



AAC Publications

Cirque of the Moon, Exploration and First Routes

Wyoming, Wind River Range

Cirque of the Moon is the name given to a compact horseshoe of walls and buttresses lying south of the North Fork of the Popo Agie River, between Long Lake and Papoose Lake. (The center of this cirque is at about 42°45'17.93"N, 109° 8'17.68"W.) The rock is generally high-quality Wind River granite, and the walls average 1,000' in height. The location is secluded compared to the nearby Cirque of the Towers. From left to right, facing the cirque, the prominent features are: Sunset Buttress, Tycho Wall (buttresses one, two and three), Flattop Spire, Conehead Spire, Wombat Spire, Cowcatcher, and Sunset Wall (predicted to be pure choss). The spires are actually buttresses—they only look like spires from below. The cirque floor is solid rubble, giving it a moonscape appearance. Our trips began from Dickenson Park, but most climbers will probably want to base in Cirque of the Towers and visit by day hike or an overnight.

Mark Leonard, David Baltz, and I did the first routes here in 1978, and we returned a year later along with Bruce Bundy, Dave Dahrling, Mike Head, Paul Horak, and Tom Wells, all New Mexico climbers. No evidence of previous ascents was found on either of my two visits. In light of this, my partners and I took the liberty of naming everything, from the cirque and its features to the various faces and buttresses we wound up climbing on.

It was Dave Dahrling who first spotted these walls, during a NOLS trip in 1977. His slideshow back in Albuquerque fired up Baltz, Leonard, and me to pack in the 12 miles from Dickenson Park for a two-week stay in July 1978. All scouting in the cirque ended abruptly below the clean crack system on the middle buttress of Tycho Wall. Three days later, Pipeline (V 5.9 A3) was established: nine pitches of predominately splitter cracks, with only two bolts and two fixed pins left behind.

Attention then turned to the slabby wall rising out of Mare Lake, dubbed Sunset Buttress. The six-pitch Buffalo Crude (III 5.10) follows cracks and flakes down low to two pitches of face climbing, followed by an easy dihedral to the rim. Lastly, Dave Baltz got started on Cowcatcher (so named for its profile resembling the devices in front of old locomotives) on the opposite side of the cirque. The route started out slabby but quickly reared back to terrifying steepness, and Dave only got up two pitches of free and aid, using a prusik roped solo system, before, with our food running low, we packed out.

The 1979 group was more than double the size of the previous year's. Mike Head teamed up with Tom Wells and Bruce Bundy to free Pipeline at 5.11d. They fixed the first three pitches and completed the route the second day, rerouting the last pitch through a chimney that had been a small waterfall in 1978. No doubt the original finish will go free as well, and no doubt the route can be climbed in a day. With longer ropes I can even envision combining pitches five and six, or six and seven (though probably not all three).

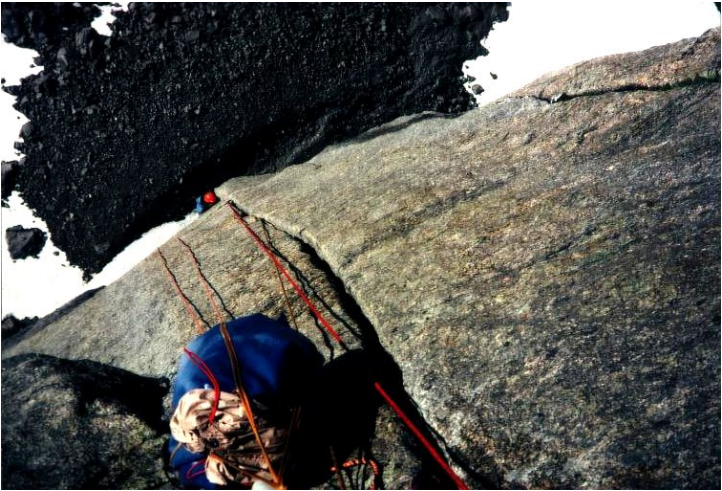
After Pipeline, the same group teamed with Baltz and Paul Horak to take another shot at Cowcatcher. Five pitches were added above Baltz's solo high point before retreat under a band of chossy rock. Next, while Head and Leonard climbed Telstar (III, 5.10) on the first (or Green Cheese) buttress of Tycho Wall, Dave Dahrling and I enjoyed a mellow outing on Conehead (a name paying homage to the SNL sketches), resulting in the Last Resort (II 5.9). Also on this trip, Buffalo Crude saw its second ascent and Baltz freesoloed another line on Sunset Buttress somewhere to the right of it.

