

# THE NDOTO MOUNTAINS

*There is a lot more to the Ndotos than the great Poi. Welcome to the lesser-known crags of Kenya's largest climbing area.*

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MARNIX BUONAJUTI



The Ndoto Mountains from the south, looking toward Poi. *Andrew Wielochowski, [www.ewpnet.com](http://www.ewpnet.com)*

**T**he Ndotos are a remote cluster of mountains in the deserts of northern Kenya. Getting there is a grueling two-day drive through unruly country, but once you arrive you find yourself in one of the most beautiful and untouched places in the world. This area has many cliffs over 400 meters high, and has Kenya's biggest cliff, Poi, which stands a proud 700 meters tall.

The northern Ndoto Mountains around the town of Ngurunit are large forested or brush-covered hills with enormous gold and red gneiss blocks parked on top. There are a dozen or so cliff faces that exceed 300 meters in height, and many of these are as high as 500-600 meters and easily a kilometer wide. It is a hard hike to the base of many of these cliffs. This is because you

need to walk uphill, in very warm humid weather (up to 35° Celsius in December), through some very thick thorny scrub, and then through forest to get to the bottom of the cliff. In addition to the dozen bigger walls, there are many smaller cliffs with easier approaches. There is also lots of bouldering. You could live in this area for three life times and not do the half of what is here.

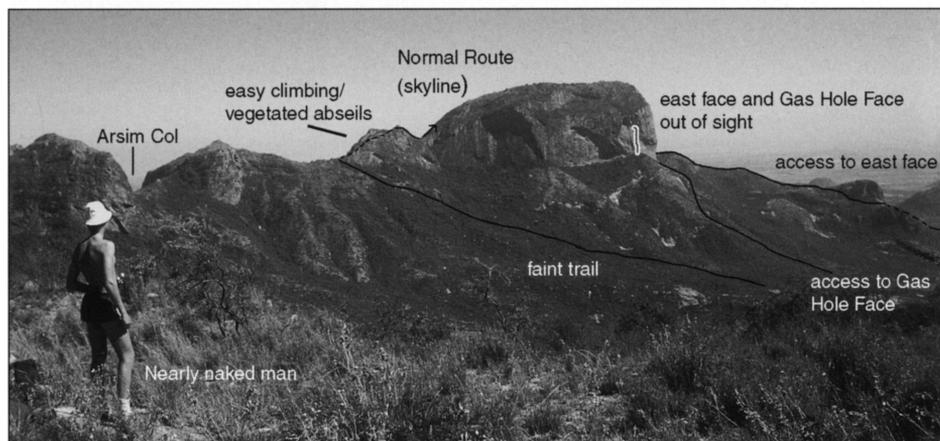
Despite its amazing cliffs, the Ndotos region has received scant attention from climbers. This is for two reasons. First, the Ndoto Mountains are very remote. To get there you either need an expensive airplane charter or a two-day car drive through beautiful but harsh and uncompromising land. Second, the quality of the rock is not as good as it is in other adventure areas such as Greenland and Baffin Island. This makes the climbing a little on the dangerous side, and new routes require much cleaning.

In frozen realms, ice cracks the stone and protection is generally abundant. In northern Kenya the rock heats up during the day and cools at night, so that rather than cracking it just exfoliates. Where rain washes the face you get smooth featureless slabs (great friction climbing) with no protection for the entire height of the cliff. Where rain does not touch (overhangs), you get millions of flakes, most of them loose, and many of them really huge. These usually are not adequate for protection. In the Ndotos there are blank faces that are great for sport climbing, and rotten areas that are good for psycho climbing. There are a few cracks and enormous grooves on some of the cliffs; these are where you go for trad climbing. Be careful here, as many of these cracks have an exfoliating layer. Break it off as you climb up, or the protection could break out when you fall. Vegetation also can be a problem. Most of the plants are on the slabby top sections of the cliffs where they receive water runoff. In sum, trad climbing in the Ndotos is a little chossy, and sport climbing is not so steep, but five star.

