



AAC Publications

Kolob Canyons, Black Diamond Wall, Melting Point

Utah, Zion National Park

“Get out of the way, quick!” I shouted, as calmly as possible considering the position I was in.

It was summit day on our bid for the first ascent of the Black Diamond, an unclimbed wall in Zion National Park’s Kolob Canyons region. I was 25’ up the third pitch, stemmed out and surrounded by stacks of loose rocks, when I looked below to see Ana Pautler still jugging to the sheltered belay—she was right in the crosshairs. My pulse quickened and I immediately regretted taking off on the pitch before everyone was tucked in at the belay. My only recourse was to try to prevent the rope from touching the loose rocks after I climbed past, and I turned 5.6 into 5.9 by avoiding the trundle pile at all costs—luckily it worked.

Brandon Gottung and I had planned for this climb for half a year, each of us having stared at the wall for hours while exploring routes on nearby Tucupit Point the previous year (AAJ 2016). Ana and Brandon had been rock climbing steadily in the months prior to our climb, and they arrived in Zion in late February with relentless psych. I had been mostly off the rock, and, conversely, at times almost in reaction to their unwavering optimism and positivity, I couldn’t help but feel uncertainty and plain fear of the dangers, both real and perceived. I tried to temper their enthusiasm by expressing the very real possibility that the line would not go, or a danger would present itself that would be unjustifiable. But hurdle after hurdle was passed, we experienced wild, untouched terrain, and we topped out on our third day of climbing.

The first day was spent figuring the approach, which involves multiple 3rd- to 5th- class sections. On day two we hiked up a second load and fixed the first pitch. The next day we woke to snow and cold. We climbed the second pitch, fixing the rope and returning to the base. On day four we jugged to our high point, climbed the final three pitches to the top of the wall, and forged a heinous thrash through steep dirt and scrub oak to the top of Horse Ranch Mountain. The expansive view was memorable: looking down on the north face of Tucupit Point and over all the finger canyons south toward St. George and beyond to Arizona. We rappelled our route via bolted anchors.

The route has a beautiful, surreal character, more pretty than solid; in places the cliff was sculpted into giant huecos, gargoyles, and tunnels. For the upper half of the climb, where the rock had eroded to form psychedelic features, for the thresholds of fear and uncertainty that were met and overcome along the way, and for the snowfall that covered us on the night of our coldest bivy, we called the route Melting Point (600’, IV 5.11 C1); the climb is mostly free, with two short sections of C1 on pitches one and two.

– Karl Kvashay

Images



The Black Diamond Wall of Horse Ranch Mountain (upper wall), showing the line of Melting Point (IV 5.11 C1) and the approach. The line marked on the lower wall is Solstice of Change (III 5.10+, Ewing-Roberts, 2009).



Karl Kvashay leading the first pitch of Melting Point on the Black Diamond Wall in Zion's Kolob Canyons.



Brandon Gottung leading a wide corner on pitch three of Melting Point, the first route to be established on the Black Diamond Wall, in the Kolob Canyons region of Zion National Park.



Karl Kvashay encountering a steep roof on pitch five of Melting Point, the first route to be established on the Black Diamond Wall, in the Kolob Canyons region of Zion National Park.



Ana Pautler coming up through a natural rock tunnel on pitch four of Melting Point.

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