

SA MOUNTAIN

SOUTH AFRICA'S DEDICATED CLIMBING MAGAZINE

ISSUE NO. 87 | DECEMBER 2023 – FEBRUARY 2024

WILL GADD

On SA Ice

DRAGON'S TALE

Via Ferrata Drakensberg

ANDY de KLERK

Solo Ascent

Eiger North Wall

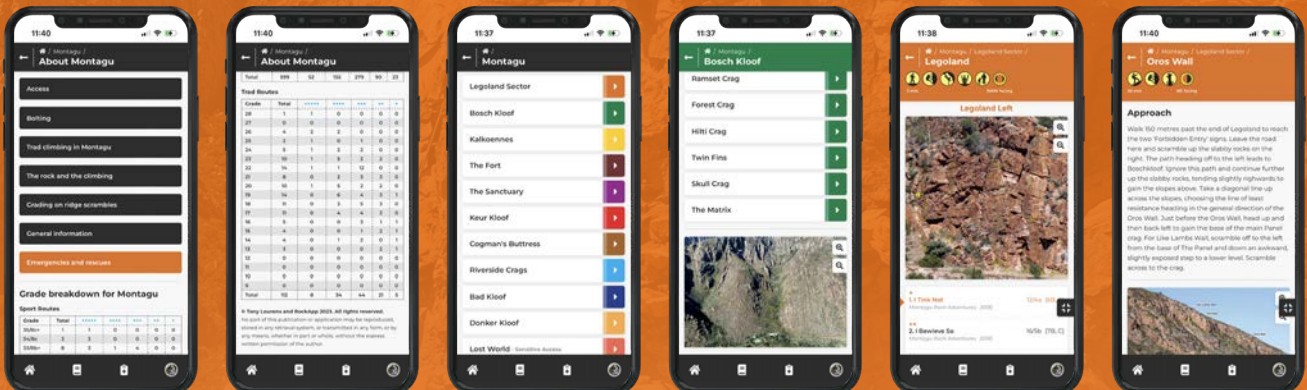
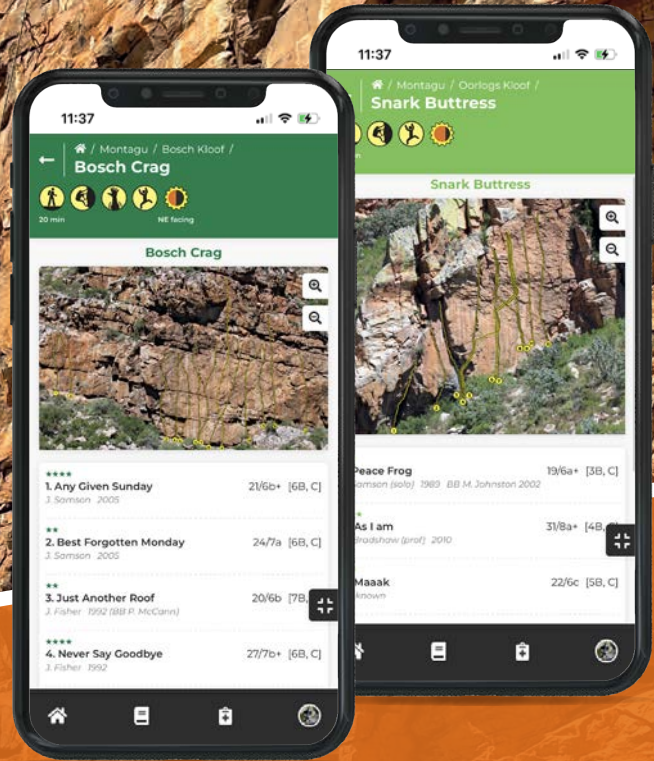
OFF THE WALL

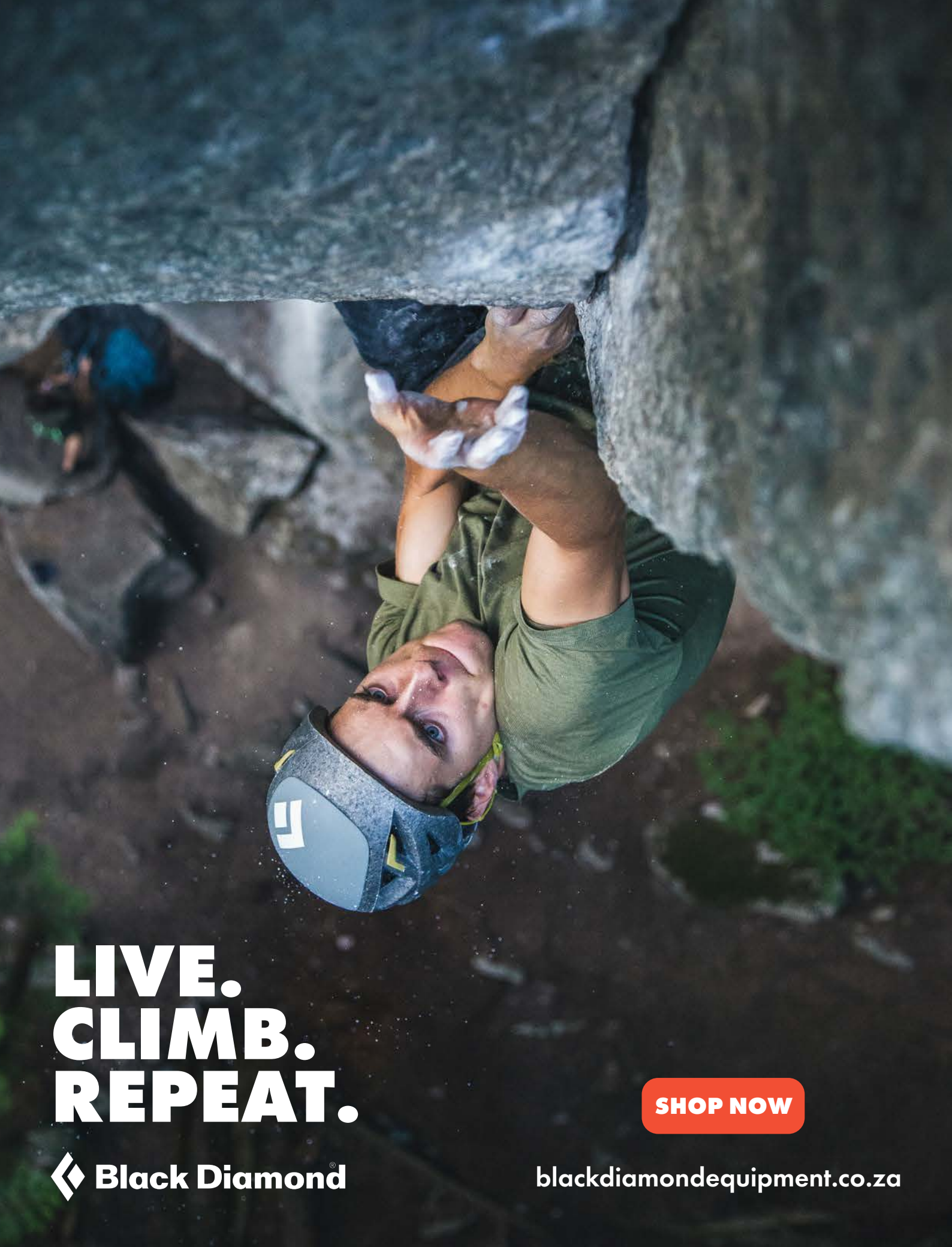
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End of the long traverse at the bottom of the last vertical climb up to the top.
Photo JAMES PITMAN

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A full-page background image showing two hikers on a rocky mountain ridge. The hiker on the left is wearing a black and orange jacket, black pants, and a black headband. The hiker on the right is wearing a blue and black jacket, black pants, and a black cap. Both are wearing backpacks and climbing gear. The background shows a vast mountain range under a hazy, golden sky.

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editorial

Who's ON THE END OF YOUR ROPE?

I try to find a reasonably comfortable place to plant my butt as I fumble through my pack to find my stove and tea paraphernalia. I light the cooker, sit back and look up at the steep wall above, where just moments ago we had been hanging out – sitting in our harnesses on exposed stances, railing out over the bowel-sucking void and jamming up immaculate cracks.

I lean over and pass a cup of tea to my gubba and offer the obligatory rusk. Our muscles wonderfully tired, the skin on our hands parched and still covered with chalk and mountain grit, our minds still swimming in the intoxication of that post-climb euphoria.

“Jusssiss, how was that move leaving the stance on pitch three? That crimpy barndoor move to gain the crack system?” and “My donner! That layback on the final pitch! What a beauty, with such perfect gear.” And so it goes on. One never tires of talking about the routes you have just done. Or indeed the routes you are yet to do.

