

## Sugarite Canyon State Park

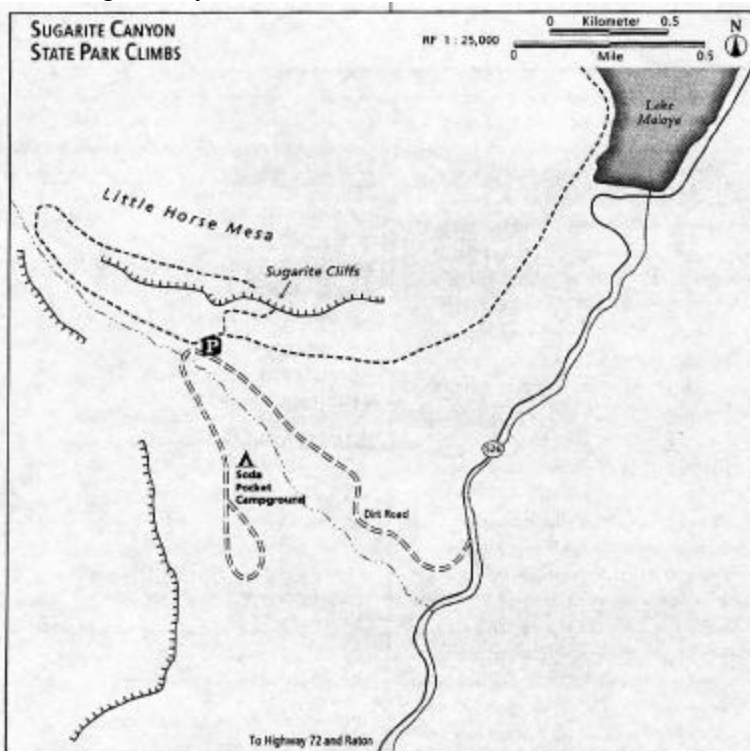
Excerpted from *Rock Climbing New Mexico*, by Dennis R. Jackson, Globe Pequot Press: Guilford, CT, 2006.

### Overview

Sugarite (pronounced “*sugar-reet*”) Canyon State Park, located just south of the Colorado and New Mexico border near Raton, is an off-the-beaten track climbing area but well worth a visit. The area is almost fully developed since its brief mention in the first edition of *Rock Climbing New Mexico and Texas* and now offers over 40 quality established routes. With the exception of one bolted line, all of the routes are traditional affairs that require good protection placement skills and a head for traditional climbing. The excellent climbing here is mostly up vertical faces, using pockets from finger *mono-digits* to mailbox-slots and a good assortment of finger and hand cracks. There are climbs for everybody at Sugarite, with routes ranging in difficulty from 5.8 to 5.12. The majority of routes are 5.9 and 5.10.

Crowds are never an issue at Sugarite. Indeed, sightings of bear, wild turkeys, and other wildlife are more common than the rare sightings of other climbers. The absence of crowds allows for a pristine and private climbing experience. Every ascent you do seems like a first ascent since there is little chalk on the rock and almost no bolts.

The cliffs at Sugarite and the surrounding mesas are composed of basalt that resulted from lava flows associated with the Raton-Clayton Lava Field. The higher mesa caps are up to 7.2 million years old but volcanism occurred in the area about 60,000 years ago, a relatively recent geologic event, with the eruption of Capulin Volcano. A unique feature of the older basalts (including Sugarite) is the abundance of “vesicles” or in climbing parlance, pockets. These vesicles, which make great face holds, are a result of gases that were originally dissolved in the magma. As the magma rose from deep in the earth, the gases were exsolved (released) from the erupting magma to form pockets as the lava flowed and cooled. When climbing with these pockets, note that they are aligned and stretched out in a direction parallel to the flow of the lava, which is generally horizontal in this area.



**Climbing history:** There is no local climbing community in Raton or northeastern New Mexico to establish routes at Sugarite. The first known climbing here was in the late 1980s when Colorado Springs climber Steve Cheyney and other Colorado climbers visited and established several routes, mostly top-rope lines. In 1991 another group of Colorado Springs climbers, including Ric Geiman, Mark Van Horn, and Mike Johnson, installed a half-dozen quality sport routes on the cliff in a few days. These bolted lines were quickly and inexpertly chopped by an unknown person. The chopping was extreme and brutal, leaving bent over bolt studs and flattened hangers on the cliff.

