



AAC Publications

Central Tower, El Regalo de Mwoma, First Free Ascent and Variations

Chile, Torres Del Paine

It took a while for Nicolas Favresse, Siebe Vanhee, and I to get used to walking on horizontal ground again, after 19 days on the east face of the Central Tower of Paine. It was a powerful experience, with lots of bad weather and harsh climbing conditions. We just barely managed to pull it off!

El Regalo de Mwoma (VI 5.10 A4) was an aid line put up in 1992 by a British team comprised of Noel Craine, Paul Pritchard, Sean Smith, and Simon Yates (AAJ 1993). The line is obvious: a crack that cuts right up the steep east face. The route came to our attention when Nico and I free climbed the South African Route, to its right, in 2009. The crack looked very thin and reportedly there was a lot of knifeblade nailing, so it seemed unlikely this route would go free. However, the only way to be *really* sure was to put our noses right up against the wall.

We walked into the park on January 20 with our first load. On the 24th we climbed and fixed two pitches up the lower slabs. We then needed to carry in two more loads of gear and food and prepare our bags for the wall. On the ground, we took shelter in caves during bad weather. We managed to climb and fix the rest of the lower slabs over two more days during the first week. These initial seven pitches followed a direct line to reach the main crack system, whereas the original route traversed in from the left—this variation seemed like a more logical line to us.

On January 31 we committed to the wall capsule-style, utilizing two portaledge. Our first camp was above a nice comfortable ledge atop pitch seven. A few days later we moved to an impressive hanging camp atop pitch 13, right above the two crux pitches of the climb.

The first crux, pitch 12 (originally pitch 18, rated A4) is a stunning dihedral with hard friction stemming and a very hard move at the end (5.13b). The second crux, pitch 13, is a variation of the original route. For this pitch, we traversed left toward another crack system one pitch below where the British traversed—the section we avoided was A3 on the original topo. Our variation climbs a sustained and technical face that utilizes small crimps; it is mostly protected by small wires in a thin crack (5.13b).

The unstable weather, wind, cold temperatures, snow, and iced-up cracks made the free climbing very challenging. On the days that we managed to climb at all, we could only do one to three pitches before racing back to the portaledge for shelter and to get the blood recirculating in our fingers and toes. Six days were so bad that we didn't even come out of the portaledge. We spent a lot of time reading, playing music, meditating, and doing yoga. One memorable moment was my 36th birthday party, which we celebrated with popcorn and music: Nico played the guitar, I played the tin whistle, and Siebe was new to the mouth harp.

On February 14, our 15th day on the wall, we finally got a good weather day and raced to the summit under blue skies. Though it was Valentine's Day, there was not much time for romance on top because the wind was bitterly cold. We returned to the portaledge just as it began to snow again.

At this point, we still needed to redpoint pitch 13. We had more or less run out of food, having only brought enough for 15 days; however, we decided to ration and stick it out as long as we could. On February 18, our 19th day on the wall, after three days of bad weather and with no food remaining, we decided it was time to go down. Nico had already missed his flight back to Europe. We waited for the

afternoon, though, hoping for a last chance at freeing pitch 13. And our miracle arrived: The wind and snow calmed down for a few hours, just barely enough time for Nico to redpoint the pitch! After this, we rappelled into the night through heavy snow.

We climbed El Regalo de Mwoma (1,200m) in 26 pitches (the original ascent was 36 pitches) at a grade of 5.13b. We completed the climb team-free, with the followers primarily climbing free without jumars, with a few exceptions when the weather was too stormy and cold. The hardest climbing is between pitches 10 and 16, with the two 5.13b pitches (I led the first of these and Nico the second), one of 5.12d, and two of 5.12b. The rest is mostly in the 5.10–5.11 range but often spiced up with icy cracks and snow-covered holds. No bolts were added, and a lot of the protection is on small wires. It was an incredible adventure, which took a fierce effort. It was a proper battle—a proper fight!

– Sean Villanueva O’Driscoll, Belgium

Images



Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll in the stemming dihedral of pitch 16 (5.12d) of El Regalo de Mwoma.