But it goes much deeper than that. It is about who you share these moments with; about the bond you have with your climbing partner. The years and years of climbing together, getting to know each other. Learning each other's body language, feeling the emotions of your partner through the rope. Words aren't even necessary. Just that knowing glance, which is meaningless to others, but carries a string of messages to you – watch me here, I'm shaky, I'm scared, I'm gonna go for it, and many other subtle messages.

When I'm up there, with my 'old April poutin like a



Two gubbas at the base of the crag

goodun', I want to know that my gubba down below has my back. My life is in their hands. And I know that when the roles are reversed, that feeling is one hundred percent mutual.

If you are reading this, chances are you love climbing as much as I do, but the love for climbing goes far beyond the actual act of climbing – the moves, the situation, the grandeur, etc. Climbing also brings with it a multitude of emotions – a heady mixture of fear, excitement, doubt, trust, the unknown, love, joy, elation, a sense of belonging, contentment, and a few more, I'm sure. These passionate emotions are wholly instrumental in forming that powerful bond between you and your climbing partner. A bond that grows stronger every time you tie on to the rope together. A bond that grows stronger every time you sit at the base of a route just climbed and relive those emotions. A bond so strong, that it inextricably ties you together for a lifetime.

I have always felt that who you share your climbing experiences with is as important, if not more important than what you climb. We all climb with a multitude of people, but when it comes to the business, we need our gubba. We need that person on the other end of the rope that you know that they know, and they know that you know – that person who knows your mind sometimes even better than you know yourself.

Be safe in the hills

Tony

SA MOUNTAIN

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COVER PHOTO: Will Gadd on the first ascent of
The Niknak Ice Crack M9 - Bokong, Lesotho.
Photo GARRRETH BIRD

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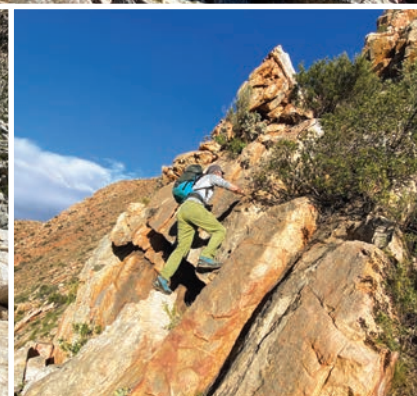
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Dragon's Tale

by OLLIE ESPLIN

A Mystical Creature once lost but now found

Once upon a time in a land not so far away there was a young maiden. At birth, she was christened *The Gordian Edge*. She was a via ferrata, a one-of-a-kind, raised by a small group of unsung heroes in the mountain-loving community. She was a Mystical Creature, original and unique, rising 400 metres over 3 long pitches. Unfathomable views met those who braved her

13 mm steel cable vein. She was located in the biggest mountain range in South Africa – the Drakensberg – on Beacon Buttress, between the mighty Sentinel and the world-renowned Amphitheatre, in a place previously known as the Orange Free State – where there are no oranges, nothing is free, and the roads are in a hell of a state. >>



Early morning hike up to the start of the route.
Photo HEIN STAPELBERG





The 'holy crap' section of the traverse on the last pitch. Photo MARIANNE SCHWANKHART

Her adventurous nature led her to wander into foreign lands and combined with her incredible beauty, she awoke a Big Bad Wolf. The Big Bad Wolf attacked fiercely. Its propaganda incited the villagers from the nearby land. Ultimately, the alluring huffing heroes who raised her were persecuted and punished by blind injustice and the Mystical Creature was slain. Her steel vein was cut out and all her beautiful traces were erased. And just like that, she was gone.

More than a decade later, the mountain slowly started revealing the curious outline of a new Mystical Creature. A group of nature lovers and mountain enthusiasts known as *Friends of the Via Ferrata* assembled. Then, suddenly, the Phoenix rose from the ashes and the Mystical Creature made a glorious *kintsugi* return – stronger, better, and more beautiful than before.

With the support of the landowners (the Batlokoa people) and the Surveyor from the Dragons Lair (who surveyed the boundary line accurately) this became a true Free State and authentic Drakensberg experience.

Standing proud next to the Sentinel (with its well-known traditional climbing route *Angus Leppan* and sport climbing route *Paradigm Shift*) this new via ferrata makes for a fairy-tale journey with unicorns, dungeons, and dragons. This brand-new extraordinary experience is set alongside the Amphitheatre containing the world's tallest waterfall (the Tugela waterfall at 987 metres), only a stone's throw from the Golden Gate National Park and the quaint village of Clarens with its unbelievable secret bouldering scene.

So where does one start? This journey begins at the world-class Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge, where all your

accommodation and meals are catered for. Its stunning views and warm welcoming staff make it the perfect base for a range of adventures into the Berg. A shuttle service is available to get you to the Sentinel car park – the road is only accessible by 4x4 from the lodge. If you want to arrange the necessary equipment and a guide, or if you want to become an integral part of this tale, speak to the Druids at Witsieshoek. 📍

NOTE

Via ferrata means iron way in Italian. A steel cable is fixed to a steep mountain side to create a safe and easy route over otherwise steep and difficult terrain.

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of putting broken pottery pieces back together with gold, resulting in a more precious and beautiful piece of art.

The Batlokoa is a Basotho clan who owns the Witsieshoek land in the town of Phutaditjaba, the only Free State town containing a piece of the Drakensberg.



MENS LA SPORTIVA TX4 - R3999



WOMENS LA SPORTIVA TX4 - R3999



MENS LA SPORTIVA TX5 - R4999



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FACT FILE

General risks and awareness:

The Drakensberg is a serious mountain range and any activities in it pose a range of risks. Be aware of the weather and sudden weather changes – it is not uncommon to encounter blistering sun, howling wind, snow, rain, or hail, all in one day. Ensure adequate clothing and sufficient food, water and sunscreen are taken along for your climb. Be aware of the potential effects of high altitude. Do not use the via ferrata during impending weather – particularly during lightning storms. There is a high probability of rockfalls – be sure to maintain a good following distance and avoid being directly below other climbers.

Accommodation

Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge makes the perfect base, where all your accommodation and meals are catered for.

How to get there

To get to Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge you must head straight through the town of Phutaditjaba until you reach the gate of Witsieshoek (the roads up to this point are all tarred or paved). Your GPS will take you right to the reception. Get in touch at www.witsieshoek.co.za.

From the Lodge, drive back towards Putaditjaba and take the first left (\pm 400 metres). Drive the 4x4 track up to the Sentinel car park and park your vehicle (or take the shuttle from the lodge). Fill in the register and pay the hiking fee.

Approach

From the Sentinel car park, take the path that leads to the chain ladders. At about the 3 km mark, once you've passed the back of the Sentinel, turn left, and walk to the saddle between Sentinel and Beacon butte, then take the faint path up right to the base of the rock (if you reach the gully descending from the top of the escarpment, you've missed it). The start of the route is marked by a steel cable fixed to the cliff.

The route

The route is broken up into 3 pitches. Between each pitch is a ledge and a short section to walk (the start of the following pitch is visible from the top of the previous one). The route becomes progressively harder and more exposed – however, anyone who is active and fit should be capable of climbing it. The exposure is notable. Previous rock climbing or via ferrata experience is not a requirement, but will be beneficial. It is recommended to arrange a guide from Witsieshoek.

Just before the route tops out, there is a short section of via ferrata that branches out left onto a large ledge – this is *Alard's Photo Booth* and is a great position from which to photograph people on the last section of the route. The route tops out on Beacon Butte. There is a summit register and pen in a Tupperware that is located 5 metres to the right from the second last anchor. Please ensure that it is closed properly and returned to its location as it was found.

Ollie and Hein on top of down climb section looking at the last vertical section on the skyline. Photo JACO SMUTS





James making his way up the last vertical section. Photo JACO SMUTS



Descent

The easiest descent is to take *Beacon Buttress Gully* back down to the contour path. The top of the gully is about 100 metres diagonally left of the top of the route. Take care going down the gully, as it is steep terrain over loose rock – especially during or after rain. Alternatively, the chain ladders provide a fun way back to the contour path and the top of the Amphitheatre can be enjoyed along the way.

Escape route

The *Chicken Run*, between the top of the first pitch and the start of the second pitch takes you to the gully, from where you can descend back to the contour path. From the start of the second pitch walk along the base of the cliff face, to the right. Around the corner, descend about 5 metres over easy rock to reach the grassy ledge again and continue along the base of the cliff. The terrain is steep and extremely slippery when wet – move slowly and carefully. There is a short section of via ferrata cable to facilitate safe access into the gully itself.

Times

Approach: 1 hour 30 minutes

Route to the summit: 3 hours – this is for a small group at an easy pace, with plenty of time for taking pictures, pausing for snacks, and enjoying the views.

