

# The Tetons, Revisited

## New routes in an old haunt

JIM BEYER

**I**n the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Teton Range was a dynamic training ground for American alpinists. The creation of the Climbers Ranch pulled climbers out of the crowded tourist campgrounds and created a competitive scene similar to that found in Yosemite's Camp 4. Ranch Manager Rick Liu was a major motivator, constantly showing us young alpinists photos of virgin faces and potential new routes. He encouraged us to quit repeating the old classics, as was our habit in Yosemite. He told us to go out and put in our own routes. So we did. We climbed in the "good style" of the day: ground up, on-sight, without bolts.

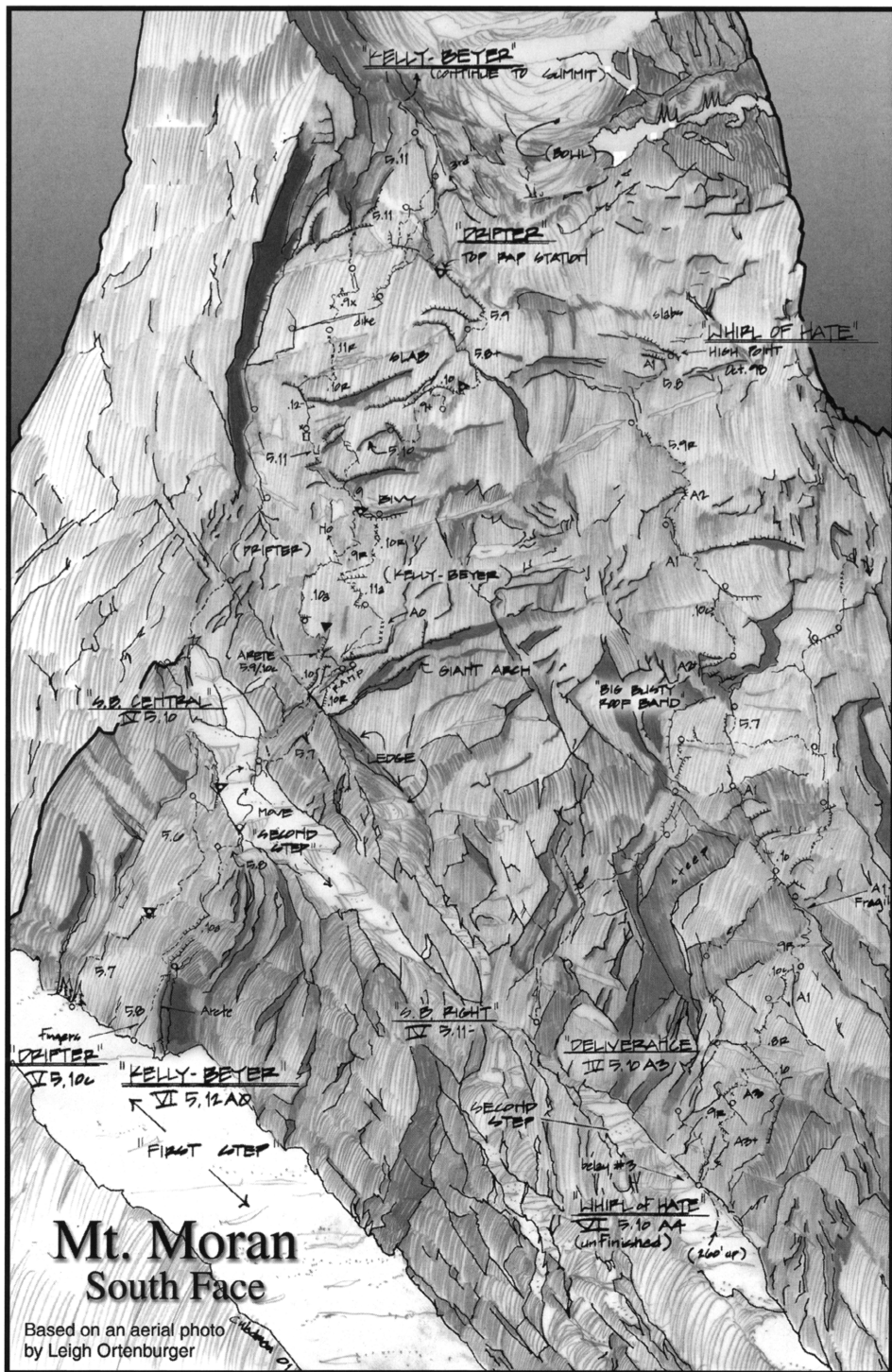
Everything changed in the late 1980s. Trad zones like Yosemite, Rocky Mountain National Park, and the Tetons were ignored by the climbing mags, as they raved about the virtues of being superhip by climbing higher-rated micro routes with no commitment or danger. Why spend all that effort to hike into the lonely mountains when you might get stormed off? Why not park below the sport crag and make the scene dressed in your most revealing lycra, climbing a higher-rated route with a fraction of the effort and none of the danger or uncertainty of an alpine climb? It was a no-brainer.

