



AAC Publications

Bubbs Creek Wall, East Face, The Ecstasy of Gold

United States, California, Sierra Nevada, Kings Canyon National Park

After establishing Ikigai (18 pitches, 5.12a) on the Bubbs Creek Wall with my friends Dave Meyer and Marec Serlin in 2020, I returned to the pristine granite of the 2,000' east face in the spring of 2021. I wanted to check out a golden-brown shield 100' right of Ikigai. From the ground, I could see what looked like an incipient crack splitting the right side of the shield. I figured it would be really hard or impossible to climb, but I tend to be optimistic.

Unable to find anyone to come with me, I did the nine-mile approach to the top of the route and rapped alone into the headwall on three ropes tied end to end. The exposure took my breath away. The crack turned out to be continuous, but more of a thin flake. A double dike feature—like a set of railroad tracks—started right above the flake. I freed 95 percent of the terrain as I top-rope soloed back to the top.

Later in the summer, I recruited Honz Mikhalek to help work the route with me. We figured out the pitches below the Gold Shield Headwall and determined the best start for the route would be on the first eight pitches of Ikigai. We also added a variation to pitches four and five of Ikigai: a cool, gold-varnished chimney to a face, clocking in around 5.11a.

My wife was about to give birth to our first child, and on my last weekend up there for the season, Honz and I attacked the route using fix-and-follow tactics: The lead climber ties the rope to the anchor at the end of each pitch, and the second top-rope solos, using progress-capture devices, instead of receiving a traditional belay. This allows the leader to haul a bag, rest, and prepare for the next lead, while still allowing the second to free climb.

In this way, we freed everything up to pitch 14, the route's crux, which involved a balancey transfer into a finger crack to a small roof, followed by a 5.10 layback up a flake. Honz and I both took lead burns, and we were about to give up when I finally stuck the crack transfer as darkness set in. We called this 5.12b pitch Walking on Sunshine, because of its fun movement on golden rock. We were both so exhausted that we weren't able to send the double dikes pitch. We climbed to the top, claiming the first ascent—but not free.

Fast-forward to the summer of 2022. My wife and I now had a nine-month-old baby girl, Alessandra. (A million thanks to my wife for taking care of the baby while I went back to Bubbs Creek.) I returned to the wall with Dave Meyer, because Honz had hurt his ankle. It was way past midnight when we got into camp, but with the long daylight of June on our side, we were able to sleep late and start climbing at 9 a.m. We were pleasantly surprised to see two parties already several pitches up on Ikigai.

Again using the fix-and-follow method, we fired the lower pitches of Ikigai, using the new chimney variation. It started to rain a little on pitch 13, right before the crux pitches. To maintain the psych, we flipped on a small speaker I'd brought and started to play the soundtrack to *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*. Ennio Morricone's "The Ecstasy of Gold" is one of the standout tracks, an apt tune considering my obsession with the brilliant golden granite of the route. The rain was light and lasted only 20 minutes. We felt rejuvenated after the nice rest and sent the crux pitches. After a few easier pitches on low-angle terrain, we topped out *The Ecstasy of Gold* (19 pitches, IV 5.12b) just before sunset.

Images



Dave Meyer enjoying the laybacks above a crux transfer between two cracks on pitch 14, dubbed Walking On Sunshine, of The Ecstasy of Gold (19 pitches, IV 5.12b).



A stoked Dave Meyer after climbing the splitter cracks on the Walking on Sunshine pitch, the 14th of 19 pitches on The Ecstasy of Gold (IV 5.12b).



jpeg Dave Meyer leading pitch 15, named The Trio, during the first free ascent of The Ecstasy of Gold (19 pitches, IV 5.12b), Bubbs Creek Wall, Kings Canyon National Park, California. First ascensionist ShaunReed described this as “one of the best pitches on the route and also one of the hardest.”



Looking down the double dikes pitch on the Gold Shield Headwall of The Ecstasy of Gold (19 pitches, IV 5.12b).



The south and east faces of Bubbs Creek Wall. (1) Ikigai (5.12a, 2020). (2) The Ecstasy of Gold (19 pitches, IV 5.12b, 2022), sharing six of the first eight pitches of Ikigai. Other routes to the left are not shown.



Shaun Reed (left) and Dave Meyer at the top of The Ecstasy of Gold (19 pitches, IV 5.12b) after the first free ascent in June 2022.

Article Details

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| Author | Shaun Reed |
| Publication | AAJ |
| Volume | 65 |
| Issue | 97 |
| Page | 159 |
| Copyright Date | 2023 |
| Article Type | Climbs and expeditions |