Descent back to car park: 1 to 2 hours – depends on your descent route.

Gear

Via ferrata requires specific equipment. A helmet, harness, and a via ferrata lanyard set must be used. Speak to Witsieshoek Mountain Lodge if you need equipment and/or a guide. Bear in mind that a rescue from the route would be challenging. Dress appropriately, with comfortable walking shoes that have good grip. Pack cold and wet weather gear for your climb. Gloves are not required but fingerless gloves are advisable.



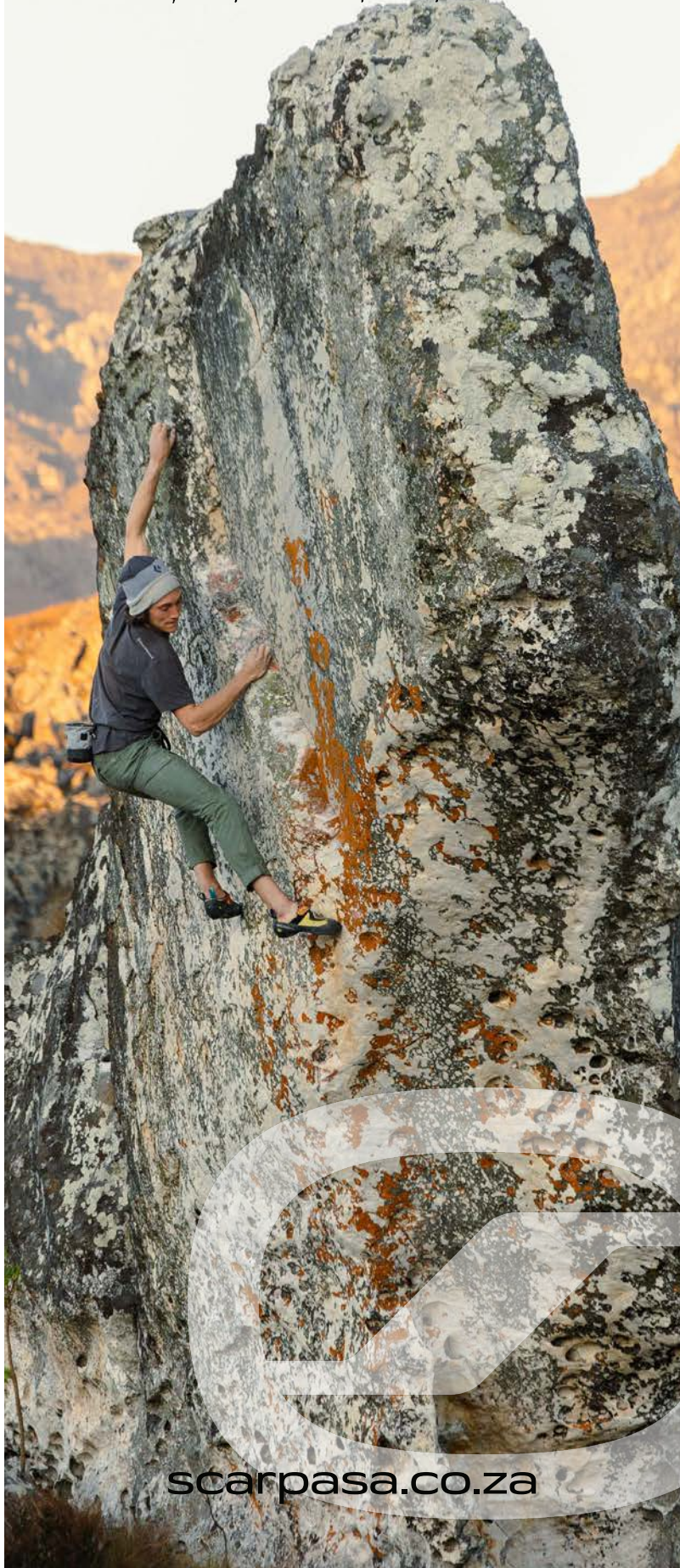
Photo JACO SMUTS



Friends of the Via Ferrata on top after the opening climb. Photo JAMES PITMAN

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The photo booth section just before the top out on *Dragon's Tale* – via ferrata in the Drakensberg. Photo MARIANNE SCHWANKHART



Garvin Jacobs topping out on the immaculate *Living on a Prayer* (20/6b) Sanddrif Crag, Cederberg. Photo TONY LOURENS



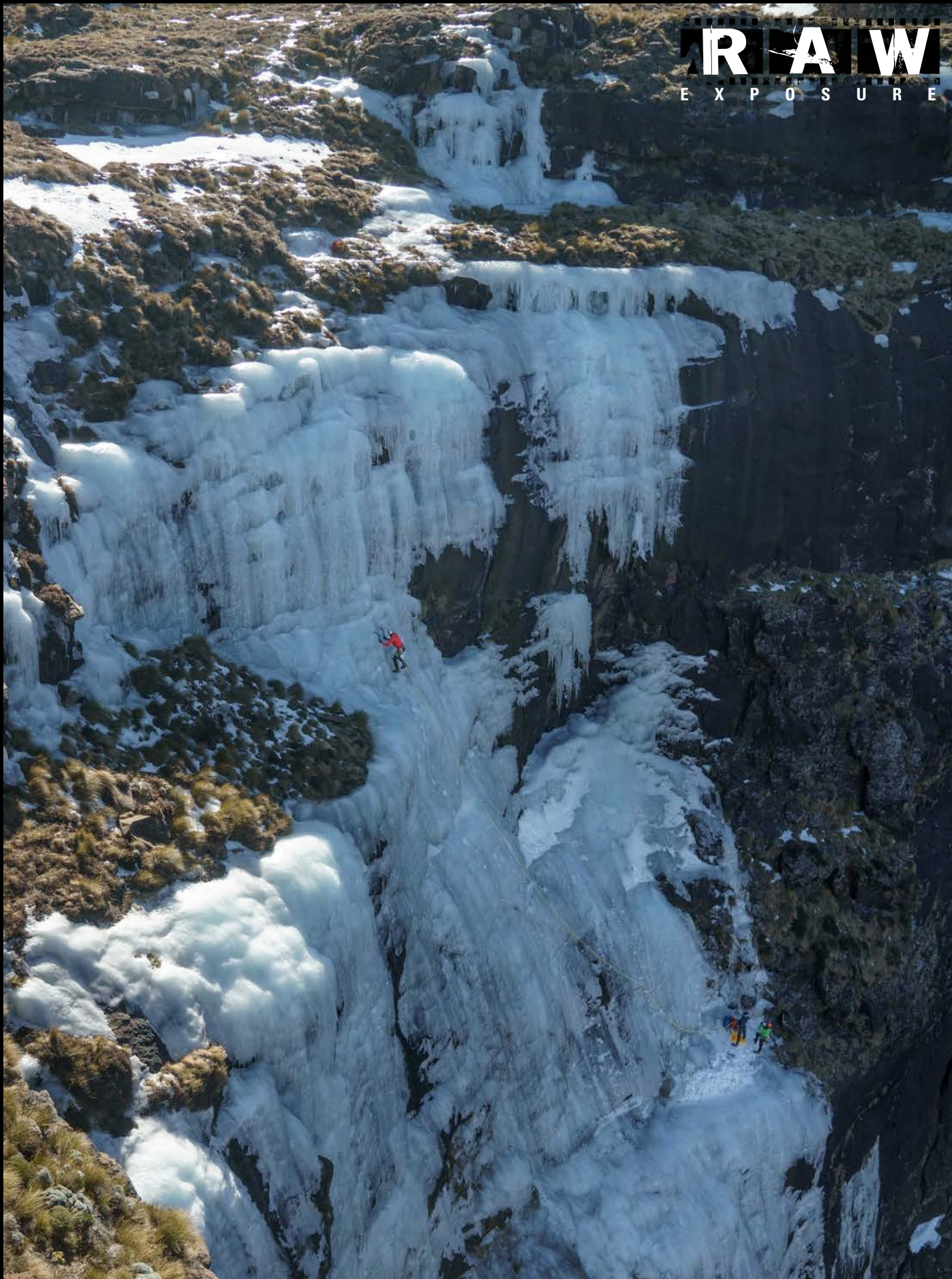
Richard Behne leading the money pitch on *Crime of the Century* (19) on Supertramp Buttress, Rock n Roll Kloof, Montagu. Photo TONY LOURENS



Jens Munk coming up the final exposed headwall on the top pitch of *Eagles Folly* (17), Montagu. Photo TONY LOURENS



Tony Lourens on the crux layback of *Beware the Dark Horse* (18), Lion's Head. Photo WILLIE KOEN



Will Gadd leading the first ascent of *Chakacanaka* WI4, Giants Castle, Drakensberg. Photo GARRRETH BIRD

WILL GADD

ON SA ICE

words by COLIN McCOY
pics by GARRRETH BIRD

Will Gadd on the first ascent of
The Niknak Ice Crack M9, Bokong, Lesotho





Timothy Larsen inspecting the tent damage after a very windy night on top of Giants Castle

In July this year a small group of us had the privilege of hosting Canadian ice and mixed climber, Will Gadd, for a whirlwind 10-day climbing trip in the Drakensberg. This all came about when Tim Larsen commented on an Instagram post of Will's, about how short the South African ice climbing season is.

