



AAC Publications

Runnel Vision: An 800-meter sport climb on Pedra Baiana

Brazil, Minas Gerais

Pedra Baiana in the morning light. The 2019 route Runnel Vision (800m, 8a A0) climbs the prominent left-to-right dike on the shaded wall, eventually finishing up a prominent runnel in the central southeast face. The 2016 route Sangre Latina ascends the sunny east face, beginning in the low, left-facing corner. Alun Richardson

Brazil, the land of the mighty Amazon, endless sandy beaches, Caipirinha cocktails, and a big statue of Christ on a lumpy granite mountain. Brazil must have big walls, I thought. An internet search turned up many walls with few or no routes, and one, in particular, caught my eye: Pedra Baiana, a huge monolith in a lush paradise. My friends remarked, "Chuffin' amazing," when I showed them my 2018 summer holiday.

These days, it's difficult to assemble a group of likeminded climbers who enjoy the delights of climbing up huge monoliths of vertical granite and aren't needing a joint replacement or hearing aid. Miraculously, kids appeared! In the V12 outdoor shop in North Wales. I bumped into a keen young chap named Angus Killie.

Angus – "When?"

Twid – "June"

Angus – "Yep"

Twid – "Got a strong mate?"

Angus – "Many"

Twid – "See you in Rio de Janeiro"

Angus swaggered down Llanberis' High Street looking for a strong climber, and I chatted up my old mates Steve Long and Rob Johnston. Somehow our merry band converged on the same day on a beach in Rio de Janeiro. Barry Manilow looped in the background as we drank Caipirinhas. In the morning, we'd drive to Pedra Baiana, in the state of Minas Gerais, about 1,000km north of Rio de Janeiro. Luckily, Angus had brought along a burly looking partner named James Taylor. Not only was he a talented, Huber-strong climber but also, it transpired, a well-organized guy. James had taken the initiative to photocopy Google Earth maps to help us find this mythical wall.

A nationwide strike, empty petrol stations, riots, roadblocks, and poor road surfacing were only minor distractions while Steve, Rob, and I struggled to keep up with Team Youth. Weaving through endless, dense coffee plantations, we passed many unclimbed, stunning granite towers while hunting for our own. Is it that one? Sorry kids, not there yet. After two days (double Google time), we arrived below the mighty Pedra Baiana. The 800m wall looked every bit as impressive as the images we had gleaned from the internet.

The next morning, as the sun rose, the team got cracking up a stout free climbing feature on the southeast face. Angus and James, on the early shift, unexpectedly came across some old bolts,

which soon ended. It was apparent why previous explorers had abandoned the line: As the morning grew warmer, thousands of bees living on the rock face joined the lads, forcing a prompt retreat.

Our original plan, based on photos, had been to follow a different feature, a prominent quartz dike that runs left to right across the face. [Editor's note: Runnel Vision is located to the left of the only other known route on Pedra Baiana's big walls: Sangre Latina (AAJ 2017), an 800m mostly-free climb (estimated at 8b/8b+) on the east face, put up by Brazilian and Argentine climbers.] The next day, Steve and I started this line. Initially, we followed easy slabs then grooves to gain access to the dike. It was covered in positive edges and pockets, unlike the featureless granite walls on either side. It gave us hope for a free route of epic proportions.

Ground-up drilling was our only option, as there weren't any cracks. In the 800m of climbing, we came across a grand total of one nut placement. The angle of the rock was either just off the vertical, dead vertical, or slightly overhanging. The upper, extremely exposed section of the wall took some fine aiding from Angus and James; on one particular nighttime effort, Angus took a sizable fall from a sky hook. Eventually, we got the rock boots on. Free climbing on the initial steep part of the wall, we had eight fine face climbing pitches with grades 6c upward to 7c+ and 8a (redpointed by Angus and James). In the middle of the wall, we took the line straight up through runnels, where two long, blank aid pitches led to a perfect 400m runnel—we felt destined to climb this 2m-wide runnel directly to the summit.

After seven days' effort, we had climbed 18 bolted pitches to a high point about 150m vertical below the summit, with many pitches freed lower down (to 8a). We placed our last remaining bolt at our high point with the frustrating realization that we'd need a second trip to finish the climb.

A year went by, replete with the gnawing of an uncompleted project. Steve and Angus couldn't make a second trip due to work, and Rob Johnson, our cameraman, was bankrupt after buying cameras. James and I asked two others to join us in June 2019: Simon "the Champ" Nadin, now living in Scotland, jumped at the chance of a midge-free climbing experience, and Shaun Hudson, guide and cabinetmaker from Chamonix, fancied seeing Cococabana beach and thought big walling a fair price to pay. We were joined by Welsh photographer and guide extraordinaire Alun Richardson.

The team quickly got stuck into pushing the incomplete route toward the summit, which turned out to be 180m of hard climbing. Here, the runnel sprouted vegetation, with hanging gardens of lush plants, flowers, and hidden beasts. Shaun led the final pitch, climbing rock and lunging like Tarzan to lumps of lush vegetation. The totally flat summit was packed with amazing wildflowers and dense foliage. The vista was breathtaking, with the vast massif of Pedra Riscada and distant coastal cities visible beyond. However, the stark reality of the work still to come dawned on all of us—after all, we had come to free climb.

The following day, James and Simon looked for an alternative through the blank pitches in the middle of the wall while Shaun and I cleaned the upper runnel. My motto has always been "Light is right!" to which Shaun (the cabinetmaker)—hanging from a wooden seat with two cordless drills, hammers, bolts, spades, and a thick-bristle yard brush—retorted, "You need the right tools for the job, youth!" Indeed, I soon realized that performing the splits across a 2m runnel with a new hip replacement would be risky. Eventually, Shaun and I focused on free climbing the lower sections, and James and Simon took on the runnel.

Belaying James and Simon allowed for grandstand seats. The two rubbed most of the skin from their palms while stemming the hold-free runnel and soon garnered calves worthy of the Tour de France. In all my years climbing, I'd never seen such a unique feature. It should spark others, for sure, to explore the smooth, perfectly formed runnels of Pedra Baiana.

On our final night on the wall, we bivied on the towering summit. In the night, a large meteor lit up the vast sky. As the morning sun clawed through enveloping morning mists, we started the long abseil

down the climb, retrieving our gear and ropes. James' burning vision had been a totally free rock climb, and with a couple of blank pitches remaining, we hadn't quite managed that, but it's always a privilege enjoying the adventure and raw beauty of a place like this. About 90 percent of the climb went free, and our completed climb was a fine effort: Runnel Vision (800m, 20+ pitches, 8a A0). There are no ledges bigger than four inches. If you are still wondering, Brazil has it.

By Mike "Twid" Turner, U.K.

Images



Pedra Baiana in the morning light. The 2019 route Runnel Vision (800m, 8a A0) climbs the prominent left-to-right dike on the shaded wall, eventually finishing up a prominent runnel in the central southeast face. The 2016 route Sangre Latina ascends the sunny east face, beginning in the low, left-facing corner



Looking west to Pedra Baiana. The 2019 route Runnel Vision (800m, 8a A0) climbs the shaded southeast face, while the 2016 route Sangre Latina ascended the center of the sunny east face, beginning in the low, left-facing corner.



James Taylor leading in the upper runnel on Pedra Baiana's southeast face.



Runnel Vision (800m, 8a A0)

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