



Pico Cão Grande, Nubivagant

Africa, São Tomé

I first came to know of Pico Cão Grande early in 2015 while searching for a big wall that was unique and unknown—the dream wall, I guess. I stumbled upon the peak one evening while Googling “super hero villain lairs.” Cão Grande was listed as “the tower of Mordor” on one website. I was captivated by it.

Formed millennia ago when high-pressure magma solidified inside the vent of an active volcano, Cão Grande (“Big Dog”) is a 370m plug deep in the jungle on the island nation of São Tomé, off the west coast of sub-Saharan Africa. Thanks to support from Adidas Outdoor’s Claim Freedom project, Tiny Almada (Mexico) and I were able to complete this dream climb in June.

Arriving on the island in early May was a cultural eye-opener, with stray dogs running wild through the busy streets and a seven-person family riding a single 125cc motorbike. Navigating the narrow roads that wind south from the capital, Tiny and I, along with a small film crew, arrived at Agripalm plantation, the furthest point we could reach before continuing on foot. A 3km hike through thick jungle brought us to the base of the wall, where we were surprised to find a 100m-high roof line that jutted out some 30m. We had not been able to find any information on the peak before arriving, and standing at the base we gained a very real sense of the task at hand. [See note below about Cão Tomé’s climbing history.]

Various difficulties threatened to end the project from the start, many of them not climbing-related. Luggage problems, blown battery chargers and generator issues, snake bites, currency exchange concerns, sickness, stuck vehicles, marginal food and water rations, and rockfall all looked as if they would stop us. However, with each new obstacle that stood in our path we would find a solution, though none was what you would describe as “traditional.”

After three weeks of 14-hour days, we stood on top of the peak on May 28, having established a new route up the east side. Tiny and I climbed 15 pitches up Nubivagant (“Wandering in the Clouds,” 455m, 5.13d A0, with widely spaced bolt protection). Pitches two through four, passing the huge roof line, were the cruxes, with V8 moves off the belay to start the second pitch (5.13d A0), followed by two 5.13 A0 pitches. We made a redpoint attempt over two days, summiting again on June 3, but were unable to free the three crux pitches without rests.

Gareth “Gaz” Leah, U.K.

Editor’s note: The first known ascent of Pico Cão Grande was in 1975, when Jorge Marques Trabulo (Portugal) climbed the tower with two São Toméans, Constantino Bragança and Cosme Pires de Santos, after several earlier attempts. The team improvised various techniques and equipment, including the use of long aluminum ladders. In February 1991, a trio of young Japanese climbers from Waseda University (Naotoshi Agata, Kenichi Moriyama, and Yosuke Takahashi) spent two weeks establishing a route up the southeast buttress of Cão Grande (400m, 18 pitches, 5.10a A2). In 2014, Spanish climbers Hector Fernandez González and Victor Sánchez Martínez began a new aid route up the east face, left of the 2016 route, but left before completing their climb.

Additional climbs and attempts may have occurred, but details are not available. The editors request that anyone with information about routes or attempts on Pico Cão Grande contact us at aaj@americanalpineclub.org so that a more complete history of climbing on the tower may be developed.

Images



The line of Nubivagant on the east side of Pico Cão Grande. The Japanese route (1991) ascends near the left skyline.



Gareth Leah attempts one of the 5.13 crux leads of Nubivagant.

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