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Desert Towers Select

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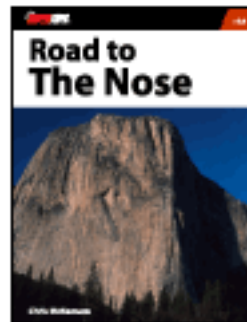
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Desert Towers Select



Dougald MacDonald and Chris McNamara

Desert Towers Select

S U P E R T O P O S

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When climbing you can only rely on your skill, training, experience and conditioning. **If you have any doubts as to your ability to safely climb any route in this guide, do not try it.**

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Introduction

As a climber, it is impossible to ignore desert towers. Each sandstone splinter rises dramatically above endless river-carved valleys of red earth. Constructed of dead-vertical, chocolate-colored walls with flat summits, the shape entices while the steep and smooth walls terrify. Each one seems designed to keep climbers from the summit, which is, of course, why desert towers are so appealing.

Now, imagine that surrounding just one of these incredible formations was another two or three of equal beauty. Imagine from the summit of one tower you could see another ten. Around the next bend in the broad canyon in which you stand perch more and more towers. Welcome to the Colorado Plateau—desert tower paradise.

So, why isn't everyone climbing desert towers? Why isn't the Colorado Plateau the center of American climbing instead of Yosemite? Why not quit your job and move to Moab? Two reasons: desert towers are hard and scary.

Nearly all towers involve 5.9 to 5.11 moves, which makes them accessible only to seasoned and confident trad climbers. The walls lack handholds or rests, and the parallel-sided cracks mandate refined crack technique. These are "pure" crack climbs—no hidden jugs in the crack, no large pods to rest in, no face holds to relieve your hands and feet. Not even a 5.12 gym climb will prepare you for a dead vertical 5.9 sandstone crack.

Towers frighten because their sandstone ranges in quality from decent to horrendous. Even a perfectly placed cam in the best desert sandstone is not guaranteed to hold a fall. Now consider that gear placements rarely inspire and the rock quality sometimes resembles dried mud. Not surprisingly, there is a simple rule in the desert: don't fall.

That said, the fear and difficulty lead to reward: desert towers guarantee adventure. Just the chance to camp and hike around the desert towers and surrounding canyons would be well worth a trip. The fact that you can climb perfect rock towers in this unbelievable setting means any desert climb comes packaged with enduring memories.

The difficulty will certainly deter many from attempting a tower. Others, however, will see the challenges towers offer as inspiration to take their trad climbing to the next level. If you are not confident on cracks, then let the images, stories, and topos in *Desert Towers Select* push you

to hone your skills. If you are already a confident 5.9 or harder crack climber, then what are you waiting for! Borrow or steal cams from your friends and direct your car to one of the most incredible climbing destinations anywhere, the desert towers of the southwest.

Welcome to Desert Towers Select

Our goal in this guidebook is to provide you with everything a climber needs to know about the finest desert towers in order to prepare you for an awesome climbing adventure. We chose these routes because of their rock quality, elegant lines, and outstanding views.

Many of these routes played a historic role in the development of desert towers rock climbing. As we do in all of our SuperTopo guidebooks, we've taken the time to provide you with the history for each route as well as the climbing info. If you are like us you will find the experience of climbing these classic routes enhanced by the rich history and stories of the colorful characters that pioneered the climbs.

We hope you enjoy climbing these routes as much as we do. If you need to choose what climbs to do in a limited time period, you can be assured that these routes offer a guaranteed adventure.

Essential Desert Tower's Beta

You will find a wealth of *Desert Tower Select's* information and links on the SuperTopo web site. We encourage you to check the web site, as it will have more current beta than we can include for you here.

For the latest info, visit:

www.supertopo.com/climbingareas/towers.html

There you will find essential beta on:

- Climbing safety
- Getting there
- When to climb
- Road conditions
- Staying in Moab
- Food
- Climbing gear and climbing guides

Building Desert Tower Skills

Whether you just started trad climbing or climb 5.11 in Yosemite, familiarize yourself with short sandstone routes before attempting a tower. Desert sandstone can be sandy and scary and takes some practice to get used to. Below are some quick tips to prepare you.

