



AAC Publications

Leader Fall – Off Route, Loose Hold

Utah, Southeast Utah, Castle Valley, Sister Superior

On November 14, my brother David (32) and I (29) set out to climb Jah Man (5 pitches, 5.10c) on Sister Superior. In the days leading up to the climb, we had read route descriptions and the most recent trip reports. As we racked up, I picked out features on the first pitch that appeared to match the route description. Specifically, I identified what I understood to be the “squeeze chimney” up and right of the start.

Leading the first pitch, I got to the early ledge and then wrestled through a V-slot/ squeeze that felt scrappier than the 5.8/5.9 described. At the top of this squeeze, I found two large fixed nuts with a sling. I clipped my own sling to them and continued up. At this point, I could tell I was beginning to trend left of where I should be, but the slot and gear that I had passed led me to believe I was still on route.

Above the two nuts, the climbing eased into low fifth class, and I carefully explored a series of ledges for the correct route. As confusion overcame confidence, I decided to stop and build an anchor so David and I could regroup. The first two crack systems I evaluated appeared to have some unstable rock. As I continued searching, I placed both hands on the face in front of me and leaned back. A block peeled off in my hands and I tumbled backward, falling 25 feet before the fixed nuts and rope caught me.

Immediately upon stopping, I saw blood dripping briskly from my pant leg. David lowered me to the ground. My left elbow was in excruciating pain. Quickly realizing I would be unable to walk back to the trailhead, David called 911 and guided responders to our location. A helicopter arrived, but because I was located in a narrow band of relatively level ground between a sandstone tower and a steep scree slope, the extraction was complicated. Eventually I was evacuated to Grand Junction, where I was treated for a major laceration on my lower leg and a shattered left elbow.

ANALYSIS

During the week preceding the trip, I had been working long hours, totaling 80 hours in six days. The morning I finished my last night shift, I immediately jumped on a plane from Seattle to Denver without sleeping. The next day we drove to Utah, and we headed up to Sister Superior the following morning. In retrospect, sleep deprivation and work-related stress likely contributed to my poor route-finding.

There were many clues that I was off route, but I misinterpreted these as signs that I was following the route description. Specifically, I should have recognized the two nuts as bail gear from someone who had also followed the wrong slot. I also should have corroborated written descriptions with closer attention to photos of the route. Finally, I had noted instability in the rock, but was falsely confident because of the very easy climbing in the area where I fell. Given this low-angle terrain, I should have been more cognizant of the risk inherent in a fall. (Source: Whitney Kiker.)

SECOND JAH MAN ACCIDENT: One day after the incident described here, a 20-year-old woman took a ground fall from the first pitch of Jah Man when her sole piece of protection pulled out. She was own from the scene by helicopter. See the report here. In early January 2020, less than two months after these incidents, the start of this classic climb and the huge flake forming the squeeze chimney collapsed.

The original route is no longer climbable.

Images

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