While all the plum lines are surely plucked in the Cirque of the Moon, I know better than to call the area tapped out. [Editor's note: In 2016, Andy Hughes made two trips to the Cirque of the Moon with Adam Ferro and Garrett Reigan, completing three new routes, the first reported since Dalen's initial trips.]

Practically limitless lines remain on the slabs of Sunset Buttress, and there's potential between the three buttresses of Tycho Wall as well as in other scattered areas.

– Mark Dalen

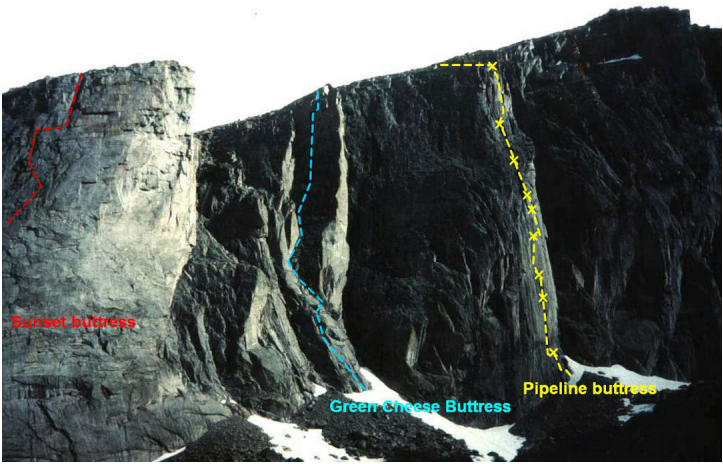
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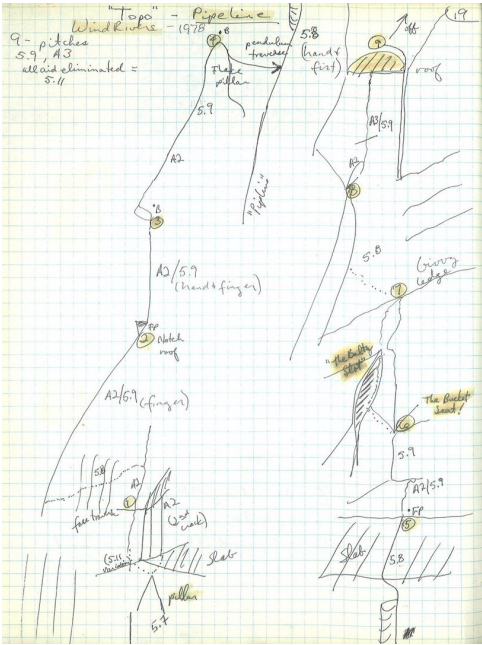
Looking down the splitter fifth pitch of Pipeline, on the middle buttress of the Tycho Wall in the Cirque of the Moon. The route was first climbed in 1978 and freed the following summer at 5.11d.



Mark Dalen jumaring to the top of pitch four during the first ascent of Pipeline (5.9 A3) in 1978. The route went free at 5.11d the following summer.



The northwest-facing aspect of the Cirque of the Moon, showing the Sunset Butte on the far left and the three buttresses that comprise what Dalen and his partners named Tycho Wall: the Green Cheese Butte, the Pipeline Butte and the third butte. The latter was climbed by Andy Hughes and partners in 2016. The routes Buffalo Crude, Telstar, and Pipeline are marked.



The original topo for Pipeline in Wyoming's Cirque of the Moon, from the 1978 first-ascent party.

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