Before your trip:

Train by climbing as many cracks as possible at your home crag and gym. While it is unlikely that the cracks in your area will be similar to the desert, any crack climbing training will help. Surprisingly, many gyms have great

cracks to train on. If the gym crack is vertical and parallel-sided, then it may be more similar to a desert crack than anything you can find at your crag.

Familiarize yourself with the rock:

Desert sandstone bears little resemblance to the sandstone familiar to eastern climbers. It is sandy, has few large holds and is often fragile. When you first arrive in Moab, consider stopping for a few hours at the Big Bend Boulders to get a feel for the rock. The problems range in difficulty from easy to ridiculously hard and will familiarize climbers of all abilities with the moves before they rope up. There is no guidebook, but directions are available on the SuperTopo web site:

www.supertopo.com/climbingareas/towers.html

First Desert Climbs:

Start your desert climbing trip at Wall Street. Just a 10-minute drive from Moab, the area offers the rare 5.4-5.9 difficulty range so hard to find in the desert. The climbing ranges from face climbs and slabs to vertical hand cracks and offwidths. In a few sections, you can scramble up easy rock to set topropes. However, most climbs end with an additional 300-500 feet of rock above, so leading is the only way to reach the anchor. Bring a ropegun (strong leader) who can set up topropes on crack climbs that challenge you. For a good guidebook to Wall Street, check out: *Desert Rock II: Wall Street to the San Rafael Swell* by Eric Bjornstad.

About the Desert Towers Climbs

Below is a list of climbs included in the *Desert Towers Select* guidebook. Climbs are listed from easiest to hardest.

Off Balanced Rock, Northeast Chimney (5.7 R, 2 pitches)

This is one of the few 5.7 towers, but don't let the rating deceive you: The second pitch hits you with a full 90 feet of secure but unprotected chimney climbing on excellent rock.

Owl Rock (5.9, 1 pitch)

Located right off the road in beautiful Arches National Park, Owl Rock is fun, popular, and the easiest tower in the area. This is a great first tower.

Ancient Art, Stolen Chimney (5.10d or 5.8 A0, 5 pitches)

This tower has one of the most exhilarating summits in the desert and is many people's first multi-pitch desert tower. While this is the next step in difficulty from Owl Rock, it is a BIG step. The exposure is intense!

Independence Monument, Otto's Route (5.9, 4 pitches)

This is the most moderate major tower in this guidebook and probably all of the Colorado Plateau. This awesome, unusual route follows a large ramp with chimney sections (no chimney moves required), yet whenever the climbing gets steep, there are large drilled pockets for handholds, circa 1911.

Lizard Rock (5.9 R, 1 pitch)

The short tower is a good introduction to Fisher Towers rock and protection. This climb, while relatively moderate, is runout and only attempted by bold climbers who confidently climb 5.9.

Castleton Tower, North Chimney (5.9, 3 pitches)

The North Chimney is perhaps the easiest of all-free routes on a major tower. The first pitch may be the best 5.9 in the desert and the overall quality of the line rivals the nearby Kor-Ingalls route.

Castleton Tower, Kor-Ingalls (5.9, 4 pitches)

Even with numerous wide cracks, this classic route offers sunny exposure, good ledges, interesting history, and fun climbing. If you could only do one climb in the desert, this would be it.

Great Wall, Chinese Eyes, (5.10b, 1 pitch)

Located on the enormous Great Wall, this challenging route ascends a left-facing corner with fingers, hands to a (brief) squeeze. This offers great 5.10 handcrack training.

Three Penguins, Right Chimney, (5.10c, 2 pitches)

This short, but proud tower is located just minutes from Moab and offers great rock. In spite of its name, this route is not a chimney though it does require 20 feet of offwidth climbing before the summit.

Sister Superior, Jah Man (5.10c, 5 pitches)

Great, varied climbing and a narrow summit make this an unheralded desert classic. It may be the best 5.10 desert tower.

