



AAC Publications

Cottontail Tower, Line in the Sand

Utah, Fisher Towers

After sharing adventure climbing stories and pictures of chossy towers one night over dinner in the fall of 2015 with the legendary Richard Jensen, we envisioned a Fisher Towers climbing project that unexpectedly ended up spanning three trips over two years to complete. In the spring of 2016 we met in the Fishers to look at possible lines to climb and selected one on the east face of Cottontail Tower. Despite the lack of guarantee that we would be able to connect the dots and find a way up over 900' of rock—mud really—I gave up my annual Yosemite trip to begin climbing the route that fall. Cam Burns joined us on all three trips for support.

We spent three weeks cleaning, jugging, engineering creative placements, and straining sand through bandannas covering our mouths to finish the first three pitches. Richard led the spicy first two pitches, the crux of the route, consisting of hooking on holes followed by traversing terrain with very little gear that could sustain a fall. I led the third pitch, which began with rock so hard it bent pitons. The layers forming the Fisher Towers change in density every ten feet or so from very dense rock to the consistency of kitty litter. The remainder of the third pitch featured crumbly knobs and irregular edges that I hooked with Richard's homemade hooks he calls "claws."

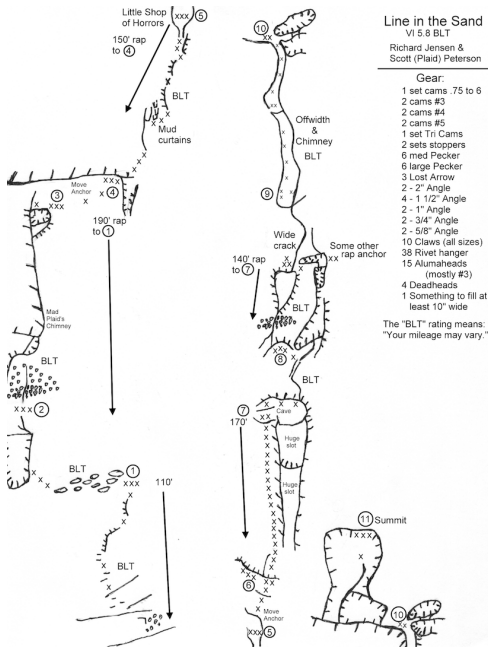
We returned in April 2017, and above our high point we faced a series of chandeliered mud curtains. There was nothing Richard could do but hack away and dig under these hanging horrors. As the 30 to 40 pound globs fell to the ground they looked like meteors with a swirling plume of dirty smoke trailing all the way to the ground. They exploded with a loud report, like mortar fire from an angry enemy. At the end of each day, Richard resembled a Virginia coal miner, only redder than a barn. We were shut down midway up the fourth pitch by Pacific Northwest-style rain and agreed to come back in the fall.

In October, Richard continued leading above our highpoint while I suffered through a bombardment of grapefruit sized dirt clods and dust so bad I couldn't see or breathe. Pitch nine required going to the left to avoid a multi-ton, triangular-shaped detached flake that rang like a gong. Richard then suffered through an offwidth chimney, which he bolted with 3/8-inch bolts and hangers so that it can be free climbed in the future. The off-width chimney leads to the shoulder of Cottontail, and Richard rewarded my suffering by letting me lead the summit pitch, the tail of the Cottontail, joining the route Brer Rabbit for the last 40'.

We named our 10-pitch route Line in the Sand. We decided to rate the route BLT because all aid ratings are subjective, especially in the Fisher Towers where the first ascent experience can't be replicated. If pressed, it would suffice to say the route is hard aid. For those adventurers willing to suffer in order to scale bizarre and unexpected rock reminiscent of Patagonian ice formations, bring your most creative aid skills. All belays have 1/2-inch and 3/8-inch stainless steel anchors with rap rings. The only other fixed gear is the 1/4 X 1 1/2-inch Zamac rivets designated on the topo.

– Scott Peterson

Images



Topo for Line in the Sand, a new aid route complete by Richard Jensen and Scott Peterson in fall of 2017. The route climbs 10 pitches to reach the shoulder of Cottontail Tower, where it shares the previously climbed summit pitch to the top.



A drone shot of the fourth pitch belay of Line in the Sand, a new hard aid route on Cottontail Tower in the Fisher Towers outside Moab.



Richard Jensen's homemade aid hooks, which he calls claws. These custom-made hooks are made of an exotic steel called Hituf, which has to be white hot to forge. Once forged and heat-treated, it retains flexibility right to the point of failure, so it can be ultra-hardened without becoming brittle.



Richard Jensen weights a precarious hook placement on the fourth pitch traverse on Line in the Sand on Cottontail Tower, in the Fisher Towers outside Moab.



Richard Jensen nearing the end of the short fourth pitch during the first ascent of Line in the Sand. Jensen and Scott Peterson completed this new route on Cottontail Tower with the help of Cameron Burns over the course of two years and three trips.



Richard Jensen doing some delicate mud hooking in full Fisher Towers battle gear during the first ascent of Line in the Sand on Cottontail Tower.

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