This vandalism led to the closure of the park to all climbing. In 1992 the park reopened to climbing although further bolting was disallowed. A developing management plan slated for future adoption may provide for the limited installation of some bolts for lowering anchors and possibly for some limited bolts on new routes that cannot be totally protected by traditional means. The area presently is regarded as a traditional climbing area with a prohibition on all bolting.

The pocketed face routes included in this guide have all been led in a traditional manner placing cams and tri-cams in the pockets. Pre-placed protection was utilized on several of the more difficult routes, but for the most part routes were led from the ground up. Mark Hesse, Paul Drakos, Stewart Green, Dennis Jackson and Pete Takeda, have led this effort.

The local climbing ethic accommodates pre-placed pro if there is the potential for either ground falls or taking long falls onto questionable gear. Visiting climbers should feel free to provide for their safety by pre-placing gear or top-roping, in view of the prohibition on bolting. Top-roping is a valid and safe method of ascent that has always been utilized at Sugarite. The style of the first ascent is usually noted in the written description.

A typical **rack** for Sugarite includes small to large wires, at least doubles (3 is often better) in the small TCUs and #1 to 2.5 Friend sizes. The hand cracks (*Jam your Blues Away*, *Crack from Hell*, etc.) require multiple #3 and 3.5. Many climbs require belaying from gear at the top so carry a good variety of nuts and cams. When in doubt, carry extra gear. A 150-foot rope is sufficient for all ascents, lowers, and rappels.

**Descent** from all routes is by lowering from bolt anchors, rappelling from established rappel stations, or rappelling from gear. Routes with lowering anchors are mentioned in the route descriptions. All other routes require a rappel to descend. Fixed rappel stations are found at the east and west ends of the cliff. Routes not convenient to these anchors require building and removing temporary anchors. The scrub oak and pine trees set back from the cliff rim are often the only option for top-rope and rappel anchors. If you use these you will probably need an extra rope to reach the rim.

## **Trip Planning Information**

**Area Description:** Sugarite Canyon State Park features a south-facing 70-foot-high basalt cliff with over 40 traditional routes. Routes can be led or top-roped.

**Location:** Northeastern New Mexico. Sugarite is 10 miles northeast of Raton.

**Camping:** Convenient developed sites at the state park's Soda Pocket Campground are within walking distance to the cliffs. Other developed campgrounds are available along the park access road. Showers (located across from the visitor center) are included in camping fees. Time limits apply. Primitive camping opportunities are non-existent in the immediate area.

**Climbing Season:** Year round. Best times are spring and fall. Mid-summer days can be uncomfortably warm, although climbing early in the day or in evening shade are good options. Winter climbing is possible only on warmer days. The road to the cliff is closed in winter so park at the gate and hike just over a mile uphill to the cliff.

**Restrictions and access issues:** Installation of bolts is prohibited anywhere in the park. A \$4.00 day-use fee is required to enter and use the park. The road to Soda Pocket Campground and trailhead to the climbing area is gated and closed to vehicles from late November to mid-April. Hiking to the crag is permitted year round. Check with park officials for exact dates of road closures, which

varies depending on weather.

**Guidebook:** None.

**Nearby mountain shops, guide services and gyms:** None.

**Services:** All services available in Raton about 10 miles west.

**Emergency services:** Call 911. Contact a park ranger for assistance. The visitor center is generally staffed 7 days a week during normal working hours. A pay phone is located outside the visitor center. The local hospital is Miners Colfax Medical Center (505-445-3661) located on the south end of Raton.

**Nearby climbing areas:** None in the immediate area. Maverick Cliff and Probe 1 cliff in Cimarron Canyon are about 50 miles to the west.

**Nearby attractions:** Sugarite Canyon State Park offers a visitor center with interpretive information about the area. Area attractions include Capulin Volcano National Monument, Folsom Museum, Maxwell National Wildlife Refuge, Raton Museum, and Cimarron Canyon State Park. Other outdoor activities are fishing, hiking, and mountain biking.

**Finding the crag:** Sugarite Canyon State Park is 10 miles east of Raton, the first city encountered in New Mexico when traveling south from Colorado on I-25.