The Rectory, Fine Jade (5.11a, 4 pitches)

This is an elegant thin and sustained route. The many cruxes are rewarded with grand views of Castleton Tower and the La Sals Mountains.

North Six Shooter, Lightning Bolt Cracks (5.11b or 5.10d A1, 4 pitches)

Excellent rock and a full variety of crack climbing techniques will lead you to the incredible summit in the expansive Indian Creek Canyon.

Castleton Tower, North Face (5.11c, 4 pitches)

The North Face is an exceptional and challenging route up arguably the best tower in Utah. Great wide climbing, if that's your thing.

Moses, Primrose Dihedrals (5.11d or 5.10d A0, 8 pitches)

Located in the remote heart of Canyonlands National Park, this route is one of the most rewarding you will ever do. This is one of the taller towers and the climbing is steep and sustained. It is easy to pull through the 5.11 cruxes.

Cam sizes by brand

Ref Size*	BD Camalots	CCH Aliens	Metolius Cams	Trango Big Bros	Wild Country Friends
0.4"	.1 red	.33 black	.00 gray		
0.5"	.2 yellow	.375 blue	0 purple		0 red
0.6"	.3 purple	.5 green	1 blue		.5 orange
0.75"	.4 gray	.75 yellow	2 yellow		1 yellow
1"	.5 pink	1 red	3 orange		1.25 brown
1.25"	.75 green	1.5 orange	4 red		1.5 sky
1.5"	1 red	2 purple	5 black		2 pink
1.75"	1 red	2.5 gray	6 green		2.5 royal
2"	2 yellow	2.5 gray	7 blue		3 navy
2.5"	2 yellow		8 purple		3.5 purple
3"	3 blue		9 burgundy		4 black
3.5"	3.5 gray		10 dark blue		4 black
3.5-4.5"	4 purple			1 red	5 silver
4.5-5.5"	4.5 red			2	
5.5-7"	5 green			3 green	6 plum
7-8"				3 green	
8-12"				4 blue	

*"Ref size" is the optimal crack width for a given camming unit. It is not the range given by the manufacturer.

Understanding the maps

Topo Symbols

Right facing corner



Left facing corner



Straight in crack



Groove



Arete



Flake



Chimney



Roof



Ledge



Slab



Belay station



Pitch length



Optional belay



False belay



Bolt ^x



Rappel anchor



Face climbing



Pine Tree



Oak-like Tree



Bush



Knob



Hole



Overview graphics

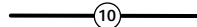
Low-clearance dirt road



High-clearance dirt road



Road or State Route



Interstate



Federal Highway



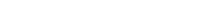
Park service trail



Climbers' trail



Cross-country trail



Notes on Rack

- "nuts" refers to any wired nut, stopper, or chock.
 "micro" = #1,2, "sml" = #3-5, "med" = #6-8, "leg" = #9-13

- for cams, "2 ea .75-1.5" means bring all the sizes between .75" and 1.5". Check the cam size chart to see which cam corresponds to which crack size.

Notes on Topo

- "belay takes .6-1" means, while leading the pitch, save enough .6-1" cams and nuts to build a natural anchor.

- a number next to a tree is the height of the tree.