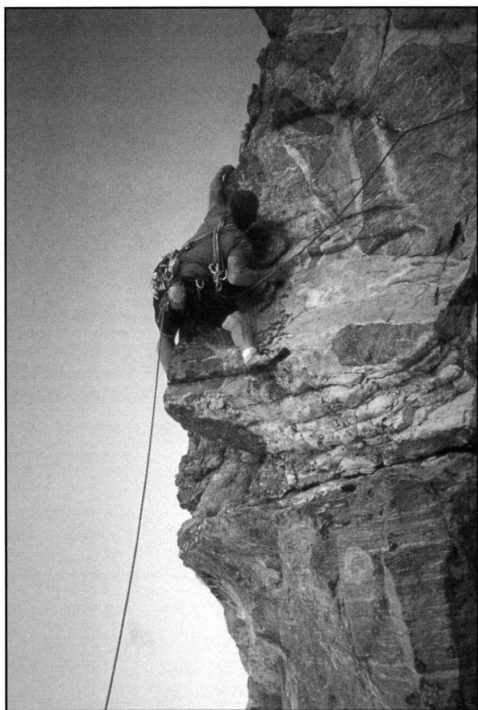
Eventually, this sport-climbing mentality corrupted the ethics of an entire generation of climbers—and the rock as well. Big-wall sport climbers routinely bolt existing routes, "free" climbing manufactured holds and peg scars on their way to fame. Is the "free" ascent of El Cap's Nose route the "greatest free climb of all time" or media hype? How can the media even call the Jardine Traverse free climbing?

Some of us climbed full-time back in the late 1970s and early '80s: spring and fall in Yosemite, the Tetons in summer, construction in winter. It was good, a simple life filled with the simple joy of achieving simple goals. But that was long ago, and this simpleton somehow morphed over the years into a sword-swinging psycho.

In 1998, my modern, hectic hell called life totally melted down. It seemed like a good time to leave town before I went down in a gun battle with police. The Tetons were an appealing destination, and my probation officer agreed to give me a travel permit as long as I continued my weekly anger-management classes. I hadn't spent any real time in the Tetons in 15 years and was somewhat apprehensive that I might find my home range cruelly twisted by modern "progress." I was pleasantly surprised to find that this geographically secluded alpine arena was still an uncorrupted gem.

Granted, three or four times as many climbers climb the Grand Teton now, and most are guided. That's a good thing. More Americans should leave their cars and TVs behind and get out there, as Europeans have for generations. I was surprised to note that climbers today are interested only in climbing the Grand Teton by an easy route. The mountain guides and other capable alpinists have all quit doing new routes, and only a small group of climbing rangers have strayed from the well-known to explore the unknown. This was particularly exciting because it meant that those potential new routes I didn't get to 20 years ago were still there. While sport climbers everywhere else have been waging war on the rock with their power





Jim Beyer on the Hanging Arête (5.9+) on pitch 5, South Buttress Drifter. JOHN KELLEY

drills and grid bolting, the Tetons have been ignored. And now I would be able to collect my “peace dividend.”

The massive south buttress of Mt. Moran has a 1,500-foot face located above a remote and trailless chunk of paradise and swamp called Leigh Canyon. Between South Buttress Central, a mediocre route with two quality pitches and 40 feet of hard 5.10, and the South Buttress Right, a moderate classic with 80 feet of 5.10a and a spot of 5.11, lies 700 feet of virgin wall.