From north and south on I-25, take Exit 452 and head east onto NM 72. This is marked Sugarite State Park and Folsom. Follow signs to the park, making sure to veer left on NM 526. Stop at the visitor center to pay the \$4.00 day use fee. Continue 2.4 miles farther north to a left turn to Soda Pocket Campground. This dirt road is generally open from April to November. (Park here and hike the 1.3-mile road if closed in the off-season). Drive 1.3 miles and park in a small pullout on the right which serves as the trailhead parking for the Lake Maloya and Little Horse Mesa trails. A sign here says "No horses or mules beyond this point". The cliff is obvious from the parking area.

Two trail options reach the cliffs. The first takes longer, but is easier to find and puts you on the cliff-top, which requires a rappel to access the cliff-base. This may be advantageous for parties wanting to set up top-ropes. Allow 20 minutes for this approach. The second option takes about 10 minutes and accesses the base of the cliff.

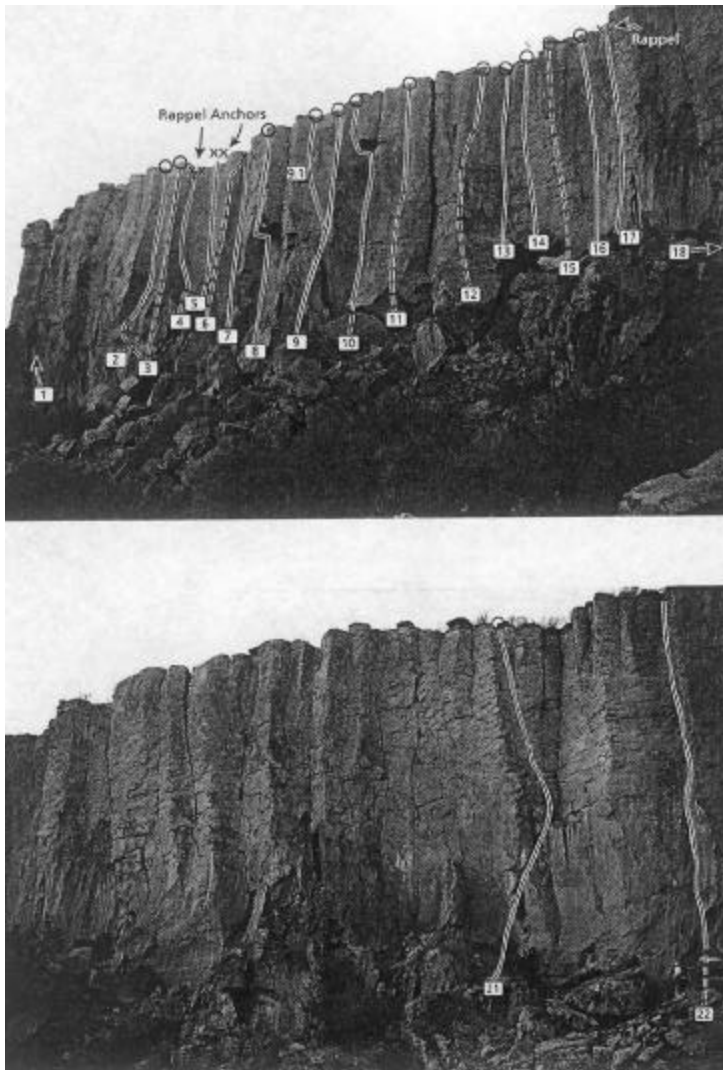
1. Top of cliff option. From the parking area follow signs left to "Lake Maloya", Segestrom Valley and "Little Horse Mesa". When the trail divides, go right toward Little Horse Mesa. On the mesa-top, turn right on a narrow path and walk for about a half mile to a (usually) dry, small lake. The middle portion of the cliff and Zoid Tower is located below the east (far) end of the lake. Build a rappel here or use established anchors by *S&M Crack*, *Jam your Blues Away*, *Crack Head*, or *Pete's Down Climb* to rappel.

2. Base of cliff option. From the parking area, follow the sign right to "Lake Maloya 2 miles". The trail parallels unclimbed cliffs left of the main climbing area. When the trail is just past an obvious jutting buttress that divides the two cliffs, look for a faint path that goes left towards the left end of the climbing area. This junction is approximately 4 minutes from the trailhead signs. A small cairn (when people leave it in place) is found here. Follow this faint cairned trail up the slope to some large boulders beneath the cliff. Cairns here direct you left or right. Go left for routes #1 to #20 and right for all other routes.