Believe it or not the rest of the world don't think SA even has a winter. International climbers know of Rocklands and Boven, but SA as an ice climbing destination? Definitely not! Somehow Tim managed to convince Will that if he came to SA there would be ice to climb. At least the backup plan would be that there's definitely good rock.

The team consisted of myself (Colin McCoy), Tim Larsen, Lloyd Anderson, Franco Houy and Garreth Bird (who did an excellent job documenting the trip through his lens). We were also joined by two porters at Giant's Castle, Mlayo and Sikile.

The first stop was Giant's Castle. The evening before, at my place, the weather was quite tropical. I'd been to Bokong and Sani the week before, so I knew there was at least some ice, but to be honest I was sceptical that we would find anything worthwhile for Will to climb. Ice climbing is so condition dependent. I know of a number of lines in the Drakensberg that when formed would make amazing first ascents, but they very rarely come into condition. At least the worst case would be that Will would have the novelty of climbing ice in SA and then we'd spend the rest of the trip rock climbing.

Going ice climbing at Giant's Castle is a mini expedition, it's about a 15 kilometre approach walk with a 1,500 metre altitude gain. We made good time on the walk in and had set up camp above and to the east of the Shiza Gully by mid evening. All was going well at this point, and we had walked past the top of the ice route called *Makhaza*, which, to our relief, was well formed.

If you have camped on top of Giant's Castle in mid-winter, you may have experienced the notoriously strong winds. Well, it lived up to its reputation. By morning, of the five tents, one was completely trashed and two had broken poles and a small tear in the fly sheet. It is close to unbearable up there in those conditions, and we were all very close to just packing it all in, but the forecast showed that the wind would die down from around midday. There was also the option that if we stayed another night in the wind, then those whose tents were broken could move to the cave near the top of Giants Pass.

At around 10.30 am we decided to go for a walk to see what ice we could find. I was hoping that we would find something in the Shiza Gully, as there are potential new routes there. I hadn't been this far along the escarpment before, so before going to Shiza, I wanted to look in the next cut back to the East, not expecting to find anything, but just to see what's there.

To my surprise we found a huge unclimbed line. "Well Will, if you'd like to do a first ascent of an ice route in SA, there it is" I said. He was psyched.

Very soon, Will, Tim and I were

standing on the ledge at the bottom of the route, and in no time Will ran up it. It was really inspiring to watch someone climb so confidently and solidly. Tim and I then followed. We named the route *Chakacanaka*, WI4, 35m.

Will and I then continued the scouting mission. The Shiza Gully wasn't in condition, so my next hope was Future X, I was hopeful, but you never know. Unfortunately, no joy there. I'd run out of ideas of potential new routes, so we headed over towards the Main Event. Now it would just be the novelty of climbing ice in SA.

As we were nearing the Main Event, one gully to the east, Will spotted a patch of ice. To me it looked quite arbitrary, but Will was psyched. Something I learned over the trip is that Will looks at a line totally differently to how I would. Quite simply, climbing at the level that he does, a line that looks impossible to me is totally doable and very cool to him.

The next day, Will and I headed to this new line whilst the others climbed on the Main Event.

We abseiled down 60 metres. I felt the exposure and continually wondered how I was ever going to climb out of there.

One of the things I really appreciated about climbing with Will was his level of safety. There's never a need to take unnecessary risks and if a system can be beefed up without too much effort, then it would be silly not to do so. As I abseiled down, Will pointed out icicles to break off to prevent them from being dislodged by our rope, this is something I've always had in mind when abseiling on ice but >>



MAIN and FAR LEFT:
Will Gadd on the first ascent of
Wind Ice and Dragons WI6 M8, Giants Castle



Above: Will Gadd scoping new lines at Bokong, Lesotho

Main: Will Gadd on the first ascent of
Wind Ice and Dragons WI6 M8, Giants Castle





never to the level of awareness that Will has, and it has certainly changed my mindset for the future. The next 40-metre abseil was off a V-thread in the ice, a skill we don't use all that often in SA.

The first pitch was very delicate climbing on thin and unstable ice, as well as some frozen turf, and Will had to really search hard for gear.

The second pitch started with pure mixed climbing, a 5-metre section just on rock followed by steep ice. It was a real experience to witness mixed climbing at that level. It's an art to find small features in the rock to balance your ice pick, or a crack to torque your tools. Needless to say, when I followed the pitch, I was very grateful for the tight rope.

The hard work was done but it was not over. In comparison, the final pitch was straightforward, nice thick ice, but still quite steep.

We named the route *Wind, Ice and Dragons*, WI6 M8, 120m, and is South Africa's hardest ice/mixed route by a few grades (previous hardest was WI5). In Will's opinion, this would be a classic for its grade anywhere in the world. If the route was in Europe or North America, climbers would be queuing to do it.

The following day, Will and Tim went back to *Wind, Ice and Dragons* whilst the rest of us climbed on the Main Event. Once Will and Tim were done, they came across to the Main Event and climbed a new line on the far right. There is a cave at the bottom of the route, which is very useful for the belayer to hide in, out the way of falling ice. They named the route: *The Firing Line* WI4, 40m.

We had now run out of options at Giant's Castle and still had two more venues to visit. It was 2 pm so we decided to walk out that afternoon. We made good time and were back at the cars by 7 pm.

We then had a two-hour drive (dropping the porters off along the way) to the Cavern Resort in the Northern Drakensberg where they very generously put us up for the night. The following day would be somewhat of a rest day – a six-hour drive to Bokong in Lesotho near Katse Dam, stopping off along the way for lunch in the town of Clarens. >>



Will Gadd on the first ascent of *The Niknak Ice Crack* M9, Bokong, Lesotho

We spent the next day and a half at Bokong. Conditions had deteriorated since I was there two weeks before, but we were still able to climb on *Siberian Enema* and *Coitus Interruptus*. At the top of the main amphitheatre, there is a huge cave-like overhang with icicles formed over the lip. I had always thought it would be super cool if someone climbed that, but it's surely impossible. Well, I was wrong. On the far right is a 20-metre overhanging crack which, as soon as Will saw it, was game on. The unique thing about it is that the crack is iced up so all your axe placements are actually in ice and feet mostly delicately placed on rock.

A lot of hard work went into making the route safe with gear. Will then sent it. Tim and I both also gave it a bash. I'm just not strong enough to climb something that hard so didn't get very far. Tim did really well but still needs to return for the redpoint.

We named the route *The Niknak Ice*

Crack M8, 20m. Another classic for its grade anywhere in the world.

We then drove across Lesotho to Sani Pass where we were joined by Isabella and Chris Kleynhans as well as James McConnel, and we spent the following day on *Split Banana*. Will also used this time to do some coaching. He took us back to basics – walking on ice, proper footwork, climbing on ice without using your axes, how to swing your tools effectively, how to place ice screws and make V-threads. Needless to say, everyone learned a heck of a lot.

That was the end of the ice climbing, and the group went our separate ways. Will, Tim, Garreth and I returned to Howick. There were two days until Will flew back to Canada, and he wanted to sample some rock climbing, so both of his remaining days were spent at Umngeni Valley. He was super stoked with the quality of the climbing and ticked off the following routes:

Onsighted:

- War on Gaza (24)
- Exactly Cheesehead, Exactly (25)
- Nothing Heals Like Cold Steel (27)

Redpointed:

- The Caterpillar Conquest (25)
- Smackdown (28)

This trip was definitely a 'once in a lifetime' five star adventure, and a privilege to be able to showcase South Africa. Check out Will's Instagram @realwillgadd to see more highlights from the trip, and keep an eye out for a film coming out soon.

Big thanks to Will for visiting and the rest of the team for making the trip so good.

I've referenced a number of existing routes in this article. Get yourself a copy of *Drakensberg Select* to find a good overview of the ice climbing areas of the Drakensberg.





