

REPORT - POI, NORTH FACE - 1999/2000



Introduction

Poi is a huge chunk of loaf-shaped rock, 2,500' high and a mile long by half-a-mile wide, situated in the N'doto range in North Central Kenya. The Northern and Eastern and Southern aspects boast spectacular faces sheer to overhanging for most of that height. The only line of weakness, if it can be called that is the East Ridge which was first climbed by Andrew Weilochowski and R. Corkhill in 1983. This is a serious climb - one 50m pitch of 5b is runnerless which, with poor belays along the way, earn it an E3 grade overall.

Shortly before we arrived for our second attempt at a line on the North Face a team of Americans (and, I think one Canadian) put up (or, since they first bolted route by abseil, should it be 'down') a climb on the E Face, some way to the left (South) of Weilochowski's East Ridge.

Since Weilochowski and Chris Fox had already attempted a route hereabouts in traditional style, and had made a pretty good fist of it before falling about 1/2 way, the American effort is to be regarded as an affront to the established ethic as well as an outrage to adventure in general. But enough of them and that. The North Face line is noted in Weilochowski's guide to East Africa. Pat Littlejohn had also spotted it when he repeated the East Ridge route some years ago. And so it was that Pat, Steve Sustad and myself gathered in Nairobi in February of 1999, intent on the first ascent of the North Face.

1999

After provisioning in Nairobi, a more interesting verb than it sounds, we hired a truck a 'Pajero' and headed north to Poi's nearest village, N'gurunit, via Nanyuki, Isiolo and Laisannis - the eastern of two possible ways. We reached N'gurunit on the second day and lodged at the Unesco camp.

The next day we hired a dozen porters and issued loads. These were not of Khumbu proportions. The Samburu must be the world's most impressive looking people: impossibly elegant, implausibly handsome, improbably tall and infuriatingly idle - as compared with short, squat and comparatively inelegant sherpas for instance. These guys folded under more than 10kgs: mind you, they folded beautifully.

Next day it took about 3 hours to the foot of the face, where we camped in thin strip of primary jungle - (it had been desert scrub to within 100m of the rock) which gave welcome shade from blistering heat. Moreover, to our considerable relief, we noted that our intended line, a series of off widths and overhanging cracks, interspersed by blank looking walls, lay entirely and diurnally in the shade by a matter of a few feet, thanks to the geography, inclination and the month.

We started that afternoon and completed three full pitches, all about 5C/E3. In the Littlejohn tradition we carried no bolts or pegs - nut protection and belays only or trees.

Jumaring to our high point the next day we completed another 3 pitches, again all about 5C/E3. Above lay an 'arc en ciel' to end them all. Pat jammed this the next day (6A/E5) to land in cave, which until his arrival and for several thousand years before that had been the house of half a dozen Griffin vultures. They suffer badly from B.O. From the cave a horizontal chimney led to the mother of all offwidths on the edge of nowhere. I got across, around and up and, resting on a good hold, saw that the crack above looked long, strenuous and far. I surrendered the lead to Pat whose relentlessly cheerful polysyllabic banter gave way to replies of the monosyllabic, "grim". At last he shoed a few vultures from a ledge and belayed: 6A/E6, the last few feet on holds cut with his nut-key into vertical guano.

I followed. The 'good hold' broke and I fell twenty feet badly cutting an instep which bled freely and red so that, at first, I thought that I'd severed an artery. Anyway, it was down and the end of that millennium's foray.

We determined, all three, to try again in 2000.

2000

Back again and much the same to the vulture ledge. This year we are four: joined by Jan Rowe. We get up after four fantastic days of marvellous climbing (two hammock bivouacs), the outcome of which was in doubt to the very last pitch. Littlejohn performed a bolas feat that would have been the envy of the Pampas: hanging free and ten feet both from runner and rock, he, on about the third attempt, managed to thread a No4 Camelot between a tree-root and the rock thirty feet above his head. Then on this uncertain lodgement, he prussiced to the tree. It was, as Americans must say, awesome. We jumared - The Route went at E6, 2,500': pitches -

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|------------|-----------|------------------|-----------|
| 1) 5C/E3 | 2) 5C+/E3 | 3) 5C/E3 | 4) 5C/E3 |
| 5) 5C/E3 | 6) 5C/E3 | 7) 6A/E5 | 8) 5C+/E4 |
| 9) 6A/E6 | 10) 6A/E5 | 11) 6A/E4+lassoo | 12) 6A/E4 |
| 13) 6A/E4 | 14) 5C/E4 | 15) 5B/E2 | 16) 6A/E4 |
| 17) 4A/E1! | | | |

From the top we walked off Westwards to camp that evening with some Samburu boys of thirteen or so who were herding cattle. They found us water and gave us fresh milk and, of all things, a comb of wild honey. Wonderful.