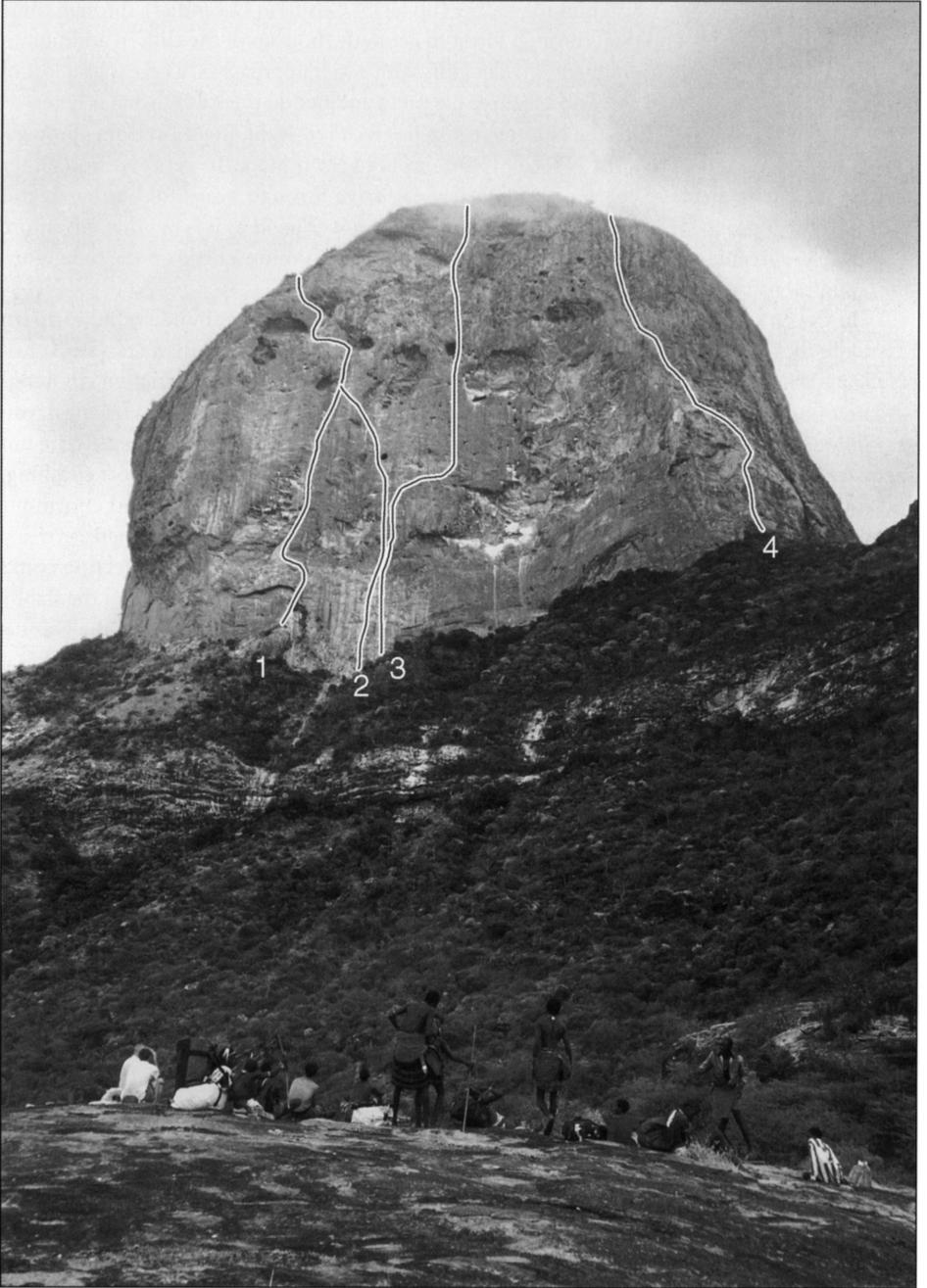
To date there have been six successful expeditions to this area.

