



AAC Publications

Merriam Peak, Heart of Darkness

California, Sierra Nevada, Eastern Sierra

After a successful trip to Royce Lakes Basin earlier in the season (see report here), Matt O'Brien and I decided to return in July with our friend Daniel Dunn to try a new route on Merriam Peak. We spied a couple of weaknesses left of the North Buttress (1,000', IV 5.10b, Clevenger-Harrington, 1976) and through the center of the steep wall between this and the northeast ridge. A huge heart-shaped feature in the middle looked like it had two different cracks that might afford passage to the top.

Two long pitches up runnels, corners, and flakes brought us to the base of the heart. We chose the left crack system—a steep stemming corner that led to a series of large roofs. From a stance under the first roof, I was barely able to reach a protruding diving-board ledge. A wild and exposed mantel onto this feature got me past the largest of the roofs—it also made for an excellent and novel belay station.

After another cruxy roof on the next pitch, the steepest part of the wall was behind us. A long, sustained splitter crack led to a feature previously named the Throne Room—a giant, comfortable ledge about 700' up that is shared with Silver Cloud (IV 5.10d A0, Harden-O'Brien, 1994). We followed Silver Cloud for most of a short traversing pitch before branching off again on a previously unclimbed wide crack that brought us to an exposed ledge at the top of the headwall. From here, we witnessed a beautiful sunset followed quickly by nightfall as we rappelled the route.

We returned the next day to connect our route to the top of the mountain via a short, unprotected traverse right. The completed line, Heart of Darkness (1,100', 9 pitches, IV 5.11-), shares terrain with the final pitch of the North Buttress.

Due to grainy rock and the unprotected traverse up high, we would recommend that future parties climb straight up from the fourth-pitch anchor or step left and take easier terrain to gain a ledge system that can be traversed into a better finish on the North Buttress.

—Matt Carpenter

Images

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