Some of Will Gadd's ice climbing achievements:

- Establishing the hardest mixed ice climbing lines in the world.
- Gold medals at the X Games and Ice Climbing World Cup
- First one-day ascent of the tallest mountain in the Canadian Rockies, Mt Robson. Solo.
- Multiple first ascents of Spray Ice at Helmcken Falls (winning a Golden Piton award in 2010 for Spray On)
- Documenting climbing the last ice at the top of Mt Kilimanjaro
- First person to ice climb Niagara Falls

Colin McCoy following on the first ascent of
Chakacanaka WI4, Giants Castle



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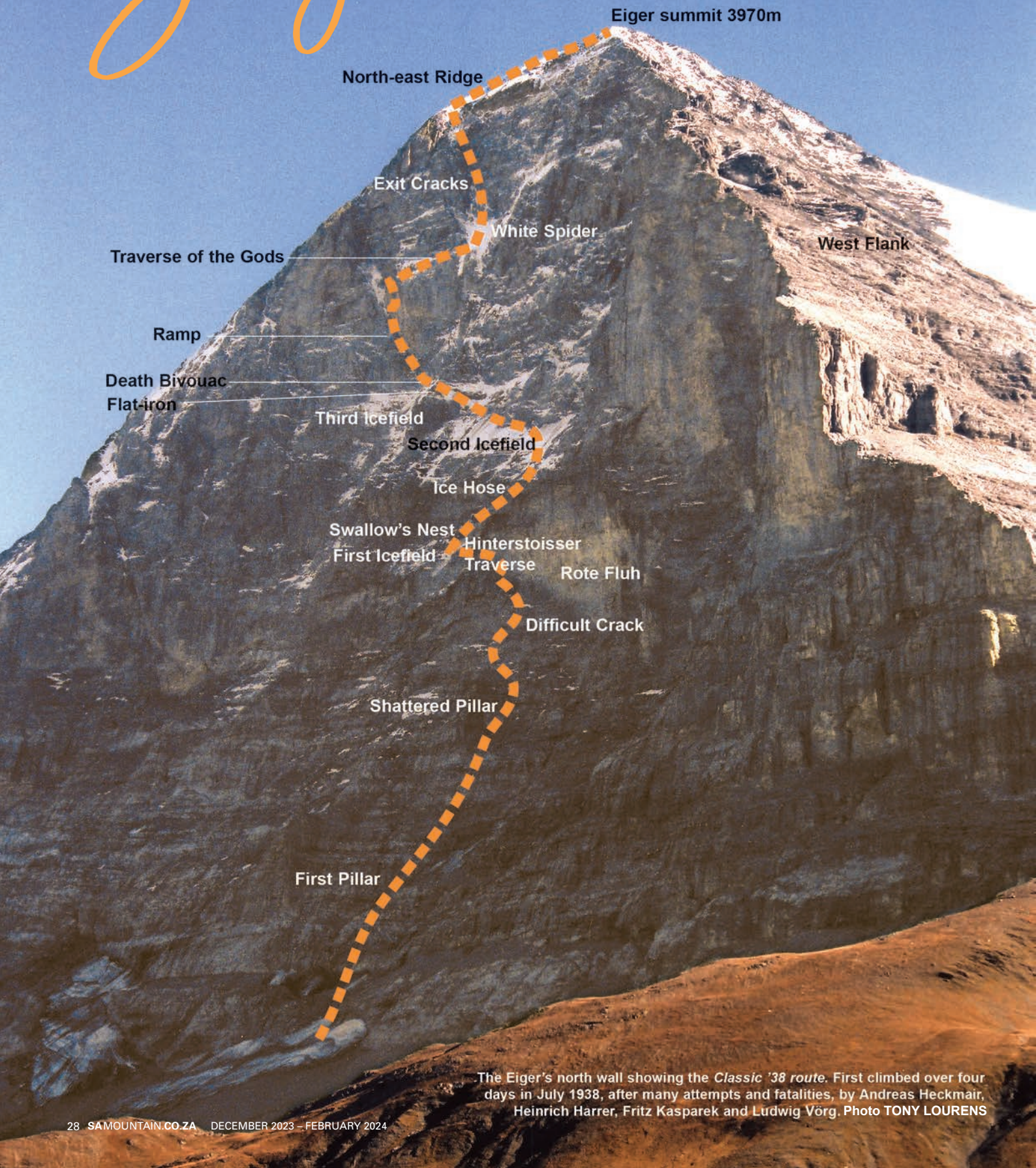
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AN INSTANT OF *Joy*

Legendary South African climber and mountaineer, Andy de Klerk, relates his account of his solo ascent of the Eiger's infamous North Wall.



The Eiger's north wall showing the *Classic '38 route*. First climbed over four days in July 1938, after many attempts and fatalities, by Andreas Heckmair, Heinrich Harrer, Fritz Kasperek and Ludwig Vörg. Photo TONY LOURENS

Majesty of silence, casting
Shadows as long as life.
The mountain speaks in dimensions
I cannot hear.
I try to feel the power
Behind the wind and snow,
To know how the emptiness
Can pervade.
It is enough to feel that presence
Amongst these walls of ice,
In the sunset, catching pink,
The highest peaks of silence.

(Alpinism Vol II)

I took a deep breath as I passed the bronze plaques bolted to the wall just above the bergschrund. Dawn had just broken a thin crack of red on the horizon, and there was just enough murky light to look up at the five thousand feet of shattered limestone hanging above me. The enormity of what I was about to do flickered briefly on the edge of a panic, but I shut it out quickly and looked up at the route just ahead as I picked out the route through the first rock bands. "One step at a time buddy," I told myself. "This is it. Here we go..."

It took six long years to complete this challenge that I had set myself, but I am a patient man, and in the end it didn't seem like a very long time. I wanted to solo the three classic north faces of the Alps: the Eiger, Matterhorn, and Grandes Jorasses, those towering, inspiring and intimidating objects of every Alpine climbers' desire. I had climbed them all previously with various partners over the course of two very intense Alpine summers, and it may have been enough at that. So why go back and solo them? The easy answer would be: "To see if I can", but nothing is ever obvious when it comes to the complexity of our drives and motivations.

There is a subtle paradox in soloing: Is it something you do for yourself only, or are there elements of doing it for yourself once reflected off the admiration of others afterwards? This paradox is boldly drawn while you're climbing: soloing contains an intimacy, a sublime beauty in fluid movement, and an intense self-reliance, all of which are contrasted sharply with the very real consequence of your own death. The question cuts directly to the core of why we climb, and after many attempts and many years of trying to complete

this goal, my answer, finally, would be: "Because I had to." Part of the beauty in mountaineering that has been laid out in so many epic tales is that we set ourselves challenges we don't know whether we will be able to meet. Then, despite ourselves and against all odds, we go out into these wild places and try anyway. Success and failure are clear. It's about the human quest: about adventure; about setting out and not knowing the outcome.

Two years previously I had started up the *Walker Spur* on the Grandes Jorasses at 10 pm, reaching the top at dawn. I had climbed the entire route at night by headlight, partly to avoid the crowds, but mostly to avoid rockfall from people above me. On the summit I watched Monte Rosa glow pink for a minute as the sun rose, and looked down at the Shroud and the Petits Jorasses, picking out the line of *Anouk*, a route we had done a few days before. I remembered Michel Piola at the Maison des Montagnes. Veins bulging as he returned the Hilti, eyes shining as he described the route and drew us a topo, and rockdust, fresh from the bolts that we clipped, dribbling out of the holes like geological spittle. The Alpine rock rage had just begun to take hold, but the lure of the big, cold north walls was stronger, the uncertainty higher, the risks very much sharper.

A month later we had gone back to Zermatt and I had climbed the *Schmidt Route* on the Matterhorn. It was a long ice route in excellent cold conditions. The ice was thick, and the only really precarious moment occurred in the twin dihedrals, where I climbed higher than I should have and traversed across back out to the good ice on loose, unconglomerated and tenuous limestone. The rest of the route consisted of avoiding rock as I wound my way up on ice. I reached the top and the big iron cross glinted in the thin sunlight, and I endured the perplexed stares of the Swiss mountain guides who didn't know where I had come from as they short-roped their clients down the Hornli Ridge. All that was left was the Eiger. I didn't know it at the time, but it wouldn't turn out to be as easy.

I climbed up towards the Shattered Pillar over loose, rubbly limestone. Moving mechanically upwards, my body seemed strangely dissociated from the rest of me, almost as if I needed the dislocation to numb me from what I was starting. I tiptoed in Koflachs on rounded

limestone footholds and then pulled over the Difficult Crack. It was strenuous and overhanging, but I had found my rhythm and I moved quickly up to the Rote Fluh, up towards the key of the lower wall: the Hinterstoisser Traverse. It still looked improbable and even harder this time. I teetered from ice boss to ice boss just barely in balance, one hand holding the same mangled fixed rope that had been there when Sandy Britain and I had climbed it six years previously, the other holding my axe hooked on sloping edges. A lurch at the end, and I was onto easy snow leading up to the Swallows Nest. The sky was cobalt blue beyond the shadow of the wall. I was doing well: It was 9 am and I was already ahead of my planned schedule.