Topo abbreviations

ow = offwidth

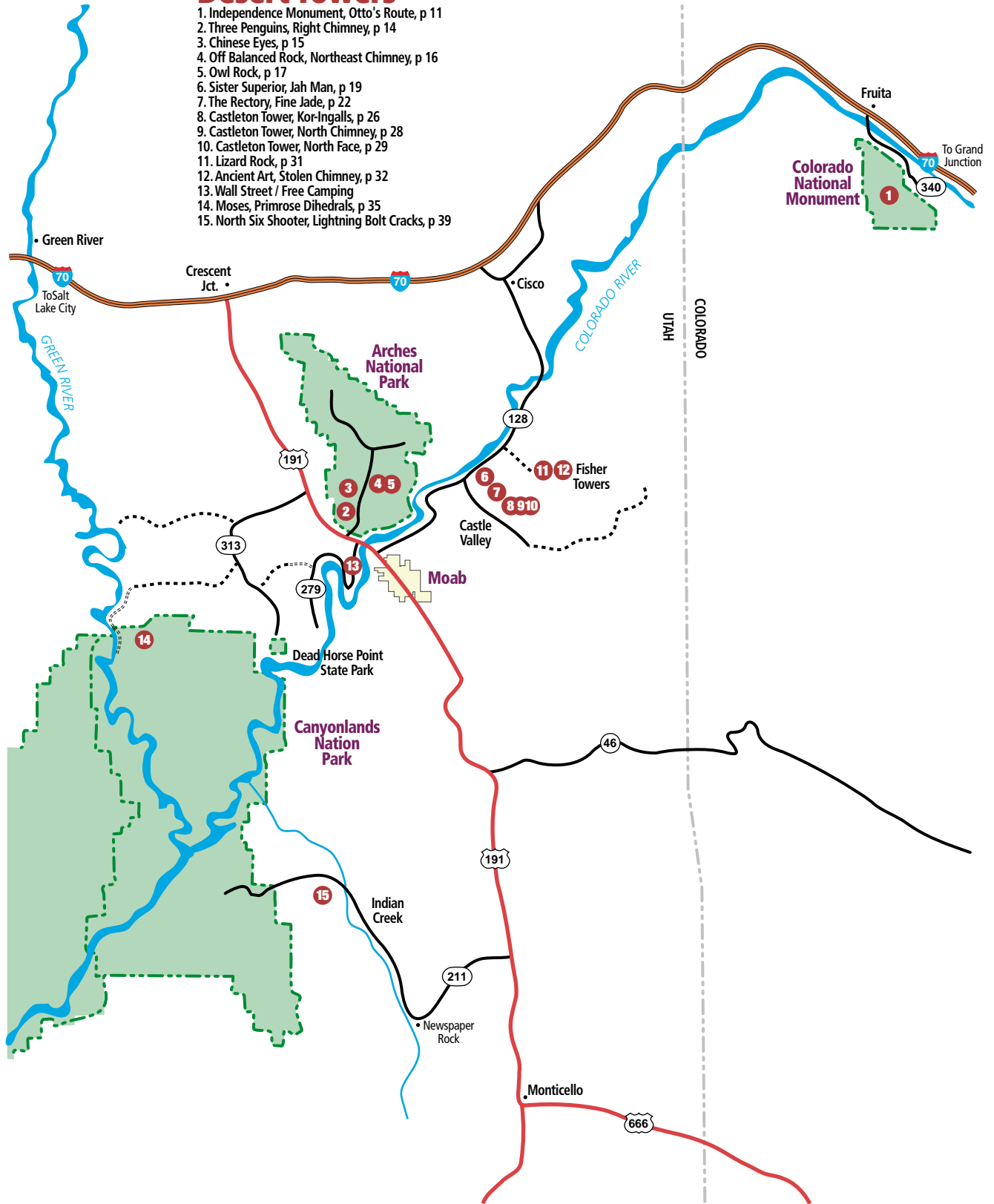
lb = lieback

p = fixed piton

R = runout (dangerous fall)

Desert Towers

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Moses

Moses may be Utah's most exceptional desert tower. The rock quality is excellent and the formation is striking with its slender girth and near vertical walls on every face. Ed Webster aptly described the tower as, "a giant exclamation point mocking the forces of erosion." Not to mention, Moses is situated at the intersection of several gorgeous canyons and thus has one of the best summit views in Canyonlands.

Approach

The drive takes an hour from Moab and requires a high-clearance vehicle. From Moab, drive north on U.S. 191 then take State Highway 313 west (the road to Deadhorse Point/Island in the Sky) for 11.6 miles. Just after a metal cattle guard, a dirt road heads right (west). (Signs may point to 'Mineral Bottom.')