Siebe Vanhee in the stemming dihedral of pitch 16 (5.12d) of El Regalo de Mwoma



Cold and snowy conditions at the first portaledge camp, above pitch seven of El Regalo de Mwoma.



Siebe Vanhee looking up from the portaledge at the second camp, placed just above the two crux pitches of El Regalo de Mwoma. "It proved crucial to have our portaledges close to the crux pitches so we could warm up inside and hurry outside to work out moves or put in a redpoint attempt," Sean said. "The downside of having the hanging camp above the crux pitches is that we were forced to shit into bags."



Siebe Vanhee on one of the lead attempts on pitch 13 (5.13b) of El Regalo de Mwoma. Nicolas Favresse eventually redpointed this pitch on the team's 19th consecutive day on the wall, after they had summited.



Climbing through wet and snow-covered rock on the lower slabs of El Regalo de Mwoma.



Siebe Vanhee on one of the lead attempts of pitch 13 (5.13b): technical free climbing protected by a

thin crack. This is the only pitch of El Regalo de Mwoma that was freed by the team after reaching the summit. The team was portaledge-bound atop this pitch during three days of bad weather and had to ration their remaining food for four extra days before Nicolas Favresse could free this pitch.



The masters of big-wall shenanigans, Nicolas Favresse (left) and Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll (right).



Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll nearing the hard moves at the end of pitch 12 (5.13b) of El Regalo de Mwoma.



Nearing the summit of the Central Tower of Paine.



Left to right: Siebe Vanhee, Nicolas Favresse, Sean Villanueva O'Driscoll.



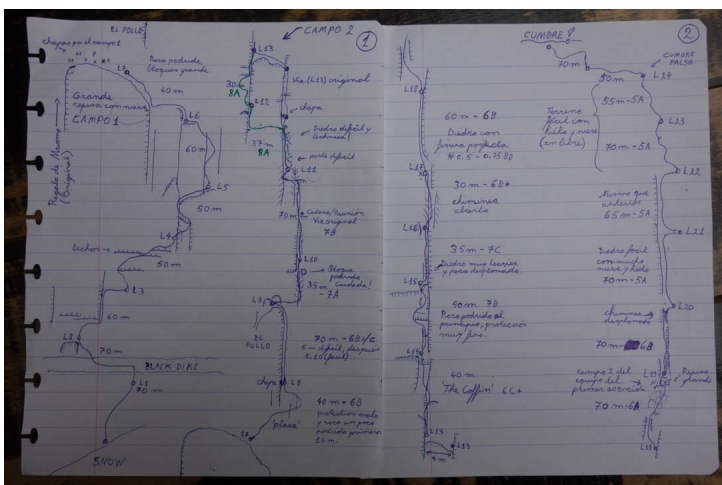
Nicolas Favresse leading up the lower slabs of El Regalo de Mwom, with the obvious crack system above.



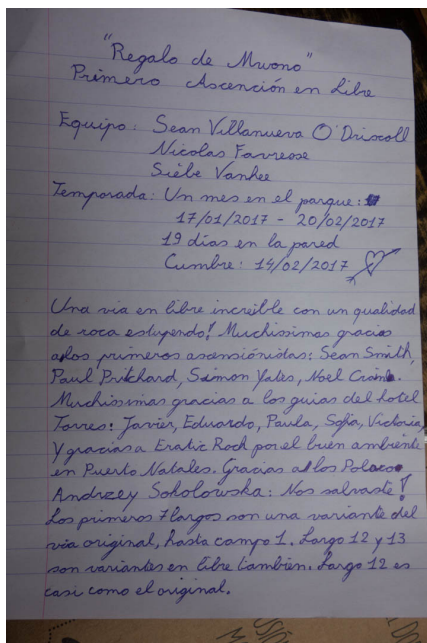
Siebe Vanhee traversing out with an icy glacial backdrop.



Approaching the Central Tower of Paine.



Topo for El Regalo de Mwoma.



Topo for El Regalo de Mwoma



The line taken during the free ascent of El Regalo de Mwoma (26 pitches, 1,200m, 5.13b). The free ascent took a more direct line than the original aid route (VI 5.10 A4) through the lower slabs. The team made only one other variation: About halfway up, they traversed into the left-hand crack system a pitch lower than the original route.

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