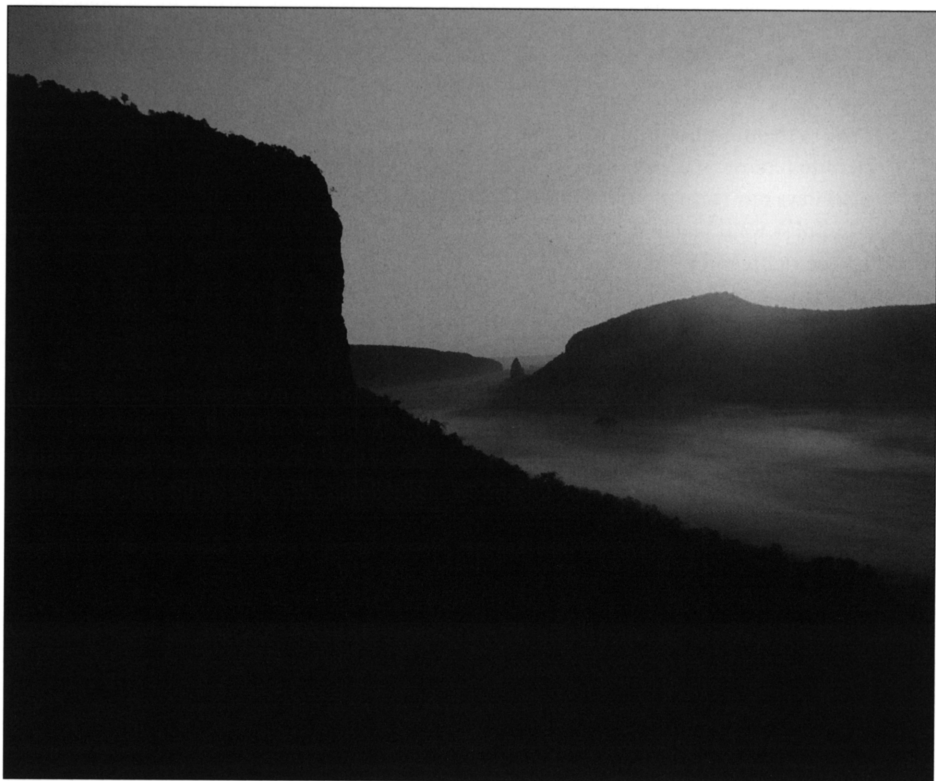


# HELL'S GATE

*Near Kenya's largest city, huge hexagonal columns provide  
lonely jamming and loads of potential.*

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ALEX FIKSMAN



Hell's Gate. The Main Wall is on the left, watching misty weather coming in from Lake Narvashe. *Bobby Model*

Rising from the Rift Valley floor less than 100 kilometers from Nairobi is one of Kenya's most spectacular climbing areas, Hell's Gate National Park. Just an hour and half outside of Kenya's capital, Nairobi, this is also the most easily accessible multi-pitch climbing area in the country, with many routes of excellent quality.

The climbs on the Main Wall of Hell's Gate mostly follow crack lines splitting polygonal or hexagonal columns. They rise over 700 vertical feet. Excellent jamming and stemming on solid rock (with some exceptions) forces the climber into wonderful positions overlooking vast populations

of wildlife on the valley floor. Thought-provoking sections of loose rock—especially on the top 100 feet of most routes—have kept the Main Wall out of reach of the majority of recreational climbers. Still, no climbing area in Kenya can provide as much satisfaction as a day out on the Main Wall at Hell's Gate.

Most of the significant route development in Hell's Gate took place in the middle to late 1970s, resulting in classics like Olympian (Iain Allan, Ian Howell, and Phil Snyder, 1972) and Future Shock (Iain Allan and Mark Savage, 1972). Currently there are over 40 routes on Main Wall alone and several dozen on the smaller crags. The last couple of years has seen renewed interest in Hell's Gate, which has resulted in removal of aid on several routes and the first completely free ascent of one of them.

The first route to be freed on Main Wall in the last 15 years was Sorcerer, originally established by Ian Howell and Iain Allan in 1975. This route featured 410 feet of climbing (Australian 17 A1). All four of the original pitches involved various amounts of aid (both pegs and nuts). On May 16, 2004 Bobby Model and I went out to explore the possibility of freeing the route. We did a lot of cleaning during this first attempt, and we managed to free climb all pitches except the first. Pitch 3 required a peg to protect the exposed move around the arête.

Nearly a month later, on June 12, Dave Zimmerman and I returned to free, which required a series of subtly engineered moves out of a short chimney on Pitch 1. The climbing provided excellent finger locks and hand jams. A serious "sting in the tail" completed the day with a slightly overhanging finish on loose rock 10 feet above a ledge and over 300 feet above the deck. For this reason, the original ascent received a Hell's Gate seriousness grading 4 out of



Alex Fikshan on the first free ascent of The Sorcerer, Hell's Gate. *Bobby Model*

possible 6. We graded the technical difficulty of the climb Australian 21, but only a few moves were of that standard, while most of the climbing was about 18 and 19.

Other routes that were cleaned of aid in 2004 and early 2005 include Capital Punishment, a 320-foot climb on Main Wall originally put up by Iain Allan and Ian Howell in 1976 at Australian 15 A3. It was cleaned of aid on two out of the three pitches when John Train and I attempted to do a free ascent of the route on March 5, 2005. Pitch 1 remains A3, with a 120-foot smooth wall with hairline cracks leading to the main corner. Although the climbing on Pitch 1 will go free, we have so-far found it impossible to protect the crux moves.

We had more success the following day when John and I removed aid on six out of seven pitches on The Zebra Wall, a 700-foot climb in the highest portion of Main Wall. The most impressive pitch (number 2) required John to fist jam through a wide corner crack into a superb chimney, exiting on the top of a pillar more than 200 feet above the valley floor.

Further aid removal is sure to continue, albeit at a slow pace owing to Kenya's abundance of climbing potential and paucity of people to take advantage of it. Despite its proximity to Nairobi, the Main Wall of Hell's Gate hosts few experienced climbers. Most local climbing takes place on the 120-foot Fishers Tower, where beginners and curious visitors to the park taste this wonderful rock in a most stunning setting.

#### NOTES ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Marnix Buonajuti was born in Kenya in 1980, to parents of Italian and Dutch origin. He started climbing at the age of 15 with a friend. At first he climbed mostly in Kenya, but as his passion grew he began to travel to different parts of the world in the all too familiar search for cliffs. His favourite way of experiencing climbing is to travel around the bush lands of Kenya exploring its multitude of unclimbed lines. When not at home in East Africa, Marnix can be found completing the last year of his Medical degree in London England.*

*Alex Fikisman was born in the ex-Soviet Union, educated in the United States, and arrived in Kenya in 1998 planning to stay only two years. He fell in love with the country and decided to remain. The climbing bug bit him as soon as he arrived in Kenya, and he's been committed to it ever since. He manages a successful safari company, Tropical Ice, and steals away to climb with the owner, Iain Allan, at every opportunity.*

*Alex Jakubowski spent his apprenticeship climbing out of his home town of Sheffield, England. He has been climbing for 15 years and has scratched his way up routes all around the world. He spends much of his spare time dodging big waves on the scary sea cliffs of South Wales and Cornwall.*

*Bobby Model grew up on a ranch near Cody, Wyoming. After turning adventure photography into his profession, he developed an interest in social and geopolitical interests as well. In order to cover Africa more effectively, he relocated to Nairobi in 2004, where he works as a professional photographer and is active with the Mountain Club of Kenya.*