Seven hours earlier, I had lain in the darkness in the meadow far below me listening to the distant sounds of cowbells. Sleep hadn't come at all, just the endless stream of doubts and fears that had arrived like the familiar but unwanted guest that I always hope won't arrive, but always does. I replayed the route continually in my mind: imagining myself on the huge black and white wall that blocked out half of the clear night sky above me. I have always found visualisation easy. I am able to remember long complicated sequences on sport routes – imagining precisely how I would grasp a hold, or how the balance change would feel as I weight a tiny foothold that I can clearly picture. And as I imagined the route above me I had one of those subliminal senses that everything would be okay. Underneath the tension in my body I simply knew I would do it this time.

I've always had an uncanny sense of intuition when it comes to danger. Three times I have ignored the warnings and three times I have been hurt: twice Base jumping and once when my knee was hit by a falling rock the first time I tried to solo the *Walker Spur* on the Grandes Jorasses. I strongly believe that we are able to sense the future, not in the form of soothsaying or fortune-telling, but in the fragile, but no less profound, connection to what lies underneath our strong efforts in extreme places. Perhaps it's because we willingly put ourselves into this very uncertainty in the first place that we become more receptive to our intuitions. I credit this to keeping me alive. I've turned away, and have had my partners turn me away from routes in perfectly good >>

weather for no apparent reason at all other than a vague feeling. The bottom line is that you have to trust yourself and your instinct because they're all part of the same thing. Even then, a large measure of it comes down to luck. In the Bonatti Couloir on the Dru during my second season in the Alps, I came the closest to being killed by rockfall. I looked up and the sky was black. My last thought was: "Oh Fuck!" as the boulders fell right through me, missing me by only fractions of millimetres. To this day, I am still amazed at how a whole couloir full of rocks managed to miss me. There had been other close calls too, on the Brenva, on the Grand Pilier d'Angle and on the Courtes: near misses that can only be put down to luck, or fate, or chance, or whatever other reasons you choose to give as you roll the dice and gamble with your very life. Ernest Hemingway once wrote that there are only two kinds of sports: bullfighting and mountain climbing. All the rest being games. Alpinism is dangerous, but we knew that before we even went up there.

Above the Swallows Nest, the First Icefield was easy and I made rapid progress up to the Ice Hose. It was covered with verglas again and looked treacherous. I took the single rope out of my pack, clipped into some rusty pegs, and self-belayed as I delicately cramponed up the smooth slab covered with a thin veil of ice. Halfway up, the ice degenerated into sloping friction-climbing in crampons. My focus was acute, my climbing so careful, and my movements so deliberate that I scarcely noticed that there was no gear. The empty rope that snaked down to the belay was just enough. I found some anchors at the top, rappelled down to unclip the end of the rope, and climbed back up with one jumar and a deliberate precision that I had rehearsed in my head so many times before.

I moved quickly up and across the 500 metres of the Second Icefield. The snow was hard and my crampons bit easily and solidly. The wall was in excellent condition: dry rock, firm snow, cold temperatures and very little rockfall. I was glad to be there, glad to have waited for this, and exhilarated from

the climbing as my movements simply pulled my head along as I relaxed into the movement. The rock band at the end was delicate and surprisingly hard: more balancing crampon points on rock, but I reached the 'Flat-Iron' and the 'Death Bivouac'. I stopped for a cigarette and looked down: the wall was immense. Below me, hundreds of metres of steep ice and snow and black rock fell away into the shadow that stretched far down the green slopes towards the sun.

I looked up and the sky was black. My last thought was: "Oh Fuck!"

There hadn't been much sun when I first climbed the route with Sandy Britain. Mornings had started out clear and then rain and snow and clouds and wind had boiled into afternoon storms which sucked themselves into the concave bowl. It had taken four days, but we had carried on, battling the weather as much as the psychological aura that surrounded the mountain and made our packs heavy.

Everybody has read Heinrich Harrer's *The White Spider*, that seminal book which so clearly describes how the mountain came to be firmly embedded in lore and mystique, with descriptions of brave lives frozen immobile, or shattered by dark rock, and of horrific tales of misery and suffering. Only after we finished the route was I able to separate the climbing from the aura. We had been battling demons inside our heads, when instead it really was just a route like any other in Chamonix.

My first solo attempt had been with Julie Brugger and John Stratham. Then climbing as a roped pair, with myself going ahead alone. The forecast had been ambiguous, but we thought we might have had a good chance. I reached the Death Bivouac just in time: rocks were peppering the Second Icefield as I raced across in the rain. Safely sheltered, but incongruously trapped, I huddled in my bivvy bag as the sleet raged beyond and washed the whole wall white. I dozed off in that netherworld

of isolation, and was startled at 11 pm when I heard a shout from below. I had simply assumed that the others had retreated since they had been so far behind, but two headlamps appeared out of the snowy gloom and traversed across below me. They were frozen, incomprehensible and hypothermic. I brewed them tea, thawed them out, and we all three lay there uncomfortably for another day and a night as the storm slowly spent itself. I replayed in my head every single rappel anchor on the route down, planning with cold precision how our descent would occur, and I executed that exact route down on the third day as cold spindrift blew across the wall. The Eiger held no demons for me: I knew I could get off.

My second solo attempt had ended at the sluice door above the Ice Hose. The weather had been good, but there was verglas everywhere. Ice had plastered the wall in a glistening frozen hush, and the climbing was slow, precarious and treacherous. Without even realising that I had made a conscious decision to bail, I veered off the route and angled over to the trapdoor. It was the right choice. I stepped off the North Wall and into the inky depths of the mountain. Thirty minutes later I walked out of the tunnel, blinking in the sharp sunlight above Kleine Scheidegg. It had been a strange day on a strange mountain, but I had known, before even starting the route, that I was destined to fail. Margo Timmins once made an interesting observation about life: "You can always see it coming, but you can never stop it." I had to go, to try anyway, before the senselessness of continuing became apparent. There is such a fine balance between ambition and judgment, that it is often difficult to separate the two elements, but I think that if you listen carefully, and are honest with yourself, the clear choice is always evident.

I finished my cigarette and stepped onto steep ice of the Third Icefield, pock-marked by stone-fall, quickly climbing across into the Ramp and up icy chimneys in the back of this narrow passage cleaving two blank walls. I reached the Waterfall pitch: the key to the upper wall. It looked desperate. Globes of ice and needle-like chandeliers

draped themselves over a small roof at the top of the chimney like a bizarre lop-sided ice cream cone. I pulled out the rope again, fashioned a solid belay, and started delicately up. Wedged off a hand jam, and precariously balanced on my crampon points on rock footholds, I carefully and very methodically demolished the chandelier until I was able to tiptoe up to reach a good axe placement over the lip. A wobble and a contorted grovel put me over the bulge, and I slowly, very slowly, climbed up the steep ice-filled chimney above and onto the hanging snowfield at the top. The pitch had been all about control and careful, methodical climbing. A quick rappel, a strenuous jumar back up, and I suddenly became aware that there was sunlight on the buttress above me. My concentration had been intense. The Eiger catches the sun in the afternoon near the Traverse of the Gods, and as I diagonalled past the Brittle Ledges and into the traverse, I felt as if the Gods were smiling on me. Everything had just somehow clicked into place. The White Spider was solid neve ice and I made rapid progress up to the Exit Cracks. It was a wild place to be: high above the ground with blue-grey hazy verticality dropping straight down to the depths of the Scheidegg below, good snow, and perfect climbing. There was nowhere else I would rather have been.


The White Spider narrows at the top into labyrinthine gullies, and previously, Sandy and I had spent half a day struggling up the wrong one in the middle of a storm and heavy snowfalls. The right gully was obvious this time, and I could see the quartz crack at the top where it pinched before opening out onto the upper snowfields. My concentration focused again, and the climbing was excellent up fairly easy mixed runnels. A final roped belay up the awkward quartz crack, and the way above was clear: the white, easy angled snowfield went straight to the top. I felt a brief pre-recognition of success: a momentary lapse of concentration that was quickly squashed, because nothing is ever finished until afterwards, until after you're safely down. I sunk my axes and carefully kicked steps, suddenly very conscious of the empty space below me. After having emerged

from the narrow confines of the wall, everything had seemed very exposed. The Eiger refused to release its grip on me right until the very end.

Fifteen hours after crossing the bergschrund, I pulled over the north-east ridge. The route was done. It was 7 pm, and not much daylight remained. I had to get as far down the west flank as I could before dark because there's no clear and obvious way down. A glance was all it took: a glimpse of an instant was all that I needed from the summit. Long shadows crisscrossed a beautiful and desolate glaciated landscape, punctured only by the sharp pale yellow peaks far in the distance to the west: the Dent Blanche, Arolla, Midi, and just beyond, the broad slopes of Mont Blanc glowed in the evening sun. It was just an instant, but it contained so much: familiarity, strangeness, and ultimate sadness. I was a stranger in that transient other world, a world of my own making, but yet I also firmly belonged in that world. I had risked everything to get there, only to discover, after arriving, that there had been nothing there in the first place. Like trying to catch a cloud with your hands, I suppose I had been looking for something more, something tangible in uncertainty, but there really is nothing to find on the summit of a mountain other than yourself.

