USA – BUTTERMILKS AND ZION

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14 DAYS AND 14 NIGHTS

Highballing and trad climbing on America’s finest rock.

A sudden cry from above tore apart the silence and a split second later Alex slammed into the crashpads

in front of his dumbfounded spotters. It was a touchdown of the inconvenient kind. System check: everything seemed fine except for Alex´ middle finger which looked like it had made the acquaintance with a cheese grater. Well, Buttermilks’ granite is razor-sharp and if you slip off it, you’ll taste the pain. It’s that simple. Thick red blood was oozing out of the chalk- covered fingertip and dripped into the desert sand. Damn it, why now? Just one moment shy of the sure victory.

It was the last day of our trip to the Californian boulder mecca Buttermilks and time was running out. The next day we had planned to hit Zion National Park for some first-class crack-climbing. But before that was going to happen Alex had to get to terms with some unfinished business. Because Alex had a dream – one that he had been carrying around for thousands of miles. It was the dream of an ascent of the infamous “Evilution to the Lip” (V10), a variant of the legendary test piece “Evilution”, a boulder with triple B-rating: big, bad and beautiful.

“Evilution” is located at the Grandpa Peabody boulder, a block with the size of a single-family house and the shape of a billiard ball. Diehard highballers call it “one of the most beautiful boulder problems in the world”. Beauty is a welcome feature but if you lose your head high up on “Evilution”, you’ll taste the bitter end. Falling off this boulder means a long flight with a nasty landing.

FOUR FRIENDS AND TOO LITTLE TIME

There’s probably a thousand reasons to visit the States for a climbing trip and each and everyone is good enough to jump up, dash to the nearest travel agency office and book a ticket right away. The States offer enough rock for countless climbing lives if not for eternity.

To be honest: 14 days couldn’t be called a lot of time considering this oversupply of climbing possibilities. In fact it was close to nothing. But it was all that Alex, Tilo, Raphaela and Maria, four friends from Austria and Germany, had to their disposition for a trip to the praised land. The maxim for this trip was therefore evident and clear from the start: Push it to the max! But before the team could get rollin’ a route for the trip had to be figured out.

“Two weeks – two areas” sounded like the perfectly obvious master plan but making the right choice was a much harder task. What’s the best combo? Yosemite and Red River Gorge? Hueco Tanks and Joshua Tree? Buttermilks and Zion? Hmm…

Buttermilks and Zion! Are you kidding me?

What do highball-bouldering and crack-climbing have in common? The answer: Nothing.

Climbing high on huge granite eggs with some crashpads far underneath the soles and jamming fully taped hands into crack systems with a double set of camalots clinking on the harness has as much in common as ballet dancing and sumo wrestling.

CALIFORNIA

Each journey has to begin somewhere and our starting point was Las Vegas, the epicentre of lightspeed luck and hypertrophic dreams in the middle of the Nevada desert. Our first ride across town felt like a sensoric overkill: everywhere we looked our gaze was almost immediately blinded by lights and lamps, glitter and glamour. But we didn’t have any time to dwell into this spectacle because our own American dream wasn’t made of bling-bling and volatile dollars but of something more tangible: the golden granite of the Buttermilks and the red-coloured sandstone of Zion. But first things first and off we were to Bishop.

Driving through the desert we experienced a contrast that couldn’t be harsher: a Joshua tree every once in a while but besides that nothing but stone, sand and vast emptiness. After a while we stopped in the town of Beatty in the Death Valley. We were hungry. Beatty is a small nest similar to those towns by the road that Europeans know from films like “No Country for Old Men” or “The Hitcher”. A trailer park there, a burnt out car wreck there, as well as some suntanned figures that sell scrap metal next to the drugstore. We got some food and then the hell out of here.

After endless hours on the interstate we finally approached the Owens Valley, North America’s lowest lying valley. Located right in there is the town of Bishop, the gateway for bouldering in the Buttermilks.

Our time of arrival couldn’t have been a better one because one hour before sunset prime time started and mother nature let her finest programme run off the reel. As if by magic an enormous Instagram filter started to cover the entire landscape. The snow-covered mountaintops began to glow in delicate pink and the cloud formations, which until now had been bobbing up and down in plain grey, turned into a gleaming armada of bright orange ships as if a sudden Technicolor-boost had been applied to them. Eye-candy made in California.

GO BIG OR GO HOME

“Man, they are gigantic!” “Huuuuge!” “No chance I’ll ever make it up there.” Due to the sheer size of some of the boulders in the Buttermilks the border between bouldering and free-soloing gets blurred constantly. This vagueness has been dubbed “highballing”. Highballs are boulders that measure up to 15m in height. In other words they are f\*\*\*in’ huge.

