

## KENYA

## NDOTO MOUNTAINS

*Poi, East Face, True At First Light.* In December, Todd Skinner, Steve Bechtel, Scott Milton and I flew to Kenya with the east face of Poi (6,562') as our objective. Strengthening the team were Peter Mallamo, Nic Good, Sandra Studer and Bobby Model, who joined as a film crew. Our trip was greatly facilitated by the Kenyan member of our team, Saba Douglas-Hamilton, our translator, bush camp wrangler and knower of things Kenyan.

A month before our team's arrival, Todd convinced Jeff Bechtel, who was climbing Mt. Kenya with Bobby Model, into reconning Poi for us. After all, Todd wiled, "On a map, Poi is only an inch north of Mt. Kenya...." Jeff rented a Land Rover and drove north. The inch became three days each way along horrid roads and partially dry riverbeds. The recon yielded good still photos and video footage from all sides.

Using Jeff's photos, we guessed that Kenyan gneiss would be similar to the stuff in Wyoming's Wind River Mountains. We were wrong. Flying in to a camel-crowded dirt strip allowed a glimpse of Poi from the air. Observing the mountain from the air confirmed what Jeff's photos indicated: that there was one truly great line on all of Poi and that line was directly up the middle of the central east face.

We arrived expecting discontinuous crack systems, which we planned to link by face climbing. However, the gneiss formed less like our familiar Wyoming rock and more like the syenite of Hueco Tanks, Texas, and was often scabbed by fingertip flakes. Beginning at one-third height, huecos appeared, but unlike the Texas variety, these African huecos are big enough to crawl inside. The largest are more than 100 feet high and 40 feet deep! There were no crack systems on the great line we had selected, so we agreed that the finest route would result by establishing our climb from above. We spent several weeks finding, equipping and preparing the line for an ascent. The rock was, for the most part, of good quality and provided an abundance of incut edges. Numerous pitches were composed of bullet-proof, marble-like rock. A long traversing section down low forced us along a section of poor mica schist, which did clean up nicely and allowed reasonable passage. We were very pleased that the great face of Poi was yielding a fantastic and fun route.

Early on, I had been solo aid climbing to get a close look at a band of huge overhangs. A hook popped and I took a 50-foot fall directly onto my belay anchor. After righting myself, I was very scraped up and sore, but relieved that everything seemed to be okay. (Back home in Wyoming, x-rays confirmed that my kneecap had been cracked in the fall.) Other than being demoted to the team's slowest, I thought I was fine.

Ten days later, on Christmas Eve, I developed incredible pain in my knee. The next day, with help from Saba and Nic, I walked down off the mountain to recuperate. The rest of the crew kept at work, establishing our climb. When I felt strong enough, I slowly made my way back to the shoulder camp. That day, the team free climbed the first five pitches. The next day, we moved onto the wall for the remainder of the ascent. All of the 21 pitches feature outstanding face climbing that requires every technique from classic thin slabs to wild and dynamic overhanging sweeps. The difficulty is mostly in the 5.11 range, with a few of 5.12. Pitch 6 and pitch 20 were the 5.13 cruxes of the climb. We called the route *True At First Light* (5.13b, 21 pitches).