



AAC Publications

Mt. Poi, Fast Free Ascents; Ololokwe, Cat and Mouse, New Routes

Kenya

Two and half weeks, one African country, and three completely unique objectives: Why not? In December 2016, I traveled to Kenya with Alex Honnold, Cedar Wright, Ted Hesser, and Taylor Keating to climb the country's biggest rock wall, put up first ascents, and tag the summit of Mt Kenya, as well as investigate off-grid solar power initiatives for the Honnold Foundation. Also up our sleeve was my friend Bobby Neptune, who's been living in Nairobi the past few years and was the indispensable, ultimate expedition manager and fixer.

First on the docket was the towering east face of Mt. Poi, the country's biggest wall. After years of failed ground-up attempts by British and Kenya-based teams, in 1999 Todd Skinner, Paul Piana, Steve Bechtel, and Scott Milton rap-bolted and redpointed True At First Light (21 pitches, 5.13b, AAJ 2000). In 2003 a Slovenian team repeated the American route and added one of their own in similar style: A Story About Dancing Dogs (5.13b). That same year, a Kenya-based team established a mostly free, ground-up route on the east face: Doing a Dirty Eastern Groove (E5 6b, 5.12d). The American and Slovenian routes were fully bolted, while the Kenyan line utilized roughly 50 bolts and a fair bit of bold trad climbing. We hoped to repeat as many of these lines as possible, while accomplishing the face's first in-a-day free ascent.

The logistics of Mt. Poi were the greatest hardship: Porters were required not only for our food and equipment but also for water, as there is none available near the base of the wall. Since Kenya is equatorial, the east face of Mt. Poi bakes in the sun until noon every day year-round, and a quick recon revealed that climbing the boiling face in the sun was out of the question. Time was short. On our first afternoon we set off on True at First Light—me paired with local Alex Fiksmen while Cedar and Alex started just behind us. The climbing was demanding and technical, and the sixth-pitch crux felt all of 5.13, sending Fiksmen and me back to the ground just before dark. Honnold and Cedar had long jetted past, simul-climbing much of the route, with Cedar finally resorting to French-freeing and clinging to the rocket that is Alex Honnold on a big wall. They topped out that night, Alex having redpointed the route in a single day, and conducted the five-hour death march through the Kenyan bush back down to camp.

Two days later, Honnold and I racked up at the base of the Slovenian line. After a few pitches of simul-climbing, I jumared as fast as I could behind Alex as he dispatched pitch after pitch on sight. Seven and a half hours later, we topped out—with a slight asterisk. An anchor bolt had disintegrated while I jumared below, and realizing we had seen other bolts in this condition, we traversed onto the American route to finish via its final crux pitch rather than the final 5.12 and 5.13 pitch of our intended route.

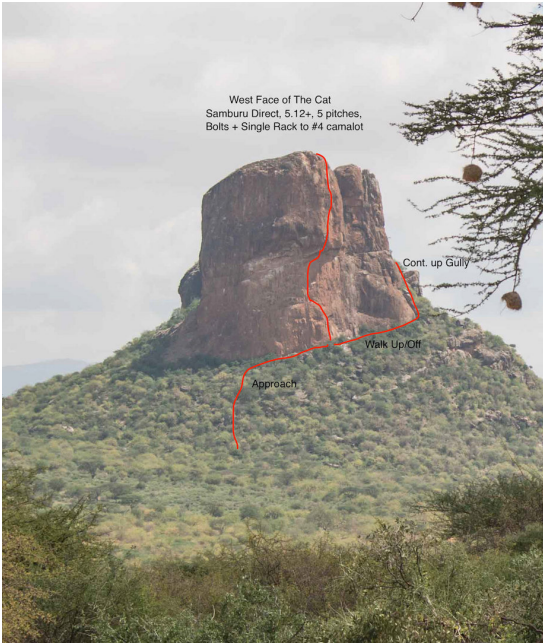
After a few days of R&R we settled into base camp near two enticing towers facing Mt. Ololokwe's 500m wall: The Cat and the Mouse. While Cedar and I battled ground-up on the Cat's 200m overhanging northwest face, Alex inspected and bolted a sport line—his first ever—on the Mouse, The Mouse of the Rising Sun (5.12). After three days of bold leads by Cedar, he and I topped out on the Samburu Direct (5.12d R), with five pitches of physical climbing varying from Rifle-style face to roof cracks. The next day Honnold repeated Samburu, declaring during pitch four, "I'm just trying not to die up here!" High praise indeed.

All that remained was a group romp up Mt. Kenya via the southeast ridge of Nelion, a celebratory

paraglide by Cedar down the mountain and into the valley, and sushi in Nairobi before our flight home.

– Maury Birdwell, USA

Images



Overview of Samburu Direct on the west face of the Cat.

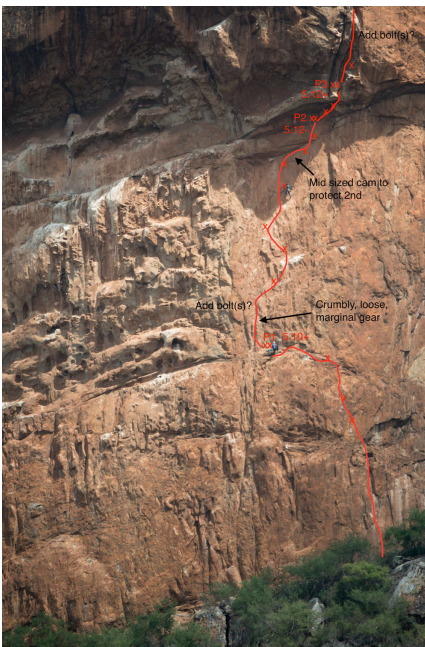
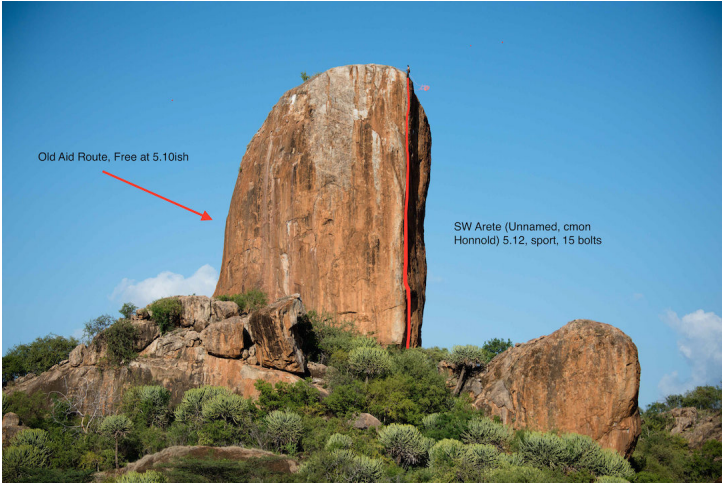


Photo topo for pitches 1, 2, and 3 of Samburu Direct.



Photo-topo for pitches 4 and 5 of Samburu Direct.



Mouse of the Rising Sun on the Mouse formation.



Alex Honnold leading one of the 5.12+ pitches on A Story About Dancing Dogs (Slovenian Route) on Mt. Poi.

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