If you plan to venture on one of Buttermilks’ big ones, you better know what you are doing. “Bring some crutches,” is a word of advice that highball veteran Wills Young handed out in his Buttermilks guidebook and he did it for a good reason. This hint may sound sarcastic to some but it surely isn’t meant this way. It’s rather an advice that should be taken as a serious warning: a Buttermilks highball is simply the wrong place to pose for a new Facebook profile picture. A fall from the top can result in nasty consequences regardless of how many alert spotters or crashpads there are in place. And if you think that raw power gets you out of any trouble, you’re plain wrong. 8–10m above the ground every crimp becomes small and every foothold feels smeary as soap. Up there the body doesn’t obey the orders it gets from the brain anymore. At this point bouldering is nothing but a mind game.

GOOD GUYS, GOOD GUIDES

We could have grabbed the guidebook and started a quest for good-to-climb blocks in this vast labyrinth of stones, which may have ended in an disastrous odyssey. But we wisely chose not to do so. Instead we had organised two guides before our departure from home. Pretty smart, ey? One thing’s for sure: we couldn’t have found better locals to guide us than the two boulder greats Kevin Jorgeson and Carlo Traversi.

With repeats of “The Swarm” and “Mandala sit” (both checking in at V14) Kevin has some of the hardest repeats in the Buttermilks under his belt. Not only that, he has also survived a head-to-head with the area’s boss, the super highball “Ambrosia”, unharmed and as a proud winner. Carlo on the other hand is one of the strongest boulderers worldwide. With repeats of “Heritage“ (8B+), Val Bavona/Switzerland, and “Meadowlark Lemon” (V15), Red Rocks/Nevada, he has climbed some of the hardest lines out there. In the past years Bishop has become a second home for Carlo and currently he is working on a repeat of the razor blade parade “The Spectre” (V13). There was no doubt that the boys knew their way and last but not least what was good for us.

The next morning we were warming up at the “Sunshine Boulder” with temperatures around zero. Together with Kevin and Carlo we climbed “Good Morning, Sunshine”. This felt really great and the feeling in the numb fingers came back slowly. Right after that Maria and Raphi headed to the “Iron Man Area” where they wanted to give the ultra-classic “Iron Man Traverse” (V4) a shot. But until they could take their turn they had to wait in line, which is not unusual on a sunny Sunday like this.

In the meanwhile Alex and Tilo were finishing work on “Saigon” (V6) and were already eyeing on the next project, “Saigons’” big brother. “Saigon direct” (V9) is not only a notch harder but the crux also sits quite high: a classic goose-bump boulder, which they both managed to top out in smooth style just two days later. Kevin on the other hand was working on a futuristic project just a few metres away. The short description of the problem according to Kevin went like this: “From a good hold you go to a bad one, then proceed to one that’s worse which is followed by a move to one hold even worse than that.”

REST DAYS ARE BEST DAYS

Climbing in the Buttermilks was great but after a few days the fingertips were worn down and the whole body ached from doing max moves all the time. In other words: we needed a rest day to recover but also to explore things other than boulder blocks. Soon we found out that the best coffee in town is brewed in the “Black Sheep” and that the juiciest steaks are served in the “Bowling Center”.

A bit later the day we meet up for a beer with Wills Young and his wife Lisa Rands. The two are a textbook example of a power couple. Wills is the author of the Buttermilks guidebook and knows the area like his living room and Lisa is one of the strongest boulderers ever to lay hands on Bishops granite. She is also a specialist for highballs and the living proof that highballing is not only a man’s game and that the “balls” that are said to be needed to climb the really big balls only exist in a metaphorical sense. Lisa knows what she’s talking about because she has climbed more scary highballs than most men would dare to.

Last-minute victory.

Soon our bodies started to adapt to the 2-1 rhythm of bouldering in the Buttermilks.

Two days cranking like maniacs were followed by a day of rest, recovery and the sensation of power creeping back into the body. This iron discipline paid off because the projects that felt impossible at the beginning of the trip started to fall one after the other.

One after the other project? “Evilution to the Lip” remained the only exception. Alex had worked the moves to perfection only to fall over and over again. The last day arose and it was spent sieging the Grandpa Peabody boulder. Hours passed and evening came. Alex knew it was now or never. He took a deep breath. The blood from the last try was wiped off and the fingers freshly taped. Alex pulled on and executed one move after the other with utmost precision. Then came the crux. But this time the dyno on the crimp-of-fate stuck. Every finger was where it had to be. Hold it now! Three moves further a bloodcurdling cry split the silence. Oh my God, is he falling? Alex? No, this was an outburst of joy. Alex held tight the finishing holds – he did it! It’s all over! And now off to Zion.

