



AAC Publications

Pic Dondy, East Face, Regicide

Madagascar, Andringitra Massif

Mark Elton

Photo-topo of Regicide, the first route up the east face of Pic Dondy in the Andringitra Massif. Photo by Mark Elton

In October, Mark Elton (USA), Thibau Grandjean (France), and I (USA) established Regicide, a 12-pitch route on the steep east face of Pic Dondy (2,195m, 22.032S, 46.828E) in Madagascar's Andringitra Massif, six miles east of the well-traveled Tsaranoro Massif. Dondy has one recorded route on its south ridge and three on its slabby west side. As far as we know, Regicide is the first route on Dondy's east face.

The peak is at the northern end of the Andringitra Massif, the bulk of which is within Andringitra National Park. To date, climbing has not been allowed within park boundaries. Like the Tsaranoro Massif, Dondy is outside the park, along with a handful of other impressive peaks with steep, sinuous east faces.

These majestic highlands, tall enough to have been glaciated in the last ice age, divide Madagascar's coastal rainforests from the central scrubland. They capture orographic rain from the easterly trade winds and, except during the summer monsoon, cast a rain shadow to the west. Dondy and the rest of the Andringitra are often shrouded by clouds and mist rolling in from the Indian Ocean.

This moisture contributes to the high endemism here, from broad aloes to small orchids to chameleons found nowhere else. At the seventh belay of Regicide, I drilled an anchor beside a blooming spiny succulent, a member of the "elephant's foot" genus (*Pachypodium*), and noticed what I first took to be a giant armored mantis, chewing on a yellow blossom. It was, in fact, a giant hissing cockroach, bigger than a mouse; like a friendly lapdog, it motored over to me and pawed my gear.

Amid these encounters, we found the climbing on Dondy just as high quality and fun as on the Tsaranoro routes, but different: more three-dimensional, with tufas and knee-bars in water runnels; sharp, juggy blobs peppering the face; and a mesh of pinkish pegmatite dikes that protruded enough to form holds. This contrasted with the endless ocean of cryptic crimps on many Tsaranoro classics. The Andringitra peaks are overall more bulbous, with a touch of Gaudi, and they have more karst-like erosion features than the austere Tsaranoro peaks. Curious ring-tailed lemurs cavorting near the base and the ubiquitous water-jug-emptying call (glug-glug-glug) of the Malagasy coucal, a kind of cuckoo, add to the playful feeling created by the rock.

After consulting with a geologist who had completed field work in the area, we think the difference with Tsaranoro may boil down to Dondy (and much of the Andringitra Massif) being composed largely of an unusual high-potassium version of syenite, a cousin of granite that contains little quartz. (Hueco Tanks is a well-known example of syenite crag.) Its potassium feldspar may be more erosion-resistant than surrounding plagioclase, resulting in subtle depressions and the adjacent holds we observed. Whatever the cause, this diversity of holds and resulting movement patterns, within just a day's walk of the nearly one hundred routes on Tsaranoro's granite walls, could become an attractive new dimension of climbing here.

We approached the east face of Dondy from the Tsaranoro camps (three to four hours with loads; about 3,500 feet of elevation gain) and camped near the base of the wall. We targeted a line that had the best rock off the deck and the least vegetation visible up high. We hoped that establishing a trade route, with friendly bolting, would attract more parties to make the effort to reach the face. (As with Tsaranoro, there is very little natural protection, and our route is protected entirely with bolts.) We anticipated finding harder pitches through three overhanging sections, but big holds appeared, and this kept the grades moderate.

Thibau Grandjean leads pitch six of Regicide while establishing the route. Photo by Mark Elton

After six days of ground-up bolting (approximately 180 bolts) and one rest day, we climbed the full route in one day on October 10. Regicide (5.11a (5.12b var.), 12 pitches, 1,200') follows an easy scooped face up a large block at the base, traverses slightly right past crimps and pegmatite rails, and breaks through a roof after a right traverse with two separate options (a 5.10c and a crimp 5.12b). It joins a steep water runnel for several pitches, followed by a slab and what we dubbed the Wormhole Pitch (pitch 10), which culminates in a squeeze chimney just below the summit block.