Follow this for 12.4 miles to the canyon rim, then descend very steep switchbacks for about 1.5 miles. (Don't do this in a storm.) Turn left at a sign for Canyonlands National Park and follow the Green River south. After 6.1 miles, turn left on the spur to Taylor Canyon. This leads 4.8 miles to parking at the end of the road.

The 30-minute hike begins at the good marked trail that heads east from the parking area. At a signed fork, go left along a well-beaten path. This winds up talus and through small cliff bands. It forks on a ridge below a subsidiary tower, the Thoracian Mare, south of Moses. Take the right fork through huge blocks and under the south face. The original 5.11 start begins at an A-shaped alcove plastered with chalk, above a small hilltop. For the popular 5.8 alternate start, continue around the tower to a notch, reached from the northeast side.

Descent

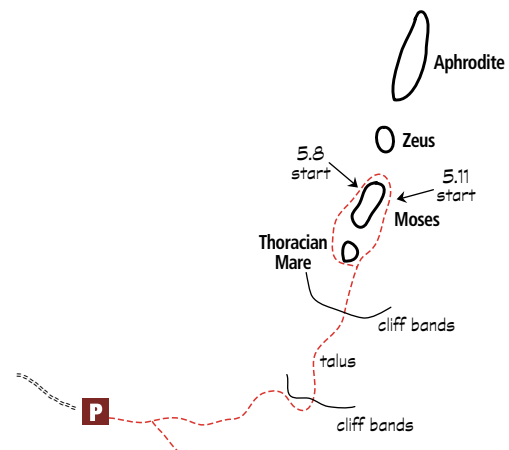
Carry two 50m or 60m ropes for the rappel descent which begins from the summit. There are two rappel options: the southeast face, as you look down, right of Primrose, or the northwest face (Pale Fire).

The southeast face begins at a bolted anchor with slings on the south face, just below the first big ledge below the summit. This option has decent stances and finishes close to the start of Primrose. Four double-rope raps, more or less straight down, gain solid earth.

The northwest face follows the line of Pale Fire with chain anchors. There is almost no danger of catching a rope, but most belays are hanging. From the summit, rap to the second big ledge down (last belay of Primrose), then rap off the northwest corner (four two-rope raps) to the ground. Hike around the north side to retrieve any gear at the base.



Approach Topo



Moses, Primrose Dihedrals

III 5.11c★★★★★

v1.0 2002

Time to climb route: 5-8 hours

Approach time: 30 minutes

Descent time: 1.5 hours

Sun Exposure: sunrise to mid-afternoon

Height of route: 525'

Primrose Dihedrals is a free route up the southeast face of Moses, a striking tower in the heart of Canyonlands National Park. It offers steep, varied climbing, mostly solid rock, and a spectacular remote setting. This is one of the most rewarding routes you will ever do.

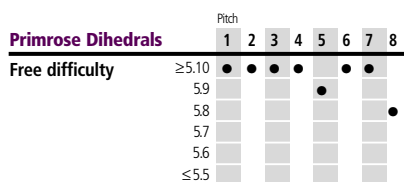
History

Moses, one of Canyonlands' largest spires, stands like an immense exclamation point mocking the forces of erosion. Dominating its three neighboring pinnacles—Zeus, the Thoracian Mare, and Aphrodite—Moses is located in the secluded sanctuary of Taylor Canyon.

The indomitable Fred Beckey was the first of many talented climbers to experience its magic. After the desert guide Lin Ottinger flew Beckey and Eric Bjornstad over the spires, Beckey wrote, "We didn't look Colorado climbers in the eyes, and trusted only the ravens and the hawks." A year later the two returned to Moses with a veritable "mini-expedition" and succeeded in making the first ascent, via an aesthetic crack system on the north face.

After several years of climbing in Canyonlands, I had still not even glimpsed Moses until Stewart Green showed me a photo. "See those corners on the East Face?" he said. "They've never been done." Quite simply, it was one of the most breathtaking lines I had ever seen.

