



AAC Publications

Castle Rock Spire, West Face, First Free Ascent

California, Sierra Nevada, Sequoia National Park

Josef Maier making the first free ascent of the original second pitch of the East Face route on Castle Rock Spire. Maier freed this pitch during a pause in the rappel descent from the summit after climbing Spaghetti Western. Photo by Brian Prince

The upper west face of magnificent Castle Rock Spire is split by a very attractive crack system, which was first climbed by Fred Beckey, Ben Borson, Mort Hempel, and Galen Rowell (AAJ 1970). It has been a goal of modern-day climbers—myself among them—to free this system. However, the pitches the 1969 team climbed to reach the crack system, including a “manzanita field,” sounded horrendous, as colorfully described by Rowell: “The field was negotiated by testing the brittle bushes and tying them off for direct aid. I tried to shut out the recurring mental image of a climber hanging in space, spinning in circles after a fall, with bunches of silly bushes tied to the rope at regular intervals above him.”

Instead of dealing with silly bushes, Josef Maier, Brandon Thau, and I started much farther down and left, on Cinco de Mayo (12 pitches, V 5.10+ A3, 2002), 20 years after Brandon established that route with the late Bruce Bindner.

After four pitches, Cinco de Mayo climbs into cracks that Brandon and Bruce aided on the first ascent. We broke into new terrain up and right, aiming for the main west face crack. Three new pitches, one of which was the crux of our route—and which we only climbed clean on top-rope, due to lack of time—led us to the bottom of the crack system, which was everything we hoped it would be. We broke it into three short pitches to savor the great climbing and belay ledges. We completed our route over two days, May 13–14, and called it Spaghetti Western (1,000', 10 pitches, IV 5.12a), due to the route's sinuous nature, its location on the west face, and the wild setting of the western Sierra. Our link-up created the first free route on the west face, with a top-rope asterisk for the crux.

We rappelled the East Face route (5.9 C1, Jeffcoach-Ruddy, 2014) and stopped on the way down to try the original second pitch. Maxim Belyakov and Vitaliy Musiyenko had freed the East Face at 5.11+ in 2016, but they followed a 5.10a variation on pitch two to avoid a difficult-looking splitter, aided on the first ascent. This striking pitch had shut down attempts from various strong climbers over the years. Josef easily freed it, placing all the gear on lead, and called it 5.12-, which is probably a sandbag.

Of note, our party was likely the first to do the notorious lower approach to the Castle Rocks since the 2021 KNP Complex Fire. The post-fire approach was perhaps a touch easier, with less vegetation, albeit with the unwelcome addition of thick ash and loose boulders.

— Brian Prince

Images

Spaghetti Western 5.12-
Castle Rock Spire-Sequoia
Park: 70m rope
2x #0.2 -#3, 1x #0.1-#4
FA: Joe Maier, Brian Prince,
Brandon Thau 5-14-2022



Spaghetti Western (1,000', 10 pitches, V 5.12a) on the west face of Castle Rock Spire, Sequoia National Park, California. The line starts with the first four pitches of Cinco de Mayo (Bindner-Thau, 2002), then breaks right to reach cracks on the upper west face.



Brian Prince (back to camera) and Josef Maier on the approach to Castle Rock Spire. For many years, climbers doing the lower approach to Castle Rock have worn Tyvek suits to protect against the particularly dense poison oak and abundant ticks that plague lower elevations of the Sierra Nevada.



Josef Maier on the crux sixth pitch, 5.12, during his, Brian Prince, and Brandon Thau's first ascent of Spaghetti Western (1,000', 10 pitches, V 5.12a) on the west face of Castle Rock Spire. Due to lack of time, this pitch was only freed on top-rope during their ascent.



Josef Maier on pitch eight during his, Brian Prince, and Brandon Thau's first ascent of Spaghetti Western (1,000', 10 pitches, V 5.12a) on the west face of Castle Rock Spire, Sequoia National Park, California. The dome across the major drainage in the top center of the photo is Moro Rock.



Josef Maier making the first free ascent of the original second pitch of the East Face route on Castle Rock Spire. Maier freed it during the descent from the summit after his, Brian Prince, and Brandon Thau's first free ascent of the West Face via Spaghetti Western (1,000', 10 pitches, V 5.12a). Daniel Jeffcoach and Tom Ruddy aided this splitter in 2014 when they made the first ascent of the East Face (5.9 C1), which John Salathé and Jim Wilson had attempted in 1949. (Some of Salathé's original bolts are still present.) Maxim Belyakov and Vitaliy Musiyenko did the first free ascent of the East Face route in 2016, but used an easier 5.10a variation on pitch two to avoid the crack shown here.



Josef Maier making the first free ascent of the original second pitch of the East Face route on Castle Rock Spire. Maier freed this pitch during a pause in the rappel descent from the summit after climbing Spaghetti Western.

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