Routes are described from left to right.

1. **Bush Doctor** (5.10b/c) Worth climbing. Start 30' left of *Endless Summer*. Climb the left side of an unattractive roof, then up a good crack.

2. **Endless Summer** (5.9+) Classic. A bolt protects the traversing moves into a demanding and steep finger crack.



3. **Up Your Arête** (5.10b) Excellent. Led on-sight by Mark Hesse using cam placements in pockets for protection. Veer left near the top to finish on *Endless Summer* or if you're feeling confident, continue straight up.

4. **Pete's Down Climb** (5.7/5.8) Off-width crack with 2-bolt anchor on the cliff rim. Good off-size crack but usually done by climbing the face to the right.

5. **Salt Mother** (5.8) One of Sugarite's easiest climbs. Fun crack and pocket climb. 2-bolt anchor.

6. **Sangre Verde** (5.10a) Good climb. Sugarite's only sport route. 4 bolts up a blunt arête to the rim. Shares lowering anchors with #7. 4 bolts to 2-bolt anchor.

7. **Crack Head** (5.8) Excellent. Perfect hand jams with lots of pro. Shares lowering anchors with #6.

8. **Great Roof Left** (5.9) Recommended. Hand and finger crack.

9. **Motengator** (5.8) Excellent moderate. Great hand jams, tips, and pockets lead to a steep finish. Ignore the poorly driven and un-necessary piton (placed near the top after the first ascent) if still there.

10. **Soma Holiday** (5.10b/c) Good climb. The difficulty is at the bottom, then great pocket pulling. Go left at the roof.

11. **Lackawanna** (5.10b/c) Excellent. Best not to be in this frame of mind for this pocket and thin crack climb. Go for it.

12. **Oral Sex in the Whitehouse** (5.9+) A statement of the strange times we live in. Good pocket pulling to your choice of thin cracks at the top.

13. **Crazy Cams** (5.9) Thin crack and pockets yield another moderate classic. Hard at bottom, crux in the middle.

14. **Dog Day** (5.10c/d) Mega classic finger crack and pocket pulling. Hard moves at the top.

15. **Yo Mamma** (5.10b/c) A worthy climb. Pre-placed pro was used for the first ascent. Start 4' right of *Dog Day*, climb up and right on good holds. It's run-out at the bottom, even with pre-placed gear.

16. **Taos Lightning** (5.10c) Area mega-classic. Named after the famous libation imbibed at the fur trappers rendezvous in the 1840s. Best to have your wits about you on this one. Route was pre-equipped on first ascent. Sequential opening moves lead to slightly easier climbing above. Choose to go straight up or veer right to a lower angle crack or traverse farther right to join *Jam Your Blues Away* at the top. Shares anchors with *Jam Your Blues Away*.

17. **Jam Your Blues Away** (5.10a) An area classic. You are sure to feel better after finishing this one. Great hand jams to a 2-bolt anchor.

18. **Raised by Wolves** (5.10d) No photo. Classic. Start 30' right of #17. Difficult opening moves up a fingertips crack to good fingers.

19. **Bush Pilot** (5.10a) No photo. Recommended. Start 15' right of #18 in a short off-width with a small chockstone, then crank up pockets and a thin crack.

