



AAC Publications

Broad Dome, Atlantis Wall, Sierra Swashbuckle

California, Sonora Pass

During the first week of August, Julian Kuettner and I completed a new line up the Atlantis Wall, on the south face of Broad Dome in the Sonora Pass area. The Atlantis Wall sits above the middle of Donnell Reservoir, approximately 15 miles from the town of Strawberry. After miles of bumpy dirt roads that tested the limits of my 2WD Transit Connect, we made it to the gate without incident. From the parking area, you must hump all your kit and grog to the dam, then hoist your boat (a canoe, in our case) over a large gate and lower it to the water, before getting in and paddling across the reservoir about three-quarters of a mile.

Mornings on the reservoir are usually calm and glassy, but by midday the winds whip through the canyon and turn the water into class 2 whitecaps. As we rowed our first heavy loads of gear away from the dam and into the choppy water, we knew we were in for a great adventure. Buzzing with excitement and nervousness, we made our base camp on the talus slope to the east of the wall. Julian promptly turned his unneeded black T-shirt (useless in near 100°F temps) into a pirate flag to mark our cache of booty and keep the pirate stoke high throughout the week.

After studying photos of the face, we had decided on a few lines that seemed promising, but left the final decision to a closer inspection. The best of the possible lines began in a giant left-facing corner chimney, then went through a series of changing corners, and ended in a gully system below the summit.

Our route began right above the water. After securing the boat, I placed the first few pieces and tenuously started the first pitch while wearing my life vest. This pitch ended about 10m up on a sloping ledge at the base of a steep and dirty undulating corner. By the end of the trip, this first pitch had grown to approximately 30m as the water level dropped.

Julian was chomping at the bit and tackled the dirt and grass on the second pitch, clawing his way up with a mix of free and aid and ending at a small ledge below a bushy gully. Pitch three climbed quickly up a gully through a bulge, ending above a large bush on a ledge. The low altitude and direct sunlight had turned us into melted pools of wax on the verge of heatstroke, so we fixed lines back to the boat and called it a day.

After a quick commute the next morning we were soon into the thick of the fourth pitch, and Julian made a valiant effort at the direct line. Starting in a nice double crack to a tree, he tried to connect the first left- and right-facing corners, but was shut down by some scary loose blocks. After some trial and error he found a passage traversing right into a steep, wide-ish corner. The pitch ended at a sloping terrace along the crack just before a steep bulge. I then climbed out of the steep corner up to a horizontal roof system, where I traversed left to a large, right-facing corner that offered the first shady belay of the trip. Looking at the pitches above, we felt there was a good chance we could reach the summit in another day or two, but were too dehydrated and hot to continue that evening. We drank the remainder of our water and then descended back to the comfort of the pirate camp.

After three days in the heat and sun we decided to take a proper rest day in preparation for a final push to the summit. So that night we got our swashbuckle on late into the night. Fueled by Gator-ritas and a mild case of heatstroke, we drifted toward the dam, admiring the Milky Way and the reflections of our headlamps on the granite walls. On the rest day that followed, we took a voyage to the inlet of

the lake, finding a few other salty pirate camps stashed around the lake.

The next morning, after a quick coffee and breakfast, we set off on our summit push. A few hours of juggling and hauling brought us to our high point, and then Julian was off on pitch six. This pitch climbed fairly easily, except for a few moves of aid through a dirty section, and ended on another sloping ledge partway up the final left-facing corner we had seen from the water a few days earlier. Pitch seven quickly became too steep and dirt-filled to free climb. After a few meters of groveling and digging out placements, the crack thinned just below a few ominous refrigerator-sized blocks. In order to avoid them, I traversed out a series of hollow flakes to the right side of the corner. This led to some discontinuous cracks and a nice crescent ledge at the bottom of a gully. We had hauled all our gear with us to this point, thinking there would be a ledge big enough to bivy, but looking up the gully we decided to push to the top before dark. After three more easy pitches of loose, dirty, ant-infested gully we reached the easy third-class terrain on the upper part of the dome.

Excited to have made it up the face with so little difficulty, we ran up to the true summit for a quick picture and a swig of whiskey. In the fading light we rigged rappels from a few large pines to return to our gear cache at the top of pitch seven, grabbed sleeping gear and food, and juggled back to the summit for the night. What a ride! After a refreshing night under the stars, we spent most of the morning getting down off the wall and back to camp.

We took another rest day sitting across from the wall drawing topos and taking notes. The relative coolness of the south side of the reservoir was a nice break from the previous days of brain-melting heat. We really wanted to free the whole route but only had time to go back and clean the amazing second pitch. After hours of digging and scrubbing we took turns trying to free all the moves. It wasn't until Sunday morning, on our very last day, that we both managed to redpoint the pitch. Some really nice jams and a cruxy layback made this one of the most memorable pitches of the trip. We both felt that the few pitches higher up the route that required aid will go free with a little more time and cleaning. We named the route Sierra Swashbuckle (10 pitches, 5.11 C1) in honor of our trusty pirate flag and the whiskey-fueled swashing that went on during our down time. [Editor's note: The Atlantis Wall (ca 1,000') now has six known Grade IV or V routes. This trip was supported by an AAC Live Your Dream grant.]

– John Greer

Images



John Greer heading up the first pitch of Sierra Swashbuckle (IV 5.11 C1) on the Atlantis Wall above Donnell Reservoir. Supported by an AAC Live Your Dream Grant, Greer and Kuettnner completed the wall's fifth reported route over a week in August 2016.



Hauling the boat over the gate on the approach to Donnell Reservoir and the Atlantis Wall. As the wall rises directly out of the water, a boat is required to access most of its routes.



Gearing up in the boat for pitch one of what would eventually become Sierra Swashbuckle (IV 5.11 C1), complete with aquatic safety gear.



Broad Dome and the Atlantis Wall from the east. Greer and Kuettner's route, Sierra Swashbuckle (IV 5.11 C1) begins directly out of the water, just left of the center of the wall. The two fixed lines and completed the route over a week in August 2016, base camping on the talus slope to the east of the wall. x



The Atlantis Wall of Broad Dome, above Donnell Reservoir in the Sonora Pass area. Sierra Swashbuckle (IV 5.11 C1) is the fifth full-length route reported on the wall, completed by John Greer and Julian Kuettner in August 2016. x



Looking down.



Trying to traverse. Took a path slightly below this to reach the corner system to the right.



The short aid section of pitch 6.



Topo for Sierra Swashbuckle (IV 5.11 C1), on the Atlantis Wall of Broad Dome, above Donnell Reservoir in the Sonora Pass area. The two believe that with additional time and cleaning, the upper aid pitches will go free

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