

Desert Tour Part 2—Desert farewell, new portaledges, Devil's Tower and appendicitis.

After our incredible final desert night high on a plateau overlooking Canyonlands with its grand finale magic moment of the full moon rising, a most appropriate magic ending to our magic desert tour, we returned to civilisation at last, and headed to Moab to see Arches.

Arches had been a talking point on our trip. Jeni had fond memories of the Fiery Furnace hike and other Arches explorations. I had passed through Moab the year before, and realised it was nothing like the old days—there were cars lined up a mile before the entrance, moving so slowly as each visitor passed the friendly ranger's entrance examination. Mostly on this trip, we had avoided the National Parks, and preferred the lesser known and more isolated desert opportunities, so entering Moab with its traffic and busyness was a bit of a shock. We bought an armload of books from Back of Beyond, and a selection of cool rocks for the kids collections at Lin Ottenger's rock shop. We drove the loops in Arches, but it was far too crowded to find a parking spot anywhere, and later we had lunch in town and bumped into Jason Kieth, and I caught up with news of the exploding climbing scene since I was in the thick of it myself 20 years ago.

Then we headed to Fruita to meet up with Luke at Runout Customs. Luke and I had never met in person before, but I had given him advice and technical expertise to start his portaledge business around 2005 or so, and I was quite impressed with his work. For the past 15 years, he has the only manufacturer of the A5 Alpine Double size portaledge (42" x 75"), the same size as A5's first generation of truly weatherproof two-person portaledges,



and the Alpine Double size still had significant and essential advantages. This was the the first truly weatherproof portaledge and the design I had spent 18 nights in on Great Trango Tower in 1992—to me, it was the perfect blend of weight and deployed size for extreme big wall expeditions, where survival and adequate rest were essential for success. This useful design had been discontinued when Black Diamond acquired my designs and for the next 15 years the mainstream climbing public only knew about the over-designed, heavy, hard-to-set-up BD Cliff Cabana (a clone of the A5 Cliff Cabana). The Cliff Cabana is big and roomy, but too heavy for long dangerous approaches, and packs to a ginormous awkward size; the result was that the climbing world was seeing a stagnation in standards for extreme technical big walls like the ones found in the Karakoram, Baffin Island, Patagonia, and other spots, where fast and light is essential. True, the free climbing and single push standards had risen incredibly in these areas, but the steepest, most technical walls which require stormproof bivouac gear and multiple days and nights to ascend, have taken a back seat, most likely because the lightweight and compact tools such as the ones we produced at A5 in the 80's and 90's, were not widely available anymore. My hope and vision is that by bringing back lightweight and compact tools, this type of alpine big wall style will pick up where it left off in the late 90's, when incredible faces like the North Face of Trango Tower in the Karakoram, Polar Sun Spire in Baffin, and the East Face of Escudo in Patagonia were climbed in super lightweight alpine style which still required weeks on the wall, but were ascents of the highest commitment possible.

On a Wednesday afternoon, Luke and I fired off the first D4 Alpine Double frame made in the USA, weighing in at only 9 pounds. On my advice, Luke had acquired a tube bender, and had already stocked the essential tube sizes to build it. By late afternoon, we were testing it out on his garage door—bomber and rigid—for sure, the next step in portaledge technology, adding a light and compact two-person model to the line up, in addition to the Full-Size D4 portaledge (47.5" x 84"). I could tell it was going to be fun to work with Luke on more design projects, and it has been extremely satisfying to establish a new standard in portaledges, after a stagnation of 20 years.



Luke Malatesta of Runout Customs with first D4 Alpine Double Portaledge

After Fruita, we were torn as to what to do for our final days of our trip. We hadn't yet seen our friend Bill Hatcher, who was only a few hours away in Delores, but also had some time constraints on getting back east, as my brother-in-law Adam was getting married. But there was also a pull to the

Devil's Tower, not quite as strong as depicted in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, but kinda like that. I kept thinking about that beautiful volcanic plug, and its amazingly fun climbing routes to its summit, and how fun it would be to climb it with my son, whose skills have been progressing and was quite ready for such an adventure. Legend has it, the grooves in Devil's Tower were formed when a giant bear, sometime in the long past, had tried to claw its way to the summit, hence the name Bear Lodge. Jeni was game for a visit to Devil's Tower, so we headed north.



From the journal: Now heading north to Devil's Tower, which has been a dream to climb with my boy Rowen, now age 11. My friend Frank has reserved us a room at his lodge. I'm looking forward to seeing Frank, whom I'd last seen when we served on the Yosemite Rescue Team back in the mid-80's. Frank was a powerful positive center of YOSAR while he was one of the 12 of the team. He lived in his van, climbed hard on Yosemite's walls all day, and was always happy and ready to share a story each evening.