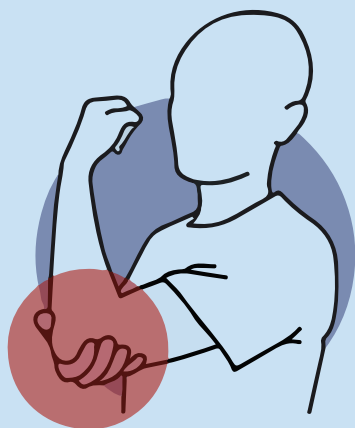
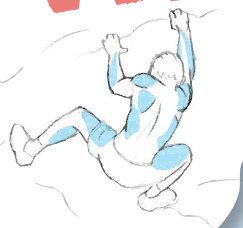
I headed down, as fast as I dared, winding my way over loose rubble, steep cliffs and slick icefields, peering harder and harder into the gloom as the light ebbed away. And then it was dark, and I wandered around slowly trying to pick out the easiest way down, always unsure if I was going the right way. One short rappel over a cliff that I couldn't seem to bypass put me onto what I thought I remembered was the last snowfield, and gradually the angle eased and then suddenly, I spotted the railway tracks glinting in the headlamp beam and it was all over. Finally, I could relax the iron grip of concentration that had locked my head in a vice-like focus. Finally, I could ease up because I was safe, and alive, and suddenly very, very tired. I cut across above Scheidegg and across the meadows to my gear, numbly made a cup of tea, and fell asleep, completely drained.

Morning came softly. It was to be another blue bird day. Overnight, my body had drunk in the sleep it so badly needed, and escaped from the powerful intensity of the previous day. I woke up feeling very much alive. I packed up and wandered over to some tents in the next meadow where two Italian girls were watching their friends on the lower part of the wall through binoculars. I took a turn and spotted them under the Rote Fluh. I started to trace the route upwards and then stopped. I lowered the binoculars and could just barely make out the two climbers, but it was enough. I looked up, and it was only then, only afterwards, after the pressure had gone, that the true scale sank in: the wall looked absolutely immense. It seemed unbelievable that only a few hours previously I had been up there. I had broken the whole route down into manageable chunks that I could comfortably get my head around, and now that it was finally over, the whole had overwhelmed me. I was excited. I had finished something that I had set out to do, alone, without anyone else to rely on, and I had finally done it. I wished the Italians good luck and walked down to Grindewald, my senses alive: the vibrancy of colour, sound and smell making Swiss pastoral life seem almost magical.

Eventually, the excitement turned to fulfilment and then to a deep melancholy, but that always happens after you have given everything you have towards a goal which you then finally reach. We spent a few weeks cragging in Provence and then returned again to Chamonix right at the cusp of the late autumn, intending to climb a few more Alpine rock routes. Instead, we watched the rain pouring down from beneath the sheltered eaves of a deserted Rue Pacard. I realised then that I had finally finished with the Alps. They had defined my life for quite a while, but I was ready to move on to bigger things. As we drove our car out of Chamonix to the north, on the long drive to Paris and eventually home, I thought back on those years, and what stuck with me was not all the years of climbing, but how a brief instant on the summit of the Eiger, can carry a lifetime's worth of joy. 

OFF THE WALL

by Brenda Marx



ELBOWS

Elbow pain is one of the most common problems that climbers struggle with. The most typical elbow issues are climbers' elbow (aka golfers' elbow) and tennis elbow. There are also other problems that can be felt in the elbows, such as inflammation of the biceps and triceps tendons that insert in the elbow region.

Climbers' elbow is where you experience pain on the medial side (inside) of the elbow. Strain on this part of the elbow is caused by the fingers and wrist flexors. A very common cause for this is over-gripping or just plain overuse, due to repetitive gripping, think campus boarding, or working the same moves over and over again. Another interesting cause is muscle imbalance due to lack of strength in the pronator muscles. The pronators rotate the hand so that your palm faces the wall, for example, when you are pulling on horizontal edges. Gripping with a flexed wrist, e.g. when you're climbing on bad slopers and you're flexing your wrist to get a better purchase on those sloping surfaces, can also be a cause.

Note: A good technique to get used to doing is to try to focus on using your legs to bring your hips in to bring your centre of mass over your feet instead of just pulling in with your arms.

Tennis elbow is where you experience pain in the lateral side (outside) of the elbow. This is where your finger extensors originate, so that explains why a muscle imbalance with weakness in the finger extensors is a very common cause of tennis elbow. These imbalances can cause one to grip with an extended wrist, so that elbows point away from the wall – think what happens when you're pumped out of your mind on a steep climb and start chicken-winging to compensate for your grip failing. One should therefore focus on trying to keep your wrist neutral and your elbow aligned with your wrist when you're pumped.

Elbow pain at the back of the arm could be due to triceps tendon overuse. A probable cause for this is doing pull-ups from a dead-hang position instead of starting with a slightly bent arm. Also, because we are constantly pulling and working with our biceps, these muscles can develop faster than the triceps, causing an imbalance. This could lead to overuse

and micro-tears in the triceps. Things like gastons, mantles and pulling thick ropes through belay devices can also put stress on this muscle group. Minimise your risk for this injury by using your feet cleverly to support gastons and mantle moves.

Elbow pain at the front of the arm could be due to biceps overuse. Resting with bent arms and straight legs or using many underclings and side pulls could also cause the biceps tendon to degenerate where it inserts into the bone below your elbow. Ways to avoid this injury is to bend your legs and keep your arms straight when resting, keep your hips forward when under-clinging and to use your feet to counter balance side pulls to put less stress on your arms.

Elbow injuries can also occur due to weakness in the shoulder stabilisers, as that puts more strain on the biceps and forearms. A lot of strain is also placed on the elbow when hand jamming, especially thumb-down because the rotational force puts even more strain on the joint.

Other common actions that place strain on the elbows are weighted pull-ups, Frenchies, gastons and hard lock-offs.

Treating elbow injuries is not always straightforward and injuries can take several months to heal. Most of the time stress reduction would be the starting point of the treatment.

Because elbow injuries are so difficult to treat (and generally we climbers don't want to stop climbing and rest), just changing your style of climbing can be incredibly beneficial, e.g. take a break from climbing steep, pumpy routes and focus on doing more vertical or slabby routes.

With these injuries, you may want to consider taking anti-inflammatories, which will bring relief in many cases. I once struggled with a bad case of tennis elbow just before a climbing competition. Anti-inflammatories didn't help at all. I resorted to having a cortisone injection. It worked almost immediately, and I never had that problem since then. (Touch wood.)

