



AAC Publications

Tucupit Point, Skeleton Key, Free Ascent

Utah, Zion National Park, Kolob Canyons

Aaron Livingston, belayed by Karl Kvashay, leading pitch 12, the crux pitch of the Skeleton Key (1,400', 15 pitches, V 5.13a), during the first free ascent. Photo by Katy Stark

Brandon Gottung and Karl Kvashay started up what would become Skeleton Key (1,400', 15 pitches, V 5.13a) on the north face of Tucupit Point back in October 2015. Over the next three years, they spent 26 days on the route, connecting stellar cracks with improbable sections of face climbing. They spent countless hours hand-drilling 75 bolts on lead and creating what I believe to be one of Zion's greatest free climbs. After several attempts, they freed all but 20' of pitch 12 and a single move of pitch 13.

Brandon and Karl had invited me to help finish a free ascent of another one of their Tucupit routes back in 2017. Morphology (8 pitches, IV 5.12+) provided pitch after pitch of quality climbing and opened my eyes to the work the duo was putting in on Tucupit Point. The potential was astounding, and Brandon was absolutely raving about the progress on Skeleton Key.

Sadly, after getting injured by rockfall during a rappel in the Organ Mountains of New Mexico, Brandon didn't see any scenario where he'd be freeing Skeleton Key in the near future, so he passed the opportunity of another first free ascent to me. Karl and I connected in October 2020 with the intent of freeing the missing sections. I had one week to put in before heading to Yosemite, so there was a fair bit of pressure.

On day one we climbed to the crux on pitch 12 to see if it seemed feasible. After a few hours of working out the holds, we decided it was worth a solid effort. After another day of sussing beta and fixing lines back to the ground, Karl took a rest day to hang out with his wife, and I went back out to Kolob alone. I spent the entire day Mini Traxioning, chalking holds, and working out key sequences. At the end of the day, I succeeded on the crux boulder problem, but still hadn't linked the full pitch. As the sun started setting, I descended the wall and stripped all of our fixed lines for a free attempt.

Karl and I ventured back into Kolob two days later. We led in blocks, with Karl graciously letting me lead all of the pitches 5.12a and up. I surprised myself with a first-go send of pitch 12, which clocked in at 5.13a. Karl went for several attempts, freeing every move, but not quite linking the pitch.

The next pitch, which we hadn't worked on at all, had just that single sequence to be freed, and it looked to be about 5.12c. The move seemed like a dyno—not my forte. But after careful study, I saw a small, lichen-covered bump that could be a critical foothold. I scrubbed it clean, lowered, and climbed the crux from a stance using this little bump. Not the best style, but I was satisfied. We pushed to the summit and topped out to a classic Kolob Canyons sunset.

I'd argue this line should be high on any 5.12 or 5.13 climber's list. It goes reasonably at 5.12 A0 with only a handful of simple aid moves. There is a deluxe bivy just below the crux pitch.

— Aaron Livingston

Images



Karl Kvashay following pitch 13 during the first free ascent of Skeleton Key (1,400', 15 pitches, V 5.13a), Tucupit Point, Kolob Canyon, Zion National Park, Utah.



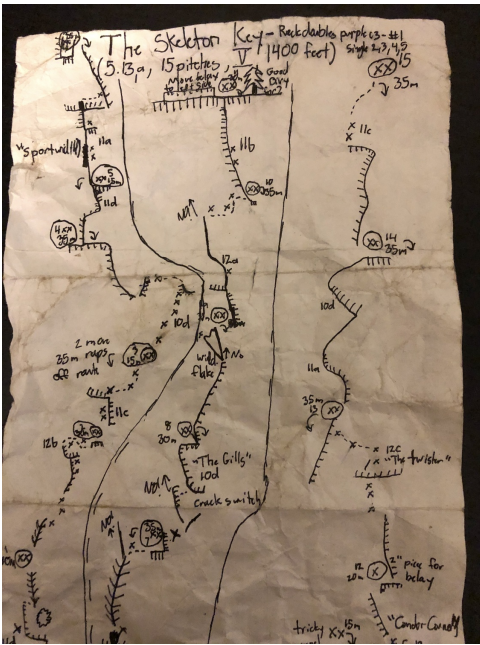
Aaron Livingston, belayed by Karl Kvashay, leading pitch 12, the crux pitch of the Skeleton Key (1,400', 15 pitches, V 5.13a), during the first free ascent.



Karl Kvashay, belayed from above by Aaron Livingston, climbing pitch three on the day of the first free ascent of the Skeleton Key (1,400', 15 pitches, V 5.13a), Tucupit Point, Kolob Canyon, Zion National Park, Utah.



The line of the Skeleton Key (1,400', 15 pitches, V 5.13a) on the north face of Tucupit Point in Kolob Canyons. Other routes not shown.



Topo for the free ascent of Skeleton Key on Tucupit Point.



Karl Kvashay following the Wild Flake on pitch nine of Skeleton Key.



Karl Kvashay climbing patina edges on pitch 10 of Skeleton Key.

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