



AAC Publications

Minotaur Tower, Suburban Blondes, First Free Ascent

Utah, Zion National Park

SUBURBAN BLONDES (IV 5.9 C2+) is a relatively obscure aid route up the 850-foot Minotaur Tower, which rises along the broad wall between Angels Landing and Moonlight Buttress. The route, established in April 1979 by desert legend Ron Olevsky and Scott Fischer, had had been on my back-burner list for a possible free ascent for nearly a decade.

After a late-night drive from Phoenix, Caleb Lichtenberger and I awoke on March 5 and had a "casual" day of cragging and scoping potential routes. Caleb wanted to check out the free version of Touchstone Wall, and from the parking lot we were also able to scope Suburban Blondes quite well. That evening we decided to go up and check out the line and see if it was possible to free.

After a late start, sorting gear and meeting up with our friend and photographer Parker Cross, we finally arrived at the base of the tower at the crack of 1 p.m. I took the sharp end and quickly buried myself into the massive chimney system, with minimal pro, wearing approach shoes and towing a 300' static line for Parker to come up. With around 100' of simul-climbing, Caleb and I were able to link the first three pitches, and we were able to onsight and cleanly follow the route's first question mark, a C2 offwidth roof, at mid 5.11. At that point we flopped the static to the outside of the system, and Parker juggled up to us. This resulted in a full-on core shot to the static line and a reality check for us all.

Without much time left in the day, we worked through the route's pendulum at the start of the fourth pitch with a top-rope, resulting in a few violent swings back into the main corner system. Eventually we found a 5.12 face sequence leading into a thin crack system, much lower than the aid line accesses this system. We bailed from our high point back to burgers and beers at the local pub.

With high hopes but big question marks ahead, we rallied from camp the following morning at 8 a.m., crossed the freezing river, and juggled back to the main ledge below the pendulum and the C2 pitches above. I quickly tapped in a single bolt to help protect our lower variation and racked up, hoping to send the traverse and onsight the C2 section above. While the traverse went first try, we quickly realized that the single lead bolt did not adequately protect the 20-foot traverse and that a fall would catastrophically slam the leader back into the chimney and ledge system below. Above the traverse, the thin crack also proved to be much more difficult than we had expected, and the free lead attempt turned into aid and French-free moves to reach the established anchor above.

For the remainder of the day, we rehearsed the moves, scrubbed, and added another bolt to the low traverse to keep things safe. (Both bolts were placed well below and out of the way of the original aid line.) We also left a handful of fixed RP's for our free attempt the following morning. We then zipped down the fixed line to the comfort of more burgers, beer, and camp.

On March 8 we started even earlier and soon were back at the ledge below what we hoped would be the crux. Having worked on this beautiful pitch together, Caleb and I both wanted to lead it. Caleb went first and had a good burn but flubbed the second-to-last boulder problem up high before the pitch eased up. He cleaned the pitch and I was up for my attempt.

The pitch starts with the difficult face traverse and then leads into a steep finger and tips splitter that is very exposed. The higher you go, the harder the pitch becomes. I barely got through the final lieback to a sinker hand jam, let out a victory whoop, and then had both feet cut, almost resulting in a fall on the "easy" section. I carefully finished the pitch, which had gone free at about 5.12+. I then cleaned the pitch and handed the sharp end back over to Caleb. He cruised the traverse, was locked into the fingers, did the lieback, and then fell at the sandy and flared moves going to the hand jam, resulting in a 20-foot lead fall onto a tiny RP and a one-hang lead to the anchor.

I jugged up the rope to Caleb. With it getting late in the day and having three more pitches to the summit, including two more rated C2, we decided to abandon Caleb's redpoint attempts and continue for the top, hoping to free the remainder of the route. I took the next 5.9 C2 lead, which was pretty thin and much looser than anything below, but it had face features that helped keep the grade reasonable at 5.11 R.

Caleb followed the pitch free and racked up for the final question-mark pitch, also rated C2. It looked really thin, heading up a beautiful lichened corner, which we later dubbed Caleb's Corner. The climbing checked in around 5.11 R, with just enough gear to keep things safe until the final 30 feet, where the only pro was a small nut and an old fixed Bugaboo piton, likely from the original ascent of the tower. Caleb ended the pitch on a big ledge below the final 30 feet of 5.8 to the summit. I led this vegetated pitch, which only took two pieces down low and required pulling on two-inch-thick moss to reach the summit.

With the light fading and an FFA under our belts, we didn't hang out long up top before starting our descent. But two raps later, we got our ropes stuck and earned a bonus lead to get them back. An hour or so later, we were back at the pub, celebrating with yet another cheeseburger, beers, laughs, and psyche.

This route is definitely one of my proudest ascents, and I feel grateful to have shared a grand experience with such good people. We added a single bolt for a free belay on the large ledge below the free variation (top of pitch 2 on the aid topo), two lead bolts, and fixed a handful of nuts on the lowest section of the crux pitch. Our style wasn't necessarily my favorite, but it helped us to work the cruxes, get some sweet photos, and be able to go to the pub in the evenings. The route was not done ground-up in a push, as we ran out of time, but now that it is equipped, it's certainly feasible and on my personal to-do list. I hope that it gets some action from visiting free climbers who are in the park and looking for more than just a Moonlight Buttress ascent. It is certainly looser, scarier, and has a fair bit of wide climbing, but if adventure is what you are looking for, this route will deliver.

– Patrick Kingsbury

Editor's Note: Over the course of 2015 and 2016, Joel Enrico, Steffan Gregory, Ethan Newman, Alan Thorne, and Rob Warden completed a new line on Minotaur Tower that was not previously reported in the AAJ. The Labyrinth (6 pitches, 5.11 C1) climbs the north face of the tower and meets up with Suburban Blondes on the ledge below the summit block. See the route topo below.

Images



Caleb Lichtenberger working the crux pitch of Suburban Blondes (5.12+) on the Minotaur. This aid line was first climbed in 1979, by Ron Olevsky and Scott Fischer, at 5.9 C2+.



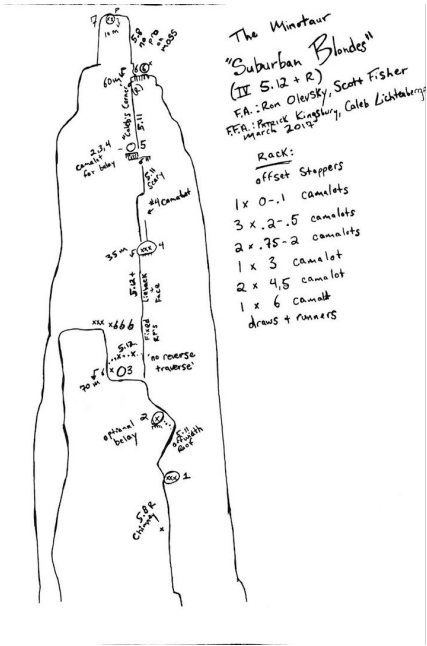
Pat Kingsbury burrowed deep in the opening chimney pitches of Suburban Blondes (5.12+). Kingsbury and Caleb Lichtenberger spent several days completing the route's first free ascent in March 2017.



Pat Kingsbury working the crux 5.12+ pitch during the first free ascent of Suburban Blondes, a former aid route on the Minotaur, near Angels Landing.



Pat Kingsbury nears the end of the crux pitch during the first free ascent of Suburban Blondes.



Topo for the free version of Suburban Blondes on Minotaur Tower in Zion National Park.

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