Exercises to rehabilitate and help prevent elbow injuries

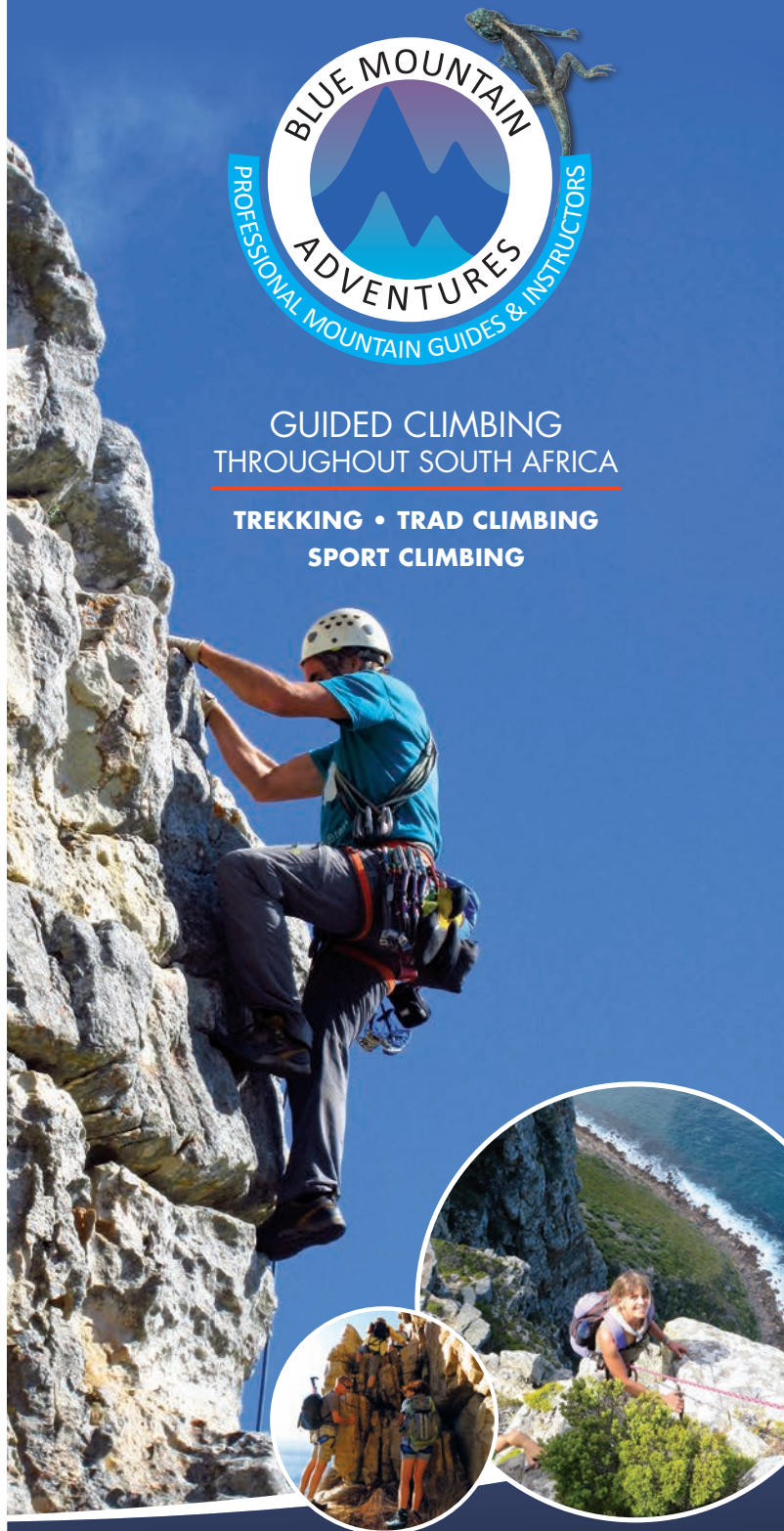
1 Wrist extension and rotation

Grab a hammer, frying pan, dumbbell, or water bottle, etc. in your fist. Hold your elbow at your side with your palm facing down and slightly flexed. Extend and rotate your wrist until your thumb is at the top. Lower back slowly and controlled and repeat (20 reps).



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2 Wrist extensions

Support your forearm on a table and hold a light weight with your palm facing down. Extend your wrist upwards and lower back to the horizontal position slowly and controlled. Do 20 reps, keeping the tension in the extensors.



3 Tricep dips

From a reverse plank position with your hands on a chair/bench, bend your arms slowly, no more than 30° and push back up. Focus on keeping your body in a straight line and **DO NOT GO DOWN TOO FAR** because then you'll be putting unnecessary strain on your shoulders.



4 Strengthen those shoulder stabilisers

in the previous issue of SAM
I wrote an article on shoulder injuries
for the specific exercises.

Shoulder Injuries

5 Push ups

Them good old push ups! Start from a plank position on your hands, lower until your upper arms are parallel to your body, keep your elbows tucked in close to your body and push back up. Do 4 sets of 10.



- 6 Palm-against-wall-stretch:** Stand with your right side facing a wall. Place your right hand flat against the wall with your thumb facing up and fingers stretched out. Now straighten your right elbow. You should feel a nervy stretch down your arm. To advance, you can bend your neck in the opposite direction and/or move so that you open your chest more. This may feel uncomfortable, but don't push it so far that it's painful. Hold the stretch for 10-15 seconds, relax and repeat 6-7 times. Do the same with the left side.



Stay tuned
on some more rehab
and injury prevention
ideas in the hands
next time.
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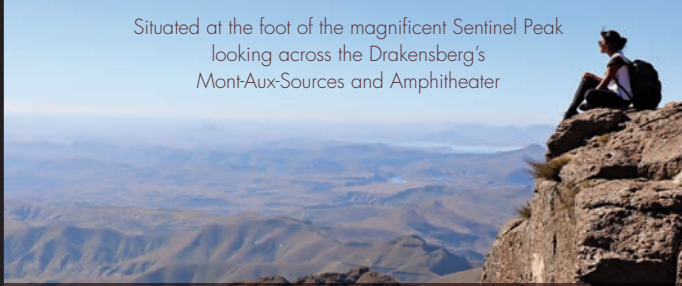
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THE CENTIPEDE EFFECT

by Terence Livingston

Captain Haddock can't sleep! In the Tintin adventure, *The Red Sea Sharks*, he tosses and turns after someone asks him if he sleeps with his beard under or above the covers. His mind's tendrils have wrapped their worrying whorls so tight, he can't function.

An itch that must be scratched, a doubt, a niggle, 'iets wat pla', grips the grey matter and forces it into paralysis by analysis.

I watch my son dither and dawdle—he's halfway up an average climb but has stalled near a simple straightforward move. I feel a crick as I crane my neck, watching him. Up one move, then back down two. Shuffle one step right, then stretch back across to the left. He's sussing, deciding, overthinking a simple route. The only jump he makes is to more inert conclusions! The leg shakes, his arms strain, and he almost comes off. Eventually, he tops out and is buggered when he slaps the chains. We're also exhausted from mentally pushing him to finish.

It's not just climbing. A golfer thinking too closely about his swing can completely skew a simple shot. A batsman keeps going out cheaply as he tries harder to play a shot that should be easy. A plane trip can be ruined by having to choose

chicken or beef. Staring at your phone, sweating, wondering what that emoji means—is your friend angry, concerned or excited?

Getting stuck in the Land of If is like sitting in a rocking chair—gives you something to do, but gets you nowhere.

Before you justify it as problem-solving (asking questions to find a solution), according to Dr Fowler of a Houston wellness institute, overthinking is when “you dwell on possibilities and pitfalls without any real intent of solving a problem. In fact, a problem or potential problem may not even exist.”

Katherine Craster put it best in a poem about a troubled multi-legged chilopoda:

*The Centipede was happy quite,
Until a Toad in fun
Said, “Pray, which leg goes after
which?”*

*And worked her mind to such a pitch,
She lay distracted in a ditch
Considering how to run.*

Climbing is not the kind of sport where you get better if you overthink things. Climbing is a sport that forces you to live in the moment and exist in a meditative state. Any extra time spent fighting against gravity only wears down the muscles and the mind so that decisive moves turn into a sordid rendition of spaghetti. Arno Ilgner in *The Rock Warrior's Way*, says “When stress increases, our attention will drift back to thinking, which will

create many thoughts (doubts) to stop our commitment.” You start gaslighting yourself—putting a negative spin on everything—how it could always be worse or that it's all in your head.

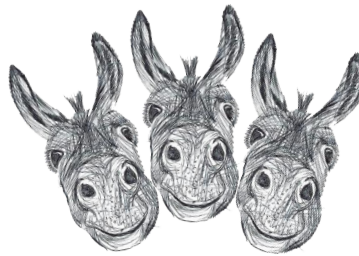
Counting breaths. That's one antidote for when the cogs start overwinding. Concentrating on what is natural and instinctive, rather than what could, should, would or might. Ilgner says, “We *don't* stop thoughts, we redirect attention. With our attention on breathing, relaxing, and moving, thoughts diminish.”

The ten-second rule. It's another remedy, the same as if a sandwich hits the floor and you've got a time limit to pick it up and stuff it in your mouth; you force yourself to make the move before the germs of doubt take over. Like having a chess clock to force you into action instead of planning 13 moves ahead but then losing all your pieces!

Practice falling! It's an art in Japan called ukemi! Act out what you're worried about, that way you'll tick it off and not dwell on “what if...”.

Climbing is all about momentum! If you get sucked into a bog of doubt (like my son and Haddock), getting going again can be as easy as breathing out 2-3-4 or overriding the thought trap by forcing the body to move. Anything to keep going forward and upward and avoid falling in the same ditch as the legless centipede!

'Should I stay or should I go now? If I go, there will be trouble and if I stay it will be double'
- The Clash



Tre Asini Designs

R160

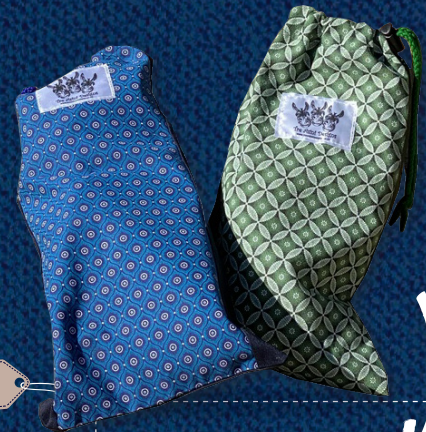


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