



AAC Publications

Provo Canyon, Cascade Mountain, The Penitent Path

Utah, Wasatch Range

Sean McLane leading pitch eight (the second of three M9 pitches) on The Penitent Path, a week after redpointing the 12-pitch route. Photo: Jon Jugenheimer.

After about 20 days of work over two months, Jon Jugenheimer and I completed what could be the longest fully bolt-protected dry-tooling route anywhere. There are dry-tooling and mixed routes of similar or greater length in the United States—for example, some of the newer routes on the Dark Side Wall, near Ouray, Colorado—and abroad, but these aren't all bolted, nor as sustained. The Penitent Path climbs high-quality rock on all natural holds to the left of Stairway to Heaven (9 pitches, WI5) and runs the full 350m height of the buttress. The 12-pitch route turned out harder and more sustained than we expected, with three pitches of M9 and most of the rest M7 or harder.

Just before Christmas 2023, Jon invited me to try to redpoint a pitch he'd bolted a couple of years prior—and which would become pitch three of The Penitent Path. The crux involves finding a hidden, natural pocket in a slab over a bulge and using your knees to stabilize yourself. I tore a good hole in my knee while figuring out the beta and proceeded to reopen it with more alpine knees later in the route-development process. Something clicked as I finally figured out the genuflection beta: I remembered the first challenge that Indiana Jones must face to reach the Holy Grail in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade. Before he, too, figures out he must kneel to avoid spinning blades that have decapitated untold numbers of suitors, Indy continually mutters to himself, "Only the penitent man will pass." Even though it wasn't done yet, our route had a name.

We equipped and freed the rest of the pitches in various styles over the next two months. I bolted pitch four ground-up and first climbed pitches five, six, and seven ground-up, rope-solo. Everything else was cleaned and bolted top-down.

On March 4, 2024, after a couple of days of cleaning loose rock and rehearsing the movement, I felt ready to go for the redpoint. The day started inauspiciously, with blowing snow and a fall on the M4 first pitch after a hold broke. We almost called it then and there, but decided to just see how far we could get. I pulled the rope and re-led the pitch clean. Jon led the second pitch, as he had never sent that one, and did it on the first try. Jon also led the easy fourth pitch.

As the sun began to set, we reached the last pitch. I had led every crux pitch first go—Jon, having switched to support mode by this point, had juggled a couple of the harder pitches. When I got to the second bolt on the final pitch, an M8+, my biceps cramped so hard I had trouble straightening my arms. I found a stance and waited for the cramps to subside while darkness crept in. At the ninth bolt, my feet skated off a sloping rail and I miraculously caught myself on one arm. Regaining composure, I worked up the final roofs and let out a whoop at the belay.

The Penitent Path (IV M9) is climbable year-round, which was one of our goals, since Utah's ice season is only getting more inconsistent.

—Sean McLane

Images

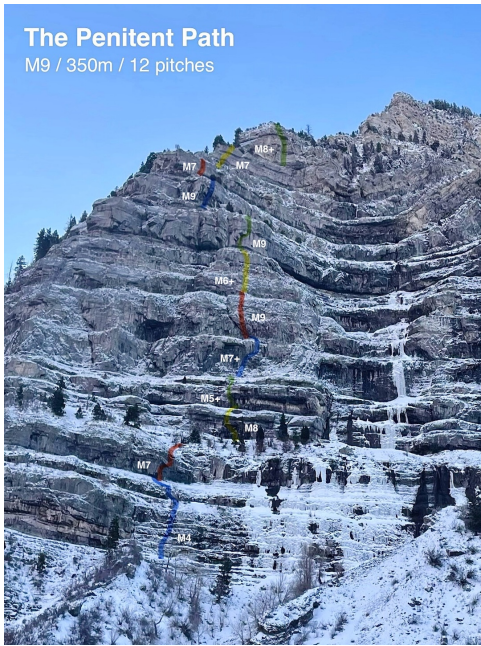


Photo-topo of The Penitent Path (350m, 12 pitches, IV M9) in Provo Canyon; some of the pitches are connected by big ledges. The Stairway to Heaven ice climb can be seen to the right.



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