3 DAYS LEFT ON THE CLOCK

The Buttermilks had disappeared out of sight a long time ago and for hours on end we’ve been rolling towards Zion National Park in south western Utah. When we spotted the shiny red walls of Navajo Sandstone our attention quickly detached from the golden Buttermilks granite and shifted towards the new object of desire. At least for now. A short check of our flight tickets revealed that there were only three days left before we had to depart. Even after two weeks of bouldering to the max Alex’ and Tilo’s hunger for climbing remained unsatisfied. But their enthusiasm was well comprehensible because the “Moonlight Buttress” in Zion is a must-do on the ticklist of every ambitious climber and an ascent of this route is as coveted as one of the Nose in Yosemite. If you find yourself right on the spot in Zion, you have to jump at the chance. It’s a question of honour.

The 1,200 foot “Moonlight Buttress” was first-ascended by the likes of Jeff Lowe and Mike Weiss in 1971 when they aid-climbed the route. Two decades went by until rock legend Peter Croft (together with Johnny Woodward) paid a visit to Zion and made the first free ascent at 5.12d/13a. It was quite obvious that Tilo and Alex were aiming high with plans and also the guidebook warned that strong fingers are only half the deal on a route like this. “Be prepared for a demanding adventure,” read the last sentence of the route description.

STARTING FROM CLOSE TO ZERO

Crack-climbing and climbing on European limestone have as good as nothing in common. The right jamming techniques (the means by which you lock your fingers, arms, shoulders or body into a crack system) may be totally different from gripping and stepping techniques on limestone, but with some talent and motivation it’s possible to acquire the basics in short time. Motivation is one thing, the right strategy another: Tilo and Alex opted for some warming-up and getting to know the rock on the “Cerberus Gendarme” instead of getting straight on the “Moonlight Buttress”.

They met up with the two locals Andy Raether and Kyle Vassilopoulos for some help with the “fine tuning”. “Fine tuning” is quite an important factor especially regarding a safe way of protection. Because Zion is one of America’s trad climbing hotspots which means that all the protection has to be placed on lead. The tools of the trade are called “Camalots” (“Cams” in short) which are devices that expand and clamp in the cracks in case of a fall and hence avoid more serious consequences.

But to be able to fiddle the right sized Cam out of 15 or more different pieces of gear that are dangling on the harness is easier said than done especially when the forearm power is as good as gone.

To place a Cam safely in the crack is as much an art form as locking into a solid jam and especially demanding in psychic respects. The first stress test for the gear came faster than we imagined. Tilo performed a Hollywood-style whipper on a route called “Intruder” (5.11+) and was dangling on the rope. The Camalot that held his fall remained stuck in place as if it had been concreted. Thank God! “What a bomb! But the pro is fine,” Tilo euphorically resumed his fall. He was quick to declare that a 5.11+ (or 7a+) crack is quite a different thing than climbing a route of the same grade on limestone, which is something that he usually manages right away. Next up was “Dire Wolf” (5.12). The route had a harder grade but nevertheless it suited Tilo better. He got it first try, which provided a welcome ego boost. Could it really be possible that Tilo is one of those naturally gifted crack talents out there that just have it in them? The “Buttress” would show.

MOONLIGHT AT DAWN

Early the next morning the boys shouldered their packs. Alongside their approach they passed by “Angels Landing”, one of the most well-known pillars in the park. Soon after “Moonlight Buttress” appeared but before they could jam their hands in the cracks, Tilo and Alex had to deal with a bridgeless crossing of the Virgin River. The water was freezing cold but the shock rendered them wide awake within a second. Three easy pitches later they were in the thick of it: the big dihedral aka the Monster lay in front of them. Sceptically they gazed upwards. Why the heck is anyone doing this? The answer was simple: because of the flawless crack systems that come afterwards which were rock aesthetic in its purest form and the perfect place for an unforgettable jam session. After a few metres into the dihedral the “monster” started to bare its teeth. “Damn it, it’s way harder than I thought.” The climbing became more strenuous with every metre and soon the forearms couldn’t recover anymore.

Last but not least there was a chimney waiting in the next pitch and if there was anything that could irritate European trad climbing newbies more than an evil crack, it’s an evil chimney. “Horrible stuff, I almost peed myself,” Alex confessed later on. Alex and Tilo fought their way upwards but finally they had to accept that free-climbing “Moonlight Buttress” was a task, that was a little bit out of their league. At least for now. “It ain’t over ‘til the fat lady sings”, goes an old saying and once they will be back, that’s for sure. Backs packed and ready to go they gazed up the “Moonlight Buttress“ for a last time. After a few moments they took their eyes off the wall, turned around and walked out.