1983: Kenya residents Ron Corkhill and Andrew Wielochowski made a bold, totally traditional ground-up ascent of the right hand wall of Poi's east face. Original Route: E2/3, with some 50-meter runouts.

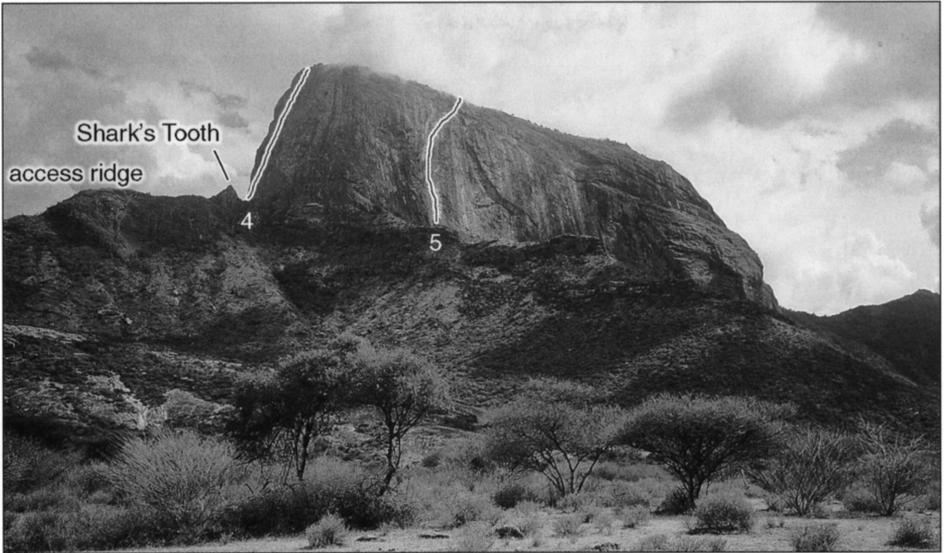
1999: British climbers Pat Littlejohn and John Barry did a ground-up ascent of a bold



View of Mt. Poi from the main Ndoto Ridge. There are no real "trails," but the Normal Route from the col down is a path used by locals. The climbing line leads to pitch 5 on two failed attempts on the "south crack" by Wielochowski. *Photo and information from Andrew Wielochowski*



The great east face/Gas Hole Face of Mt. Poi as seen from one hour's hike up the trail. (1) Doing A Dirty Eastern Groove (E5 6b trad and 5.12d sport, Berg-Buonajuti-Horsey-Nutter, 2003). (2) Story About Dancing Dogs (5.13b, Fonda-Gruden-Jeran-Koren-Sisernik, 2002). (3) True At First Light (5.13b, Bechtel-Milton-Piana-Skinner, 2000). (4) East Face, a.k.a. Wielochowski Route (E3, Corkhill-Wielochowski, 1983). *Felix Berg*



Poi from the north. (4) East Face/Wielochowski Route. (5) Dark Safari (E6 6b, Barry-Littlejohn, 1999). *Andrew Wielochowski*

crack system on the north wall of Poi.  
Dark Safari: E6 6b.

2000: Americans Steve Bechtel, Scott Milton, Paul Piana, and Todd Skinner rappel-bolted a sport route. True At First Light: 5.13b.

2002: The Slovenian team of Luka Fonda, Stanko Gruden, Matja Jeran, Goran Koren, and Rok Sisernik drilled another sport route from top to bottom. Story About Dancing Dogs: 5.13b.

2003: A mixed Kenyan and British team of Felix Berg, Marnix Buonajuti, Peter Horsey, and James Nutter did a ground-up mixed sport and traditional route on the groove of Poi's eastern face. Doing A Dirty Eastern Groove: E5 6b trad pitches and 5.12d sport.

2004: The British team of Toby Dunn, Alex Jakubowski, and Ben Winston, climbed on one of the smaller walls in the area, Manamonet: E5 6b.



*Andrew Wielochowski* on the first ascent of the east face on Poi.  
*Ron Corkhill*

There are still at least five walls of 400+ meters that have not yet been climbed.