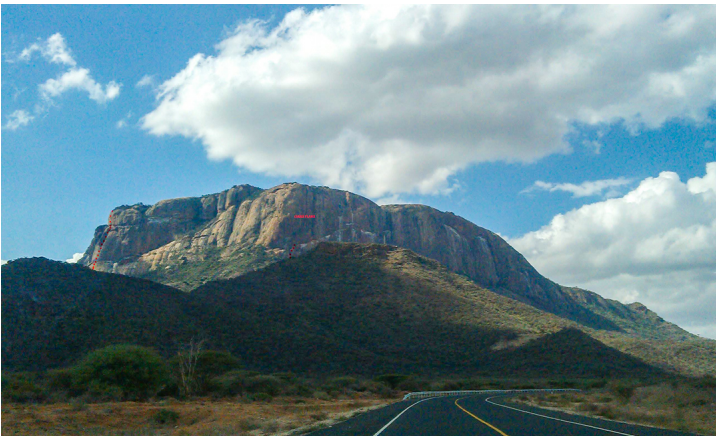
camp. The shouting was from our friends and they were coming to bring us water—water!

Alex Fikshan, U.S.

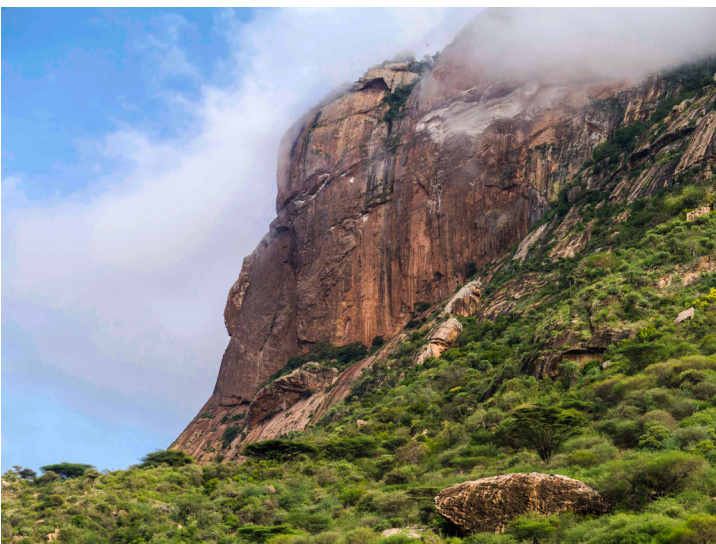
Images



Starting up the first pitch of Mirage on Ololokwe.



The massive girth of Ololokwe, as seen from the highway. Mirage is the route marked on the left, on the southern end of Ololokwe. The general location of the Allan-Howell 1971 attempt is shown on the eastern side.



The route Mirage follows a line mostly along the left skyline pictured here.



Ololokwe, as seen from a distance.



Leading a steeper pitch below the looming headwall above.



The route Mirage is shown, taking a proud line up the south end of Ololokwe.

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