



AAC Publications

Altar of Sacrifice, East Face, Cowboy Killer

United States, Utah, Zion National Park

Between November 30 and December 5, Ky Hart and I completed the first ascent of the east face of the Altar of Sacrifice in Zion National Park. The pale monolith's 2,230' face is the centerpiece of the Towers of the Virgin, an impressive Navajo sandstone cirque near the mouth of Zion Canyon.

The east face has seen many attempts, as evidenced by over 600' of rotting rope and a motley assortment of fixed gear that we found on our route and nearby, some of which dates back to the use of homemade aluminum hangers. None of the past attempts seemed to have made it more than halfway up the face.

Dan Stih and Ron Raimonde made the first ascent of the Altar of Sacrifice over four days in March of 1997. After finding a route to the plateau, they climbed the south side of the tower via the bold "Couloir of Death." Over the years, Ky and I had talked often of the alluring east face, but it wasn't until some climbers from out of town began asking a few too many questions that we finally made an attempt.

We started just after Thanksgiving. Even with support from friends Audrey Abbott and Arthur Herlitzka, who helped carry water to the base and fix some lower pitches, it took us three days to climb and bump loads up the first 1,000' of bushy, blocky terrain. Aside from a long and unprotectable offwidth, climbing on these pitches was more about gumption than brawn, full of bad rock, bushes, and difficult hauling. The high point of previous attempts was denoted by two lonely pull-tab Coors cans stashed in a bush on a massive ledge. We named this the "Banquet Bivy."

As we embarked into new terrain on the fourth day, the climbing was reasonable aside from a tricky traverse where we placed two of the three lead bolts that we drilled on the route. The fourth night we shared a skinny but comfortable ledge, where rodents gnawed into our rucksacks as we slept. The next day, the 11th pitch took us to the fiery red headwall. Here, the character of the climb changed. The forested ledges were replaced by a steep and grotesque gash, with rock the consistency of a sugar cookie. Ky led the first headwall pitch in good style—high-stepping in his aiders and moving smoothly—climbing soft cracks that split a series of roofs. I took the next lead by headlamp. Halfway through, I blew a beak and took an airy ride through the darkness. I finished the pitch and drilled a three-bolt anchor to accommodate our portaledge.

On day six, after a hearty breakfast of grits, Ky attacked the crux, climbing straight up overhanging soft stone. The iron on this pitch refused to ring true and was complemented only by sparse and untrustworthy cams. Oftentimes, fear is relegated to one end of the rope, but I think Ky and I shared it equally on this pitch. Eventually, out of earshot and eyesight, Ky stretched our 60m rope to its end, drilled an anchor, and fixed the line for me to follow.

Besides a light rack, bivy kit, and stove, we left most of our gear at this anchor, at the top of pitch 15, and pushed for the top. The last two pitches entailed blue-collar bushwhacking and more poor protection. We were greeted at the lip by a remarkably thick and twisted ponderosa pine, a mere stone's throw from the first-ascent cairn built by Stih and Raimonde. We spent our sixth and final night entranced by the desert sprawling before us. We called our route Cowboy Killer (VI 5.10 A4 X).

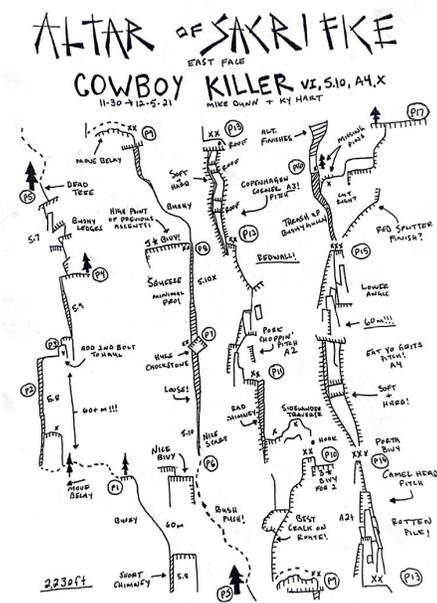
The descent on the following day was impromptu and rowdy. After returning to our portaledge, we made a 60m diagonal rappel to the plateau behind the wall and then descended a canyon to climber's left, which we suspected had been used by the first ascensionists. It was easy going at first, but the canyon turned into a massive rotten corner that required many sketchy rappels. For anchors, we had to cannibalize one of our core-shot ropes. Ky was almost decapitated by a rock that I dislodged. We made it to the Bit and Spur for dinner and drinks just before closing.

– Mike Dunn

Images



The Altar of Sacrifice in Zion's Towers of the Virgin.



Topo for Cowboy Killer, the first route up the east face of Altar of Sacrifice.



Looking down pitch ten (5.10), one of the nicest pitches on Cowboy Killer (VI 5.10 A4 X) on the Altar of Sacrifice.



Mike Dunn belaying Ky Hart on the crux pitch of Cowboy Killer (VI 5.10 A4 X) on the Altar of Sacrifice, Zion National Park, Utah.



The line of Cowboy Killer (VI 5.10 A4 X) the east face of the Altar of Sacrifice, Zion National Park, Utah.



One of two Coors beers Mike Dunn and Ky Hart found on a ledge about a third of the way up the wall during their first ascent of the east face of the Altar of Sacrifice. Based on signs of passage below, and no further signs above, they presumed the beers marked the high point of previous attempts. They named the ledge the "Banquet Bivy."



Ky Hart leading the crux pitch of Cowboy Killer (VI 5.10 A4 X) on the Altar of Sacrifice, Zion National Park, Utah.

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