

# Desert Towers Select



**Dougald MacDonald and Chris McNamara**

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S U P E R T O P O S

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# Warning!

**Climbing is an inherently dangerous sport in which severe injuries or death may occur. Relying on the information in this guide may increase the danger.**

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.**

This guide is neither a professional climbing instructor nor a substitute for one. **It is not an instructional guide. Do not use it as one.** It contains information that is nothing more than a compilation of opinions about climbing the routes described. **These opinions are neither facts nor promises.** Treat the information as one man's opinions and nothing more. Do not substitute these opinions for your own common sense and experience.

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	
<i>By Chris McNamara</i>	5
Understanding the maps	8
Desert Towers overview maps	9
<b>Colorado National Monument</b>	
Independence Monument, Otto's Route, 5.9	11
<b>Arches National Park</b>	
Three Penguins, Right Chimney, 5.10c	14
Chinese Eyes, 5.10b	15
Off Balanced Rock, Northeast Chimney, 5.7 R	16
Owl Rock, 5.9	17
<b>Castle Valley</b>	
Sister Superior, Jah Man, 5.10c	19
The Rectory, Fine Jade, 5.11a	22
Castleton Tower, Kor-Ingalls, 5.9	26
Castleton Tower, North Chimney, 5.9	28
Castleton Tower, North Face, 5.11c	29
<b>Fisher Towers</b>	
Lizard Rock, Entry Fee, 5.8 R	31
Lizard Rock, Leapin' Lizards, 5.10a R	31
Ancient Art, Stolen Chimney, 5.10d or 5.8 A0	32
<b>Canyonlands National Park</b>	
Moses, Primrose Dihedrals, 5.11d or 5.10d A0	35
<b>Indian Creek Canyon</b>	
North Six Shooter, Lightning Bolt Cracks 5.11b or 5.10d A1	39
<b>The Final Pitch</b>	<b>43</b>



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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.

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## 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.

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## 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](http://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

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## 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](http://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



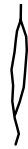
Arete



Flake



Chimney



Roof



Ledge



Slab



Belay station



Pitch length



Optional belay



False belay



Bolt <sup>x</sup>



Rappel anchor



Face climbing



Pine Tree



Oak-like Tree



Bush



Knob



Hole



## Overview graphics

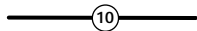
Low-clearance dirt road



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.

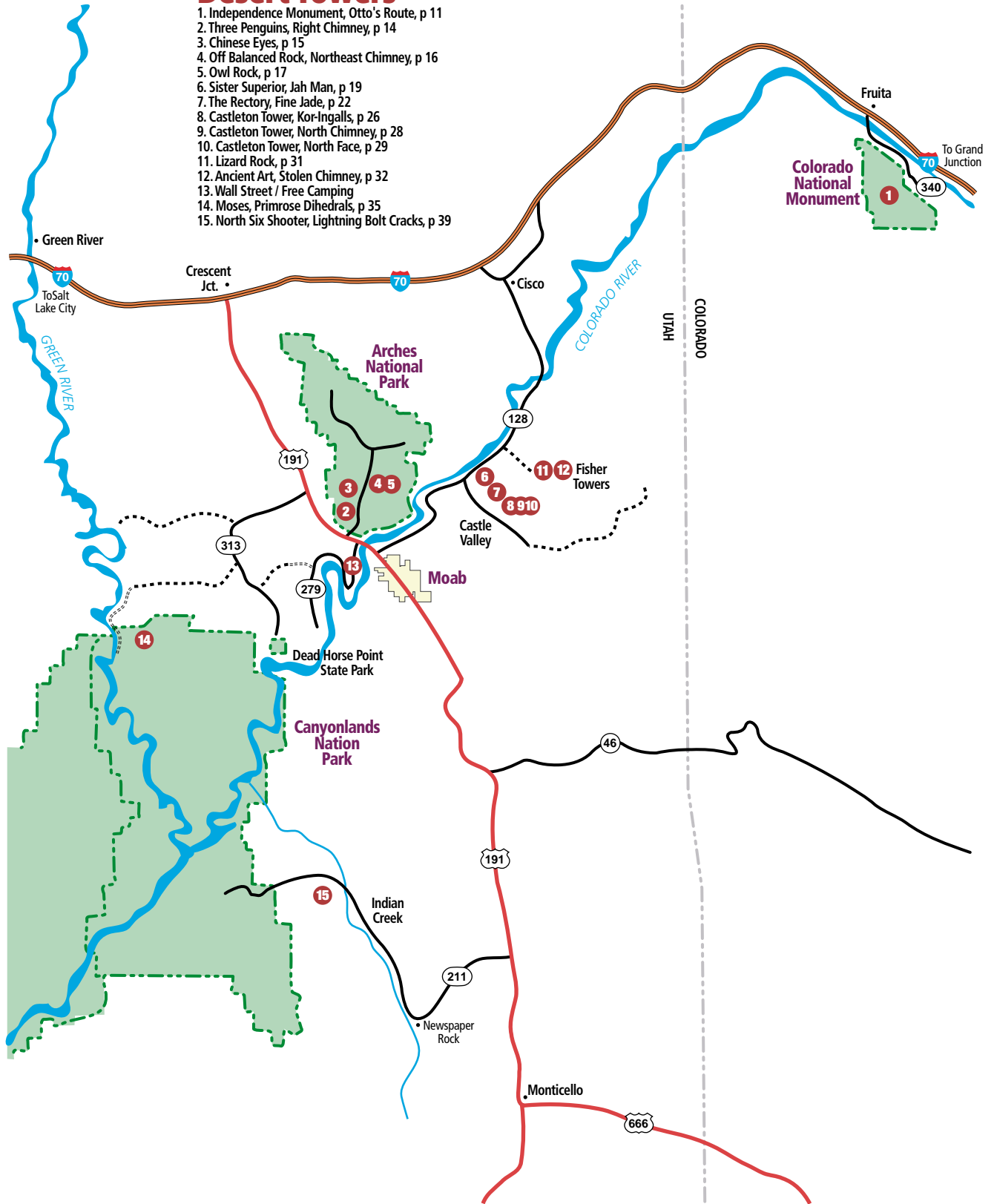
## Topo abbreviations

- ow = offwidth
- lb = lieback
- p = fixed piton
- R = runout (dangerous fall)



## Desert Towers

1. Independence Monument, Otto's Route, p 11
2. Three Penguins, Right Chimney, p 14
3. Chinese Eyes, p 15
4. Off Balanced Rock, Northeast Chimney, p 16
5. Owl Rock, p 17
6. Sister Superior, Jah Man, p 19
7. The Rectory, Fine Jade, p 22
8. Castleton Tower, Kor-Ingalls, p 26
9. Castleton Tower, North Chimney, p 28
10. Castleton Tower, North Face, p 29
11. Lizard Rock, p 31
12. Ancient Art, Stolen Chimney, p 32
13. Wall Street / Free Camping
14. Moses, Primrose Dihedrals, p 35
15. North Six Shooter, Lightning Bolt Cracks, p 39



# Arches National Park

