



AAC Publications

Poumaka, Te Va Anui O Kau Kau

Marquesas Islands, Ua Pou

In 2007 I came across folk tales about ancient glowing orbs on pointy rock summits in the South Pacific. Fascinated by these rumors, I soon discovered images of the Marquesas Islands, north of Tahiti, and the volcanic rock towers of the island of Ua Pou. It was one of those moments of pure clarity: I knew I would go there.

In the spring of 2013, alone, I visited Ua Pou. The towers played hide-and-seek behind clouds and constant rain for three days, teasing and tormenting me. Finally I met Kau Kau, who agreed to go into the jungle with me. We spent days trekking through thick forest with huge haulbags full of climbing and bivy gear, and made it to the base of a couple of towers. We camped in the rain, had a lot of laughs, and then retreated. I was not prepared for a solo ascent in the island's insane rain and jungle madness.

In February 2015 I returned to Ua Pou, this time with wonderful friends—Angie Payne, Keith Ladzinski, and Andy Mann—and fully prepared for any amount of rain. After three planes and a two-hour boat ride, we made it to Ua Pou, where my first visit now paid off. I had arranged all the logistics with my friend Kau Kau and others before we arrived. We quickly headed into the jungle, a dozen of us carrying waterproof loads of gear. Our goal was Poumaka, the legendary master of Ua Pou and the surrounding islands.

With Kau Kau leading the way, we started climbing through steep jungle toward the base of the master tower. Four pitches of jungle mayhem brought us to the top of a knoll beside the tower. We moved into a high camp there. The plan was that I would lead all the pitches and Angie would belay and clean, while Andy and Keith captured imagery. Angie, one of the world's best boulderers, had never done anything like this, but her energy is so positive, her focus so intense, her attitude so genuine that I knew she would crush this.

I started the first lead with crampons strapped to my free climbing shoes in order to get through the initial jungle stuck to vertical stone. I took them off after 20 feet, once I could touch rock. Wet rock. Muddy rock. The wall was soaked. I continued free climbing and tried to place a couple of cams—no way they were going to hold in the muddy, thin crack. But a couple of pins hammered in nicely. Then I had to do a little runout on vegetation and muddy stone. WHIP! SLAM! A cam ripped out and I crunched onto the ground. Fortunately, the vegetation worked as a nice crash pad. I could tell Angie was a bit freaked out. "No worries, I'm OK," I reassured her. By the time I made my way up the first pitch, I could literally wring water out of the rope and webbing. It would be this way for eight days.

The next day we started up pitch two on overhanging, coral-like rock. My second piece of protection, a small nut, popped out. WHIP! SLAM! I fell hard beneath Angie, my knee smacking into the toothlike rock. I could feel blood running down my leg into my socks and into my shoes. I said to Angie, "Don't worry, I'm fine, really." I got back on lead and made my way through the delicate rock, digging into muddy cracks for every placement. Had I not brought a couple of dozen beaks, this route would not have been possible. One of the pitches got an A4 rating, though I later pulled it down to A3+. I think the rain, mud, and being constantly soaked added to the sense of difficulty.

On the day of our summit push we got an early start and juggled the fixed lines to a decent ledge at the end of the fifth pitch. From here I traversed around a corner and into vertical rock covered in vines

and thick flora. I felt like a spider, hoping that equalizing my limbs on vines would somehow hold me. By the time I started the last pitch it was close to dark. Twenty minutes later I was on the summit, the wind and rain threatening to blow me off the top. I radioed down to the team, "Someone's gotta come up and clean. Then let's get outta here!" We rappelled the route and celebrated with Kau Kau back at our high camp. Our route had four jungle pitches and eight pitches on the main tower, and is called Te Va Anui O Kau Kau ("In Honor of Kau Kau," 1,500', V 5.11 A3+ JM (Jungle Mayhem)).

[Editor's note: Poumaka was first climbed in November 1996 by the German team of Hansjörg Schurz, Mario Weippert, and Siegfried Weippert, by a line on the north face (12 pitches plus scrambling, UIAA VII), to the right of the 2014 team's ascent. Siegfried Weippert had made two previous trips to Ua Pou (January 1988 and August 1995), during which he and various other climbers ascended most of the large towers on the island.]

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Images



The north side of Poumaka, showing (1) American route (2014) and (2) German route (1996).

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