We descended the route, with two 60m ropes, first down-leading the last 5.4 pitch (bolted for that purpose), then saddle-bagging the ropes on rappel to mitigate against snags on the many chicken heads. We did install three rappel anchors that offer a more direct descent off the summit block, but the rope pulls better on the actual line of ascent. If more routes are added on Dondy's east face, a shorter rappel line could be installed off the south ridge, or an existing semi-technical route from the north could be explored for more of a walk-off descent.

The village on the west side of Dondy, Ambalamisaony, charges a modest fee to enter what it manages as the "Village Reserve of Dondy." At the request of Betsileo villagers on the east side, in the upper Zomandao (Namoly) Valley, we moved our camp farther from some ancestral tombs, and for the ten days we spent in camp, we bought vegetables and live chickens from them. These logistics were only possible with the help of Faly Nomenjanahary, a local climber and guide who ran camp for us, translated, and joined us on some of the lower pitches. Solar panels and inverters were essential for recharging our drill batteries. We also bolted top-rope anchors on several easy slabs at Dondy's base to introduce the local kids (and some of their parents) to the joys of rock in their incredible backyard. They were naturals.

While we were climbing Dondy, civilian protests in Madagascar's major cities precipitated a coup d'état supported by the military. When I observed that the United States had also once overthrown an unpopular regime, burning King George III in effigy before defeating his army, Thibau reminded us that it was the French who were actual regicides. We couldn't argue with that.

—Spencer Gray, USA

A wide-angle photograph of a rugged mountain range under a clear sky. The foreground shows steep, rocky slopes with sparse vegetation. In the distance, a large, flat-topped mountain peak is visible against a hazy horizon.

Regicide

Pic Dondy, East Face

IV 5.11a (5.12b var.), 12 pitches, 370 m

17 quickdraws, 60m rope

(~5 long slings to reduce rope drag, esp. pitches 2, 3, 12)

Pic Dondy, 2,195m

Trace alternative rap anchoring marked grey. Note it is not recommended due to rope drag.

Discontinue the route after downclimbing pitch 12. Double back final rappels required, satellite-belaying recommended. At the top of pitch 5, rap straight down to final rap anchor.

On rappel, depart ascent line here to reach last rap station straight below.

Route starts on plain flake resting at base

The Wornies

5.12c, 40m

5.10c, 40m

5.8, 40m

5.8, 33m

5.10c, 45m

5.11a, 52m

5.10c, 50m

5.10c, 40m

5.10c, 40m

5.8, 25m

6.12b rap

A wide-angle photograph of a rugged mountain peak, likely in a high-altitude or desert environment. The foreground and middle ground are dominated by steep, rocky slopes with visible vertical fissures and horizontal rock layers. A prominent red line is drawn vertically up the face of the central peak, indicating a climbing route. The terrain is arid, with sparse, low-lying vegetation and patches of green moss or lichen on the rocks. In the background, a vast, hazy landscape unfolds, showing rolling hills and distant mountain ranges under a clear blue sky with a few wispy clouds. The overall scene conveys a sense of adventure and exploration in a challenging natural setting.

The 12-pitch line of Regicide, the first route up the east face of Pic Dondy in the Andringitra Massif. Six miles away in the background are the well-traveled towers of the Tsaranoro Massif.



Spencer Gray and Thibau Grandjean at a small col beneath Pic Dondy's south aspect. Regicide follows a line on the east face just inside of the prominent pillar in profile on the right.



Thibau Grandjean leads pitch six of Regicide while establishing the route.



Thibau Grandjean nears the top of pitch six of Regicide.



Faly Nomenjanahary leads pitch one of Regicide, testing the fresh bolt placements.



Faly Nomenjanahary follows pitch three of Regicide up a steep slab.

Article Details

Author	Spencer Gray
Publication	AAJ
Volume	67
Issue	100
Page	
Copyright Date	2026
Article Type	Climbs and expeditions