In April 1979, armed with a rack of Hexentrics, stoppers, and a few pitons, I approached the spire—alone. Leapfrogging gear up the parallel-sided cracks typical of the desert was tenuous, but went okay until the fifth pitch, where my preconceived notions of a spiritual desert solo quickly vanished. Several loops of my climbing rope had become tangled when I pulled some slack through the system. I then made a dangerous blunder: I decided to jumar the stuck rope.



After I had cleaned 50 feet, the tangle freed itself. The fall was like being in an elevator and having the cable snap. The corner's red walls fled by with astonishing velocity—then a tremendous upward jerk stopped me. My top jumar had nearly bitten through the rope's sheath. I had to hit it with my hammer to loosen it.

Unhurt, but badly shaken, I pulled myself together for the Ear, a severely overhanging, leaning offwidth crack. Wilting in the heat, I drilled a bolt ladder to circumnavigate the obstacle. Another pitch and more bolts got me to the summit, wasted and wondering whether I even had the strength to grasp the rappel ropes.

During the next six months I often wondered if the Primrose Dihedrals, as I named the route, could be free climbed. Friends, those absurd-looking spring-loaded novelty items, had been recently unveiled, but most climbers thought them to be too expensive and too mechanized. Yet I bought two and loved them. With the right partner—and a large enough rack of Friends—the Primrose Dihedrals might be free climbable.

In October, climbing in Eldorado Canyon, I ran into Steve Hong, an old friend from Colorado College. With his recent repeats of the West Face of El Capitan and Supercrack in the Gunks, Steve was the partner I'd been looking for. It didn't take much to twist his arm, and Steve said he could borrow some more Friends. Another desert adventure was born.

On the last leg of our drive to Moses, normal dimensions of time and space no longer seemed to apply, the vast gulf of sky and earth swallowed us whole. In the morning, after yet another breakfast of peanut butter and tortillas, Steve slid down the ropes into the dry, subterranean atmosphere of the canyon. We raced madcap across loose bands of shale to the route's base. We flipped a rock, and I won. It was Steve's lead.

He climbed up ten feet into a shallow inverted slot that seemed to require a combination of palming and chimneying. Baffled, he lowered off several times, and finally handed me the sharp end. Boosted by several extra inches of height, I latched onto an elusive handhold and feverishly plugged two Friends into a wide flare. Teetering, I muscled up onto a sharp foothold and continued to the belay.

Steve led off in the still-bearable early morning heat, wedging fingers and hands into perfectly tailored jams. This engaging pitch involved switching corners and several airy bulges. When the going got tough, he paused to plug in a Friend, and continued without breaking his momentum.

The Primrose Dihedrals is the first major desert climb that I know of where Friends played such a key role. All previous free climbs had been protected by standard wedging nuts or pitons. But nuts tended to shear through the soft, parallel-sided sandstone cracks and pitons scarred the fragile rock. Steve and I were astonished at how securely Friends jammed, and it honestly felt as if we were cheating.

After climbing down 20 feet, then traversing to some exciting and delicate stacked flakes, we arrived at a comfortable ledge below the imposing upper dihedral. Snacking on an apple and water, we were satisfied with our progress. At every perplexing move, a custom-made sharp edge or bucket would appear, holds that were rare on the smooth Wingate sandstone of which Moses was formed.

Our luck stayed strong on the fourth pitch, although our pace suffered as the rock became hot to the touch. Stemming up the perfectly cleaved corner with a crack that widened from finger to fist and finally snaked around a 5-foot roof, I lost my mind to the dance. I don't remember much else about this pitch, other than that it was one of the most heavenly desert crack/corners I've ever done—like climbing up the inside of a Wingate cathedral, the walls sweeping out around you. Steve followed quickly, circled the roof, and joked that he didn't have my oversized mitts to fit the crack.

At the semi-hanging belay, we sorted gear as Steve surveyed the Ear, leering above. With Steve's enormous strength, I felt he could pull the rabbit out of the hat as I had seen him do plenty of times before.

Wedging behind the flake forming the hideous offwidth, Steve struggled higher, panting. Then, appearing to defy gravity, he extricated himself, swung free, and liebacked up the brittle outside edge of the flake, clawing up the final 30 feet. A jubilant cry told me he'd made it. His reward was a ledge big enough to collapse on.