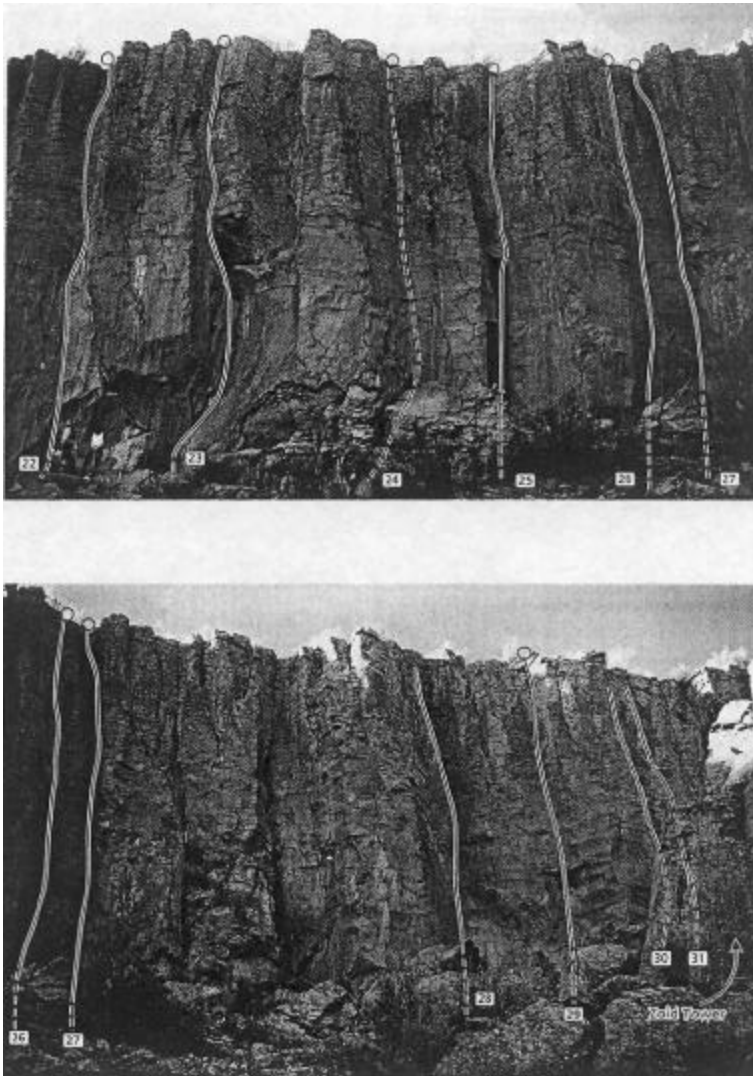
20. **Sweet and Sour** (5.8) No photo. Climb around or go through a short chimney to reach a short, low angle crack.

21. **Sapphire Crack** (5.8) Worth climbing. A curving hand crack to the right of a perched boulder at the base of the cliff.

22. **Carpe Manana** (5.10c) Excellent. A striking thin crack on the left side of a large white flake. Crux at the bottom.

23. **Get Your Mojo Running** (5.11d) A Pete Takeda test piece. Start in "the pit" (below the boulders at the base of the cliff) and crank burly moves up and around a gray roof to a thin crack.

24. **The A-Frame** (5.12c) Sugarite's hardest route to date. Established with pre-placed pro by Pete Takeda in 1999. Start deep in "the pit" below the cliff. Awkward, thin moves lead up and right past a fixed wire and piton in a thin crack. Pull above to thin but easier climbing.



25. **Type O** (5.9+) Classic. A single bolt protects the thin opening sequence, then climb a stellar finger crack.

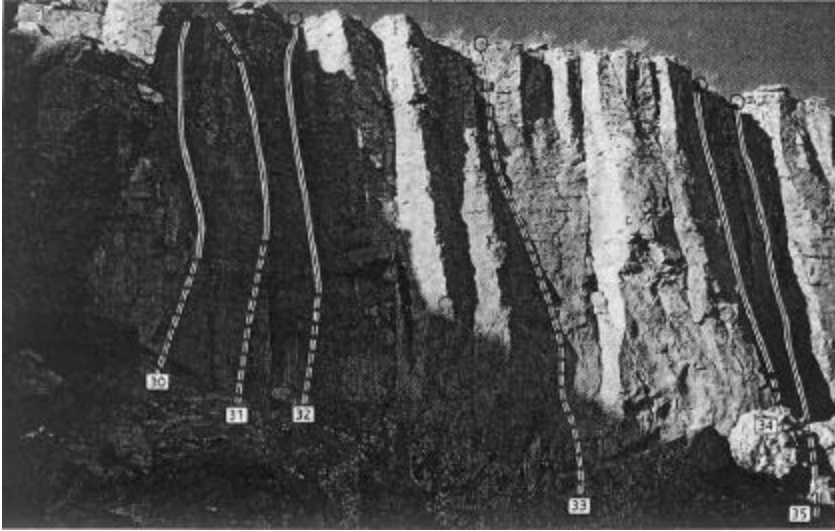
26. **Double D Left** (5.10b/c) Excellent. Thin face climbing up to a right-facing dihedral. The first ascent avoided the difficult-to-protect section about 10' up by moving right to *Double D Right*, climbed about 10', then moved back left. A straight-up ascent has not been done to date.

27. **Double D Right** (5.10b) Great climb. Gymnastic moves off the ground lead to a beautiful left-facing dihedral.