The next day we were back in Ngurunit and two days later Nairobi.

We called the climb Dark Safari.

Miscellaneous notes

Scope for new routes

Plenty. There's two or three lines on Poi and a feast of similar rock nearby. And it is a beautiful area. Sunny too.

Water Don't underestimate how much water a rock climbing European needs: lots and then more. We were in a bad way by the time we came across the herdsman (boys).

Transport A robust 4 wheel drive is essential. As are an arsenal of spare tyres. The road/track beyond Isiolo is bumpy with bandits. It may be that you are only permitted to travel by day and in convoy.

Food Just about everything is available in Nairobi supermarkets.

Finances

Costs

Air Fares (4 x 480)	£1,920
Equipment	120
Vehicle Hire	800
Fuel	210
Accommodation -	
- Nairobi	415
- Elsewhere	125
Food	200
Porters	110
Sundries	70
	<u>£3,970</u>
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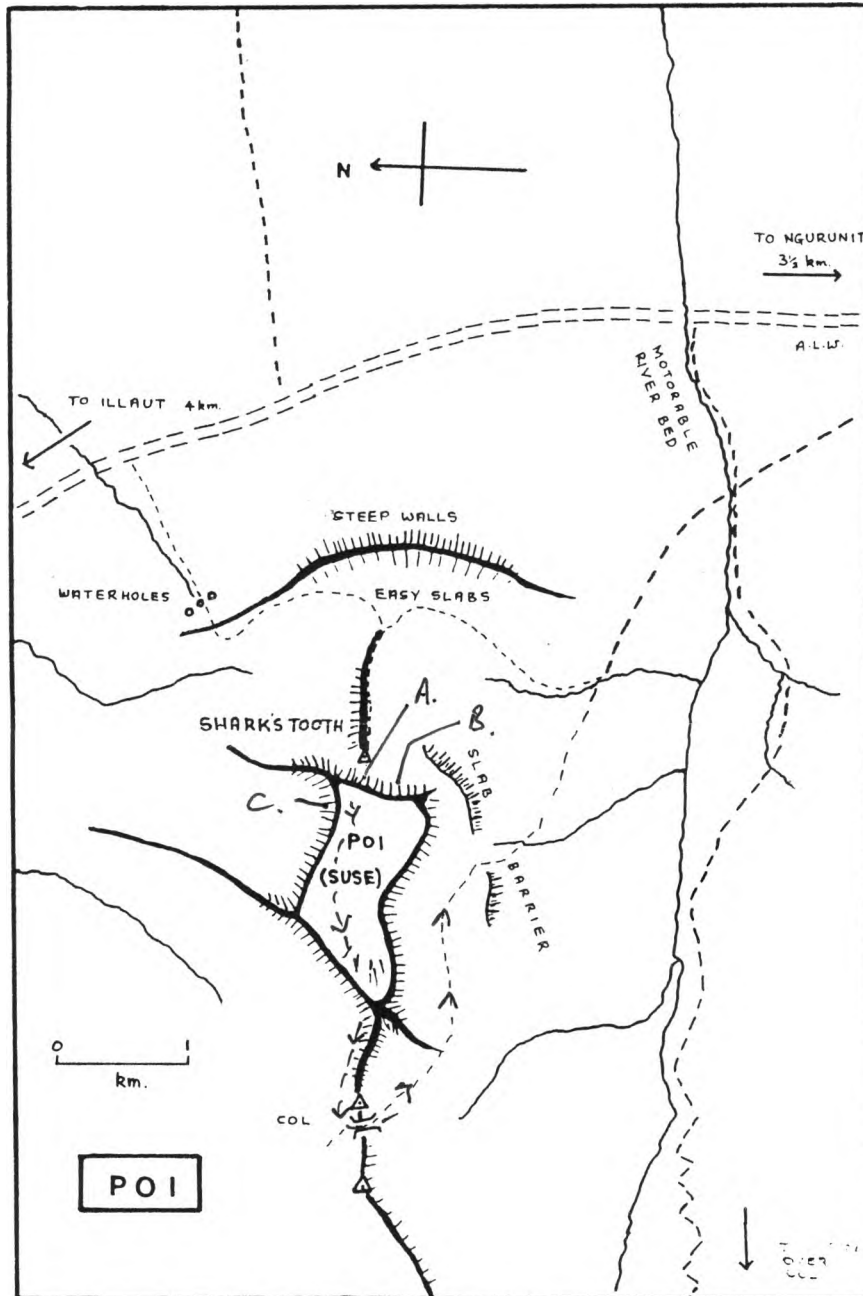
Income

BMC Grant	£950
Personal contribution	<u>£3,020</u>
	<u>£3,970</u>
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John Barry - June 2000

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- A. East Ridge (original route), E3.
- B. American Route.
- C. Dark Safari, E6.
- → → Descent.