Every move was at my limit as I struggled to repeat Steve's performance, frantically unclipping from the bolts, liebacking wildly. The pitch overhung so severely that I wasn't sure I'd be able to get back on the rock if I fell. Sand blew into my eyes and then the brittle edge snapped, but I just hung on and heaved up onto the belay, my mouth so dry I could hardly talk.

After regaining my senses, I swung around a brief undercling flake and onto the final ridge and the summit. That day, climbing with Steve, I felt harmonious and content; It was our best climb together. Unperturbed by deeper thoughts, we shared the magnificent isolation, enjoying the serene pastel colors of Taylor Canyon. We had successfully free climbed the desert prophet, Moses. The prophecy, we now knew with conviction, was that Friends would change desert free climbing—forever. A storm was brewing to the west. If we hurried, we could still get back to Moab in time for a beer.

— Ed Webster

Strategy

The route faces southeast and is sunny until mid-afternoon.

Although Primrose gets steady traffic, some loose blocks and poor bolts (from May 1977) make this a serious route. Treat it with respect. A missing bolt on 'the Ear' means some 5.10+ liebacks are mandatory.

The first pitch crux has a tough move that is pretty well-protected. It can be avoided by traversing from the notch to the right of Primrose. Step down from the notch and follow good ledges and hand traverses across the face.

On the third pitch it is best not to protect until you reach a good crack at around the level of your belayer so that the second will be on top rope when downclimbing.

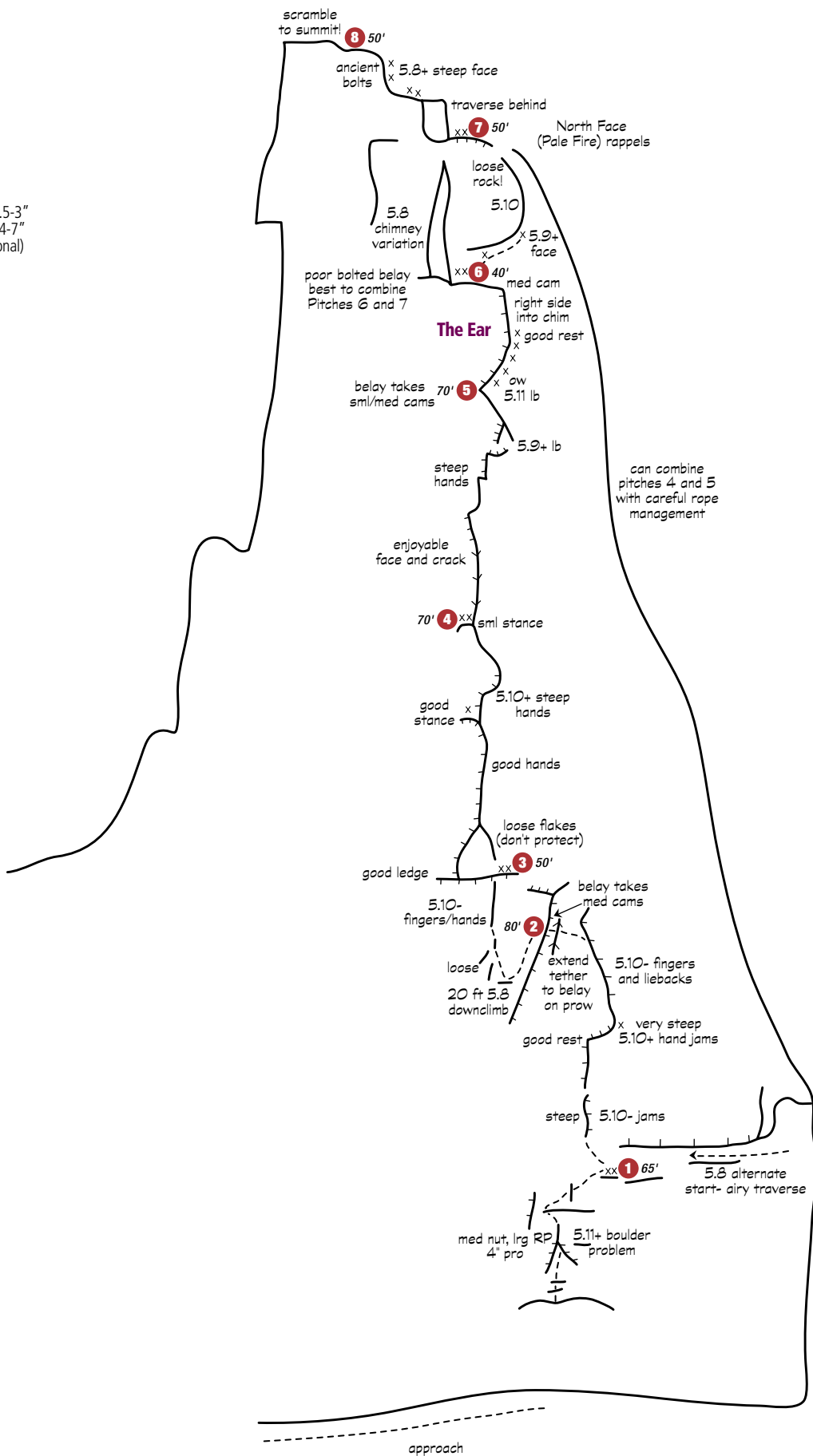
The Ear, Pitch 6, is the second crux. Offwidth until you can clip the second bolt, then use a handhold inside the chimney to swing up into lieback. Power lieback, which gets gradually easier, to a good foothold rest at the fifth bolt. Psych up and lieback again until you can swing right side into the chimney. Climb the offwidth until your foot is on a big hold. Place a 1 or 2" cam in the slot, and continue easily to a ledge. This is a poorly bolted belay. It's probably best to combine Pitches 6 and 7.