On this section of wall in June, 1998, I worked out the line of *South Buttress Drifter* (V 5.10c) over a period of three days. I had never placed a bolt in the Tetons up to this point and was proud of it. I had, however, backed off a 3,000-foot virgin face on the west side of Moran because, when confronted by a multipitch slab with but one bolt in the kit, I felt underequipped. On *Drifter*, I created an all-free route up the south face with just three bolts. This circuitous route wanders across slabs and through complex roof bands. With bolts, I could have face climbed direct linkages and avoided long traverses, but instead I chose to follow the natural line. I originally

thought my proud route was 5.11a, but when I repeated it a month later with John Kelley, we down-rated it to 5.10c. The 4th pitch, a steep 5.11 endurance solo-first-ascent effort, well-protected with 12 to 14 pieces of gear, was only 5.10 when John cruised it with five pieces of gear.

I bypassed the other crux, a reachy problem above a bolt, by climbing an unlikely hanging arête. *Drifter* is a lot harder at 5.10 than South Buttress Right (5.11) or South Buttress Central (5.10+), because it has a lot more 5.10 climbing, some runouts and some 5.10 that cannot be aided. It's comparable in quality and effort to the Black Canyon's *Scenic Cruise*.

I returned to Moran in late September, 1998, intent on another, even bigger route. I was feeling really disconnected from our phony dysfunctional American society and just wanted to stock my camp up in the mountains and work on my route—alone.

Renny Jackson, the chief climbing ranger, signed me out and asked me straight, “Are you OK?”

People ask me this all the time, and I'm getting really sick of it.

“No. I'm not OK,” I yelled.

The government had taken control of my house and possessions, and I was living out of my car. I got a cell phone, so my last customers could contact me as my business collapsed. Should I bring my cell phone on the route? The weather had been stormy; I could get weather reports. I left it behind.



John Kelley below the roof (5.11) exit from the Great Slab on the Kelley-Beyer route. JIM BEYER

I spent seven days and 14 nights in rainy weather on *Whirl of Hate* (VI 5.10 A4). It was quality: runout face climbing up big slabbers, some nailing out a big roof, more 5.10 face, some easy aid, days on end climbing alone. There was no place I'd rather have been, and I didn't want to go back to civilization anyway.

It was good until about October 6, when a big snowstorm rolled in with high winds. My sunny south face turned into the ice planet. I was one pitch of friction from the top of the wall and out of food. I spent three hungry days trapped in my leaking portaledge buffeted by high winds and pummeled by falling ice. I was gripped that my ledgefly would tear, leaving me exposed to the storm. Retreat was impossible, as my ropes and the rock that I had to rappel and pendulum down were all covered in thick ice.

It was a very dark side as I shivered in my sodden pit. I remember spending a whole day debating whether or not I should just untie and jump.

The sun returned, and I gaped in wonder at the changes below. In two days, the foliage in Leigh Canyon went green to red, and now elk were bugling with need. My stomach was also bugling, so I hoofed it to Leigh Lake and my food cache at my canoe, happy to have a simple goal, even if it was in the wrong direction. But I had rapped off with my bag, and I was crestfallen to have missed my main goal: the top of the wall.

In July, 2000, just before I went to Baffin Island, John Kelley and I returned to Mt. Moran for another project, the Kelley-Beyer route (VI 5.12 A0).

Just right of *Drifter's* fourth pitch, John led a blank corner with ledge-fall potential off the 5.10 crux. Above, I led a 5.11 bulge up into an arch. The arch looked too blank to free, so I banged in a good knifeblade and top-stepped to preview my options. The blade blew, and I took a 20-footer, landing on my back on a slab. I locked eyes with John and saw apprehension. It was the moment of truth. I started laughing like a psycho, and the moment passed.

I abandoned the arch. I could have traversed left to easier ground and an all-free pitch, but





*John Kelley leading the crux pitch (5.12a) of the Kelley-Beyer route on the south face of Mt. Moran.*  
JIM BEYER

didn't—it was too close to *Drifter*. Instead, I traversed right to a spectacular arête. I drilled two aid bolts to reach the free climbing. While drilling a hole in ledge-fall danger, I started wiggling out. The 5/32-inch bathook I was drilling off of kept popping out of its shallow hole. That bolt was a shakefest, but I finally got it in and collapsed gratefully onto it. While contemplating the difficult climbing above and registering the growing impatience of my partner, a young rope gun who would cruise this crux, I lowered off and let John run with it.