28. **The Pocket Rocket** (5.9) An area classic. Start on the right-curving crack or face climb straight up to gain the excellent pocket pulling above. Go left near the top to a 2-bolt lowering anchor.

29. **Bad Moon Rising** (5.10c) Brilliant route. A stunning splitter over a small roof. One of the original routes at Sugarite.

30. **Right on Raton** (5.8) Fun classic. Begin off a large boulder wedged against the wall. Awkward jamming at the bottom leads to a perfect hand crack and a 2-bolt lowering anchor just below the rim.



31. **Gift of Aliens** (5.10b) Classic. The smallest Alien reduces the stress level on this one. The single bolt helps too. Thin and steep.

32. **The Arrowhead** (5.9) Good climb. Climb to the top of an arrowhead-shaped flake, then up a finger crack and pockets.

33. **The Optimator** (5.11d/12a) An improbable looking climb led with pre-placed pro by Peter Takeda on his first visit to Sugarite in the fall of 1999. No second ascent to date. Begin off boulders wedged against the wall. Sequential and technical face moves up thin pockets alongside an RP crack leads to an easier finish.

34. **Miami Vice** (5.10b) Good climb. Step across a narrow chasm to gain a thin flake. Climb a finger crack in a right-facing corner with the occasional welcome pocket to a difficult finish.

35. **The Crack from Hell** (5.10b) Classic. Start deep in a pit beneath boulders. Hand jam a steep strenuous crack to the top.

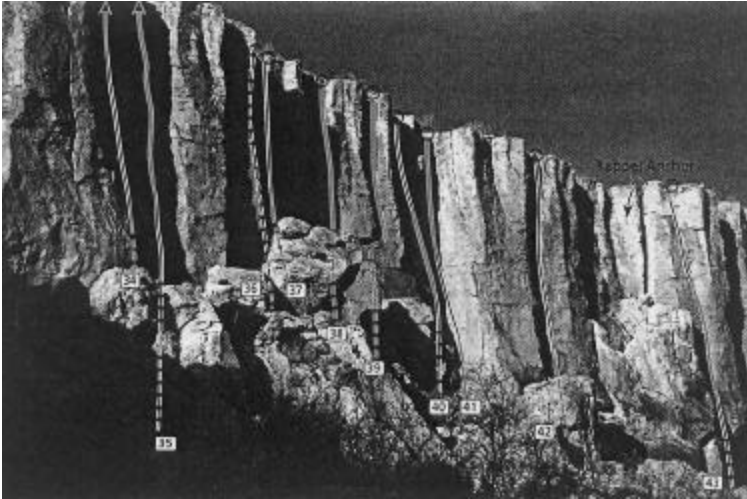
36. **Primodelic** (5.10b/c) Primo! Led first with pre-placed pro. Start just right of a striking thin crack and pull down on pockets on a steep face. Go right near the top.

37. **Wounded Knee** (5.8) Recommended. Step across a gaping chasm above a pit, then work up a crack using good hand and fist jams.

38. **Driven to Climbs** (5.9+) Superb route. Traverse right on pockets to under a thin crack that splits about 1/3 of the way up. Difficult jams lead straight up. The left crack is slightly easier.

39. **March Madness** (5.10b/c) A bold classic. Another bold lead that opened up new territory without bolting. Start on a small ledge and climb straight up to a small roof. Turn this on the right, then work up a thin crack.

40. **Spoticus** (5.9) Recommended. An awkward left-leaning hand and finger crack.



41. **Bat Dog** (5.10) Another great one. Start 5' right of #40. Straight up a thin crack using pockets and face holds. Make a long traverse right on face holds to a slightly overhanging thin hands crack. Eschew the traverse and climb the left crack near the top for a slightly easier finish.

42. **Duke in a Bucket** (5.10b) Climb the V-shaped slot to a good finger crack. Better than it looks (or sounds).

43. **S & M Crack** (5.11a) Strenuous mega-classic crack. This excellent testpiece ascends the cliff's tallest section on the far right side. Most of the climb is out of view from the main cliff area, but it is well worth the effort to find it. Scramble down and right across boulders to the base of the cliff just right of a short, sharp arête. Start by climbing through the shattered rock under a roof. Turn the roof on the left then jam a pumpy hand crack to a 2-bolt anchor on the rim.