The bear dream is also happening. The White Bear Kachina gift from Cliff to Remi, the Navajo jewellery seller identifying my need for a bear totem for courage and strength which I had worn the whole trip and planned to offer to the tower, and the bear lodge legend of Devil's Tower all seemed connected, as I really feel omens in the desert are powerful and indeed have often been prescience in my many years of traversing the Colorado Plateau.



View from Devil's Tower Lodge guestroom.

I was a bit torn about the actual climbing of Devil's Tower. We arrived on June 1, which is the nominal start of a voluntary climbing ban so that the local native American tribes can perform ceremonial tasks. I do believe there is power in those who have a deep connection and ancestry of living in the land, but also wondered about the "month of June" ban. Certainly any long standing ceremonies would be based on the sun and moon, rather than a Gregorian calendar, and as the current moon was a dwindling May moon, the time to leave the Tower in peace seemed like the new June moon coming on June 13.

Rowen and I were both well versed in what was at stake—I showed him an objective article about climbers on the Tower in June, but after consideration, we planned our ascent for June 2, drawn by our own spiritual and physical quest. We stayed with my old friend Frank Saunders, who hosts the incomparable Devil's Tower Lodge, where blessed are those who live out their dreams. He saved us his best room, with an incredible view of Devil's Tower, a luxury especially considering we had been camping in the dirt from most of the preceding 3 1/2 weeks.

Since my early days of climbing, and indeed, on my first climbing trip out west, I had often visited Devil's Tower on my many month-long, sometimes years-long climbing tours, when I was a full-time climbing "dirtbag" (vagabond), migrating to various regions depending on the season to find places most conducive to advancing my skills and craft in climbing. It was where I first really solidified my 5.11 crack climbing skills (including a new route which later became credited to others as "A Bridge Too Far") before I became a permanent resident in Yosemite in 1984.

Our climb (from the journal):

We awoke early, but waited a bit to see my old friend Frank, who was in South Dakota when we arrived last night, but soon realised he wasn't going to be up early, so we headed out about 7:30a.m. for the Durrance Route. Curtis, one of the guides at Frank's lodge, was heading up with a guided team soon after, so we tried to keep a good pace. They clipped along at a good pace and were right on our tail for the first six pitches, and I



was finding the climbing hard! Never thought I'd be struggling so much on 5.8, even off the sofa—I haven't really climbed much this year—but I was finding some moves very difficult, and happily pulled on the #5 Camalot loaned to us at the last minute to pull over the Durrance crux. I was loth to slow down the guided team, and climbed as if I was in speed climbing mode, even though our pace was likely a 1/10 of my prime in my Valley days.

At the top of pitch 6, we got some shade, and I suddenly felt exhausted. We let the guided team pass, which took longer than I expected, and before we knew it, it was 5pm, and I realised we still had another pitch and some tricky rope-snagging potential rappels to get through. I really hadn't expected the climb to take this long, and hadn't brought a headlamp—a bumbly mistake! I talked to Rowen about kicking into a higher gear for the rest of the climb. Rowen was doing stellar—although this climb was several notches harder than anything we had climbed together before, he was solid and kept chugging along through all the hard bits. The last pitch I felt like I was getting some of my old wind back, and fired through the crux section in fast time without worrying too much about the pro. We summited, took a few pics, we left my Navajo bear on the summit post, and as daylight was fading fast, began our descent down the Durrance route.



Where we rested for 2 hours. I did not know it then, but likely this is where my appendix started to fail.

Summit of Devil's Tower with decorated summit post



After the first rappel down the bowling alley, the rope did not pull. As I was feeling exhausted by this time, I felt a cold shock of fear. I was pre-rigging Rowen with his rappel set-up, so there was no opportunity to do a test pull, or to start the rappel with the knot over the edge. I tugged again—stuck. Soon I felt my old climbing instincts kick in, my fear transforming into action just like the old days, and made some careful manoeuvres and turns with the rope, and was able to get the rope to pull! Skill or luck I will never know (it's been too long since I was one with the rock) but I did know a cold benightment would not be a nice way to introduce my boy into longer climbs, or at best a scary experience rappelling in the dark, which is never Type I fun. Luckily, the next six rappels all went well, and Rowen was well focused on the mechanical repetitive tasks of rappelling, anchoring, helping to pull ropes, and re-rigging his rappel device, and I felt



Rowen on the first of seven rappels from the summit of Devil's Tower (650')

confident on his securing himself after each descent. We arrived back at the lodge well after dinner, but like little Max in the Wild Things, found supper waiting for us (thanks Clara and Alex!).

