



Pico Cão Grande: First Ascent of Leve Leve and Free Ascents of Nubivagant

Africa, São Tomé and Príncipe

THE IDEA CAME UP as it often does, after a nice afternoon of climbing and a well-deserved beer. A good friend told us about the spectacular Pico Cão Grande (“Big Dog Peak”), a volcanic plug rising out of the jungle on the island of São Tomé, off the west coast of Africa. We were looking for a climbable volcanic formation to pursue the third stage of a project we call “The 4 Elements,” which is about climbing in places that exemplify Water, Air, Fire, and Earth. We started in 2017 with Air in Patagonia, followed by Water in Peru, and now Fire on Cáo Grande.

From the first moment we saw an image of the big Cão, we decided that it was a place we had to visit—yes or yes! While planning our expedition we were surprised to discover that two of our friends from Asturias in Spain had attempted to climb Cão Grande. We benefited from their help as well as information from Catalan and Mexican-English teams. [The peak was first climbed by a Portuguese–São Toméan team in 1975.]

We traveled to Pico Cão Grande with Manu Ponce and photographer Jordi Canyigueral with the intention of opening a new route, starting with some impressive overhangs. The remote island soon delivered on the promise of adventure: During our 26-day expedition, we received only three days without rain and encountered numerous black cobras in the jungle.

While establishing Leve Leve (“slow slow,” the slogan of the country, 450m, 8b+), we climbed many pitches on very wet rock. When it rains here it’s an authentic skating rink, and it rains 280 days a year, a detail we did not discover until we arrived. (Our Fire stage was almost extinguished by rain!) We opened the route in the cleanest style possible, ground up and without use of aid or removable bolts. We cleaned many pitches for cams and nuts. The climbing is very physical and technical at the bottom and more classic at the top. We completed a team redpoint ascent over multiple days in July; the route awaits a one-day free ascent. All the rappels are bolted.

With a few days left, we attempted a free ascent of the climb just to the left, Nubivagant (455m, Almada-Leah, 2015; 8b A0, with three pitches that were not redpointed). This time we had more luck with the weather and were able to free this route in team redpoint style over two days, with the three crux pitches going at 8a+/b, 8a, and 7c+/8a. We also thought the final pitch was harder than originally rated—at least 7b. (Nubivagant and Leve Leve share their final two and a half pitches.) Undoubtedly this is one of the most fun and exotic trips we’ve made, and we highly recommend a visit to Africa’s smallest country. Thanks to everyone there who helped!

– Iker and Eneko Pou, Spain

Editor’s note: Shortly after the Spanish climbs on Pico Cão Grande, the U.S. team of Sam Daulton, Remy Franklin, Jacob Kupferman, Tyler Rohr, and Mike Swartz, supported in part by AAC Live Your Dream grants, arrived on São Tomé, also hoping to free Nubivagant. Daulton and Franklin each freed every pitch (though not sequentially), including a one-day onsight push from pitch five to the summit. Franklin and Daulton felt the second, third, and fourth pitches were 8a+/b, 7c+, and 7c, respectively. All team members reached the summit.

Images



The line of the new route Leve Leve on Pico Cão Grande. The 2015 route Nubivagant is to the left.



Eneko and Iker Pou and Manu Ponce on the approach to Pico Cão Grande.



Iker Pou climbing pitch three (5.13) of Leve Leve on Cão Grande.



Iker Pou climbing pitch three of Leve Leve on Cão Grande.



Eneko Pou climbing a gear-protected pitch on Cão Grande.



Eneko Pou climbing pitch one of Leve Leve on Pico Cão Grande.



Cão Grande New Route

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