Retreat

Most pitches have bolt anchors.

Rack

- nuts: 2 sets
- large RP
- cams: 3 ea .5-3"
- 1 ea 4-7"
- aiders (optional)





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If you go to Yosemite, here is the tick list of 5-star climbs that you absolutely must do. This pack provides SuperTopos for ten climbing days of Yosemite's best classic climbs in the 5.6 to 5.10 range. These routes were chosen because of their exceptional rock quality, elegant lines, and fascinating histories. Though these climbs are especially appealing to Valley newcomers, climbers of all experience and ability will enjoy them.



EVER WANTED TO CLIMB A BIG WALL?
ROAD TO THE NOSE

List Price: \$14.95 Available at www.supertopo.com

Many climbers consider The Nose of El Capitan the crowning achievement of a climbing career. In the "Road to The Nose," big wall master Chris McNamara takes you through 14 climbs of increasing difficulty to help you build skills, speed, endurance, and comfort with big wall climbing. This pack includes special tips and beta specific to The Nose as well as more general information on getting ready for your first big wall.



OUTSTANDING PEAKS AND DOMES IN THE HIGH SIERRA
TUOLUMNE ULTRA CLASSICS

List Price: \$9.95 Available at www.supertopo.com

Spectacular rock and amazing views make Tuolumne Meadows a Sierra gem. With few tourists and cool temperatures this is an ideal summer destination for both face and crack climbing. This pack includes over 20 climbs in the 5.4 to 5.10 range including such classics as Cathedral Peak, Matthes Crest, West Crack, and Hobbit Book. There are enough routes in Tuolumne Ultra Classics for more than ten days of exceptional climbing.



LEARN TO CLIMB 5.11
THE ROAD TO ASTROMAN

List Price: \$9.95 Available at www.supertopo.com

Get the skills to climb one of the best 5.11 climbs in the universe: Astroman. First, we outline the basic philosophy behind training for Astroman. Next, we take you through a detailed program that includes ten multi-pitch climbs and over 30 single-pitch routes including: East Butt of El Cap, Steck Salathé, Serenity Crack, DNB, and The Rostrum, to name a few.