The next morning at breakfast, I got to see Frank Saunders for the first time in 30 years. We reminisced a bit of our mutual time on the Yosemite Rescue team from 1984-1987, but mostly I was in awe of the man who had created such a spiritually positive spot in this world—the lodge was awesome, and the community of guides tight. We fossicked for spearfish skeletons and proto-trilobites (Devonian?—didn't matter!). Frank is a natural story teller and fascinated me and my kids with geology and history of the area. It was sad to say goodbye later that morning, with thoughts of our mutual shared powerful experiences in Yosemite overwhelming me.



Post Journal Note: in retrospect, I discovered that I was in the first throes of appendicitis during this climb. I discussed with Frank how the climb seemed really difficult, who waxed on about how age creeps up suddenly on us youth (Frank is a few years older than me), so I accepted aging as the cause that my unusual tiredness and lack of endurance at the top of pitch 6. Now, looking back and gaining my strength back after my appendectomy, I think I might still have a few years before age truly becomes the culprit!

Next, we drove to the Black Hills of South Dakota, Jeni wasn't feeling well, so I took the kids to Crazy Horse and Mt. Rushmore. The legend of Crazy Horse always reminds me of Thomas Berger's classic Little Big Man, a great fictional story about the white incursion to the plains.

Another note: Jeni was beginning what was to be a week long bout of debilitating and violent E. Coli sickness, which we later surmised we picked up during our swim in Calf Creek in Escalante (we had been warned by the rangers). The kids soon got it too, and it might have been what kicked off my appendicitis, though I never had the frequent poops and spews the rest of the family soon were afflicted. In the weeks following, I mistook what was to become extreme pain due to my bursting appendix to be E. Coli sickness, which created a near fatal delay in my treatment.



More from the journal:

The Crazy Horse museum is interesting—great collections, but displayed in completely meaningless order. Modern Hopi Kachinas are displayed alongside plains tool and Aztec artefacts with no mention of eras or locations. On the wall, rifles are mounted next to digging tools and woven items from different continents—a complete mishmash.

There was a beautiful exhibit of a plains Teepee which you could enter, which Remi was fascinated with (on her request, we returned to it 3 times). Once we were inside, I was telling Remi of how cozy Teepees are in winter and how its clever design allowed for efficient ventilation and smoke removal. I had once lived in a teepee in deep snow during the cold and stormy Yosemite winter of 1985, with a bedside fire every night—much better than a soggy tent! (this was before the rangers allowed semi-permanent tent cabins for the rescue team in Camp 4, and our tents were cheap and disposable department store crap as even the expensive expedition tents would not last well in year round exposure). As Remi was in awe of the model fire and the manikin children playing on the

teepee floor, some crass individual poked his head in, and said loudly, almost in Remi's ear, "Them Injuns, they'll get you". Not only did I find this disrespectful to the fact that the whole place was a monument to the white man's dispossession and genocide of the North Plains Indians, but here was the most peaceful display in the museum, and also the fact that Remi's natural interest, especially after having spent the last month following and discovering the remnants of the Hisatsinom culture of 900-1300AD, was deeply interested in how they lived, rather than on the conflicts with European descendants later. I glared my worst glare at the man, whereupon he quickly retreated from the teepee. We also visited Mt. Rushmore, and did the tourist congo line from the paved lot to the paved trail to see the sights. Now onto the 20 hour drive to Ohio!!

Postscript: The next two days, I drove like a man possessed for 10 hours each day, now Jeni and both kids in deep throes of E. Coli sickness, with frequent stops along the highway to spew and poop. My stomach was in moderate pain, but I thought I was "holding off" the sickness though mind over matter. In Ohio, where we stayed at Jeni's family house, I slept most of each day for the 2-3 days we were there. Then we drove to New York to see my brother Roxy. At Roxy's, I was suddenly stuck down with complete exhaustion, and could barely move without pain and extreme effort. We then drove to Rhode Island to see my family, and five days later I was in extreme agony. Still, I thought it was simply a symptom of the E. Coli and would pass. It was thanks to my sister Amy that I live—she arrived and sensed a deeper problem, and immediately took me to the hospital, where a 3 hour complex surgery discovered that not only had my appendix burst, but 10" of my colon had disintegrated from the infection. I would not have survived another night.

I am very grateful for so much as I write this trip report. Thanks for reading!

