



AAC Publications

Matterhorn, West Face, Cigarette Tree

Oregon, Wallowa Mountains

In mid-August, Moshe (Mo) Shtilman and I climbed a route up the prominent central buttress of the west face of the Matterhorn (9,826') in the Wallowa Mountains. In a state characterized mainly by basaltic crags and broad-shouldered volcanoes, the Matterhorn's west face is a singularly impressive alpine wall.

The mountain's current name, an unimaginative co-optation of the famous Swiss Alp, obscures its unique aesthetic, cultural, and geologic features. The valleys below the Matterhorn were home to the Wallowa band of Nimiipuu (Nez Perce), the band of Chief Joseph, before their flight in 1877 and subsequent exile following violent conflicts with settlers. Some versions of the Nimiipuu creation myth describe Coyote binding himself with a vine to the Matterhorn in a face-off with a great devouring monster. With such rich associations, perhaps there's a better moniker for this mountain than that of another continent's iconic summit, to which it bears no resemblance.

The west face of the Matterhorn is the outstanding metamorphosed (later glaciated) exposure of a thick layer of limestone, originally a reef that formed around a tropical island in the proto-Pacific, then accreted onto the ancient North American core. As the Wallowa terrane was colliding with the continent, a granitoid pluton formed underneath; the intense heat and pressure of the contact zone caused overriding limestone to transform into marble. This marble is cut by many basalt dikes, some of which appear as swirling flows in the white host rock.

The slopes below the Matterhorn are covered in disconcerting mounds of sugary calcite gravel, a preview of the rock above. The marble on the west face is not what you would find in a Tuscan quarry, ready for Michelangelo's chisel. Rather, it's as if the mountain was pulled out of the oven too soon—not quite ready for climbers.

The west face's soaring central buttress is a nose-type feature, the left flank of which ranges from overhanging to vertical, the right from vertical to steeply inclined. Farther left is another overhanging face; farther right is a distinct tower. The junctures of those features with the flanks of the central buttress are where Dave Coughlin and Dave Jensen established the West Face Chimney (1,200', IV 5.9 A1) in 1973—a free line except for 20' of aid to avoid loose rock—and the West Face Wall (1,200', V 5.8 A3) in 1974—which aids through a traversing, overhanging crack for most of its length. Those are the only recorded routes, but I wouldn't be surprised if others have been completed.

The hike into the Matterhorn is seven miles from a popular U.S. Forest Service trailhead on Hurricane Creek, followed by a few hours of scrambling up loose slopes. Mo and I bivouacked at the base of the wall. To access our route, Cigarette Tree (1,200', 13 pitches, 5.11 R), we climbed one of the few free-able cracks below the 1973 West Face Chimney route and quickly traversed left across moderate terrain to reach the nose of the central buttress. We then followed the nose, more or less, to the summit, climbing two necky roofs (mid-5.11) to surmount sections of jumbled, suspended blocks. We bivouacked once midroute and relied frequently on assorted types of pins. Alex Marine and I had attempted a similar line several years earlier, before retreating due to an ankle sprain.

The closest climbing analogue to what we found might be a rock face with aggressively decomposing granite. In the case of the Matterhorn, large pillars and blocks are often split by hairline fractures only

visible up close, and the surface of most of the mountain rubs off under your palms and feet, like grains on cheap sandpaper. Reasonably sound handholds and footholds can be found on the sloping edges after two or three swipes. Deep cracks exist, and they periodically offer acceptable protection, but it's best to double up the critical placements.

The actual movement was satisfyingly similar to that on a steep granite wall—short boulder cruxes, occasional mantels, and plenty of jamming. But the quality of the gymnastics was entirely colored by the uncertain protection. Climbing such a “Big Rock Candy Mountain,” like terrain out of a fable (“Where the boxcars all are empty, and the sun shines every day / On the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees,” as Harry McClintock sang in 1928), isn't particularly about discovering a retraceable line or a classic route to share. It's more like a game whose point is to stay on the safe side of deadly, conjuring a reasonable way through unreasonable features, seeking the nicotine without the tar.

There is ample room for new variations and independent lines on the Matterhorn, for those into this kind of thing. We can't recommend this wall—it's falling apart too much—but it is a gorgeous siren.

— **Spencer Gray**

Images



The west face of the Matterhorn, in the Wallowa Mountains, Oregon. Left to right: the West Face Chimney (1,200', IV 5.9 A1, Coughlin-Jensen, 1973); Cigarette Tree (1,200 vertical feet, 13 pitches, 5.11 R), climbed by Spencer Gray and Mo Shtilman over two days in August 2023; the West Face Wall (1,200', V 5.8 A3, Coughlin-Jensen, 1974).



The west face of the Matterhorn (9,826') in Oregon's Wallowa Mountains, from Hurricane Creek.



Locations of the belays on Cigarette Tree (1,200', 13 pitches, 5.11 R).



The west face of the Matterhorn (9,826') in Oregon's Wallowa Mountains. Cigarette Tree (1,200', 13 pitches, 5.11 R) largely follows the sun-shade line on the prominent butress in the center of the face, directly below the summit.



Looking south across the right side of the west face of the Matterhorn from the central buttress, with the 1973 West Face Chimney route showcased.



Mo Shtilman belaying pitch five of Cigarette Tree, next to a prominent dike.



Mo Shtilman stretches across the opening moves of pitch six (5.10) of Cigarette Tree, having clipped the complex, extended belay anchor for his first piece.



Spencer Gray protects the opening bulge of pitch 10 (5.11) on Cigarette Tree.



Mo Shtilman follows pitch nine (5.9) across a gravel-covered slab on the west face of Matterhorn.



Mo Shtilman tops out pitch 10 (5.10), onto another dike, on Cigarette Tree.

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