Higher up the route is our ambitious goal: a big, blank, high-angle slab. It was John's lead, and he pulled a 5.11 crux right off my one-bolt belay. An overhanging corner was protected by sketchy wires on screamers and one bolt went in free onsite at continuous, contortionist 5.11, with a spot of 5.12.

The roof above went easily, and John was on the Great Slab. After drilling one bolt, he traversed right on fragile 5.10 crystals right above the very sharp edge of the roof below. After this super scary traverse, he finished the pitch on continuous 5.11/5.11+ with 20- to 25-foot runouts between bolts. This pitch is probably the hardest bold lead in the range. South Buttress Central crosses the Great Slab a bit higher and we traversed off and rappelled down *Drifter* because we were down to our last two bolts.

A few days later we were back, and I led a dangerous 5.10a pitch protected by sketchy aluminum heads and two bolts. John flashed the roof (5.11) at the top of the Great Slab and then avoided an easy shattered chimney with a clean 5.11 bulge. We bivied at the top of the face and then continued 4,000 to 5,000 feet up the South Ridge on generally easy (5.6-5.8) soloing and some four to five roped pitches (one directly out of a notch at 5.9/5.10) to the summit of Mt. Moran. We rushed down the CMC route (which is some 3,000 feet of scrambling) in the hopes of getting to our bivy gear before dark. We didn't make it and spent a

memorable night in the rain without it.

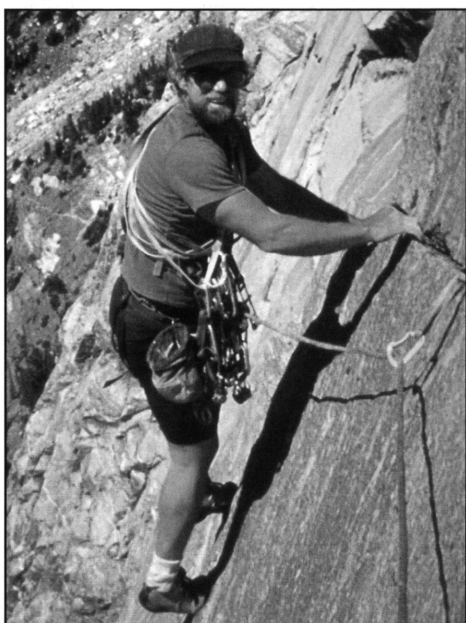
While some people will slam us for not freeclimbing every pitch in “redpoint style,” I would counter that we are alpinists and not sport climbers. We were climbing a big alpine route onsight and think that it’s OK to rest on our bolts to change our drill bits before the next runout. Our route, done ground-up, onsight over two attempts with hangs on bolts, a yo-yo lead, and two bolts of aid is not perfect style or an “all-free ascent”—but such a sport climbing goal is tainted. “Red point” ascents allow rap bolts, pre-placed protection, and custom-length pre-placed draws, all taints not available to alpinists.

While these three routes are not typical of most Teton climbs, I hope they illustrate the type of opportunities still available to alpinists in the Tetons. I know that once American climbers return to the adventure of this style of climbing and become comfortable with putting in their own routes in their own home range, they, too, will seek adventure in the Greater Ranges as have so many Teton climbers before them.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming

NEW ROUTES (all three routes are located on the south face of Mt. Moran [12,605']): *South Buttress Drifter* (V 5.10c), three days, July, 1998, Jim Beyer, solo. *Whirl of Hate* (VI 5.10 A4 to high point), seven days/14 bivies, October, 1998, Jim Beyer, solo. The Kelley-Beyer route (VI 5.12a A0), six days/six nights over two attempts, July, 2000, John Kelley, Jim Beyer.



Jim Beyer, 45, is a divorced father of two. His daughter, Lena, is 4, and his stepson, Michael Walsh, is 11. He works in Durango, Colorado, as a semi-retired builder and landlord. He started serious climbing in 1974 in Yosemite. Although he climbs all manner of natural terrain proficiently, he is most gifted soloing extreme techno aid climbs.

Jim Beyer following pitch 8 on South Buttress Drifter. JOHN KELLEY