

Climbing in Namibia

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In these days of 'self-determination' Namibia is frequently mentioned in international news, but to those who fell under the spell of its deserts, it is still 'South West', a land of peace and quiet and wide open spaces. South West Africa is a vast desolate country of some 800,000sq km in extent, most of which lies in the tropics, at an average altitude of 1100m.

The territory is interspersed with numerous mountain ranges, the highest and most impressive being the Brandberg, rising to 2579m. Many of these mountains have steep rock-faces which could be of interest to the rock-climber but none present any real problems to the mountaineer—there is always an easy way to the top—except for the Groot Spitzkop, 1817m high, which lies about 50km E of Usakos and is known as the 'Matterhorn of South West Africa'. As the mountain is approached across the plateau its summit appears over the horizon when still 160km away. The air is so crystal clear that details of the rock formations can be seen at 50km. The peak glows amber in the sunset and this is one of the great sights of Africa.

Attempts to climb Groot Spitzkop are believed to have been made by the Germans prior to 1915 and legend has it that one intrepid climber reached the summit, made a smoke signal, but failed to return.

The first recorded attempt was made in 1940 by a party from Cape Town organized by Dennis Woods and led by Servie le Roux. The third man was I. C. Smith. They made 2 attempts on the peak and finally reached a point on the S ridge a few hundred feet short of the summit. Here they were stopped by a deep cleft and a 'gendarme' and further progress proved impossible. The same route was used by a party of Germans from Swakopmund in 1945 but they were equally unsuccessful.

In July 1946 O. Shipley, L. D. Schaff and P. O'Neill arrived at Groot Spitzkop from Cape Town hoping to force a route past the 'gendarme' on the S ridge. The party decided that the W wall offered an easier approach than that taken by the 1940 party and they climbed the long humped-backed ridge across the W face using rubbers (or tackies as they are called in South Africa). The S ridge was reached by late afternoon and Servie's beacons were followed through a labyrinth of tunnels and open gulleys to the 'gendarme'. Once again no route could be found and the party decided to explore the more impossible looking N side.

This proved more successful than had been anticipated and the party gradually worked up a series of chimneys to a large platform on a pinnacle thought to be only about 25m from the summit. Further upward progress was impossible and the party bivouacked for the night. In the morning a grassy chute was descended followed by 18m of abseil to a ledge. This was followed round to what looked like a possible alternative but 9m of steep holdless rock again called a halt.

Still undaunted the party decided to cut steps up this section and returned to Usakos to borrow a hammer and a cold chisel. They returned 4 days later with the tools and supplies of food and water for 3 days. The previous line of ascent was repeated but while descending the abseil, the rope snapped and the leader fell 9m to the ledge below, luckily saved from serious injury by a patch of soft grass. While Shipley rested in his sleeping bag, the remaining 2 climbers continued with the plan to cut steps but this proved a slow and delicate task. After several hours 5m still



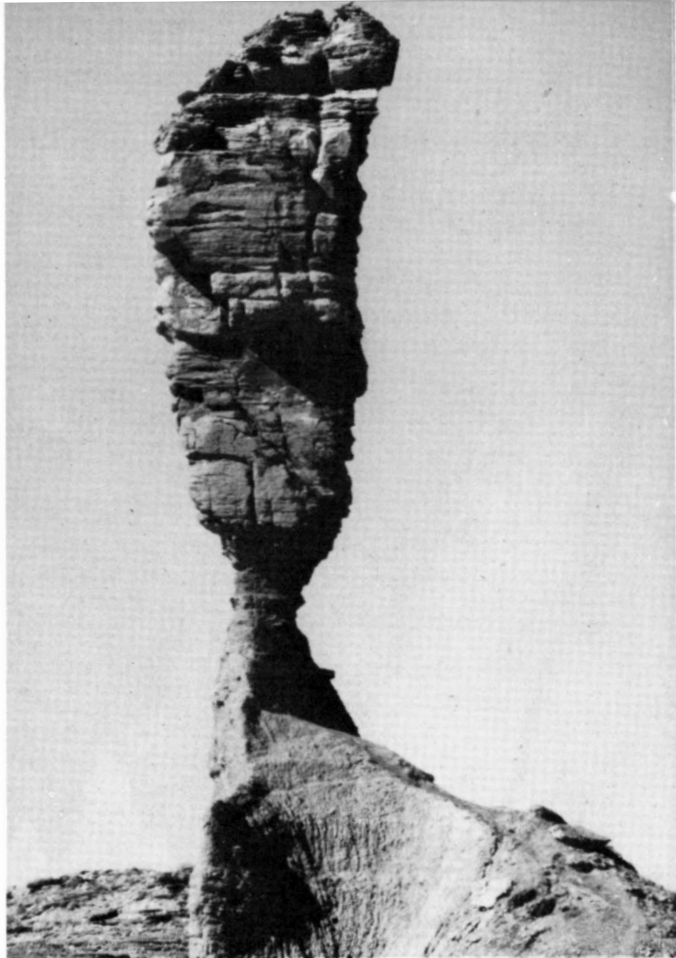
59 Groot Spitzkop (This and next photo: F. Elliott)

remained to be covered and it was decided to finish this the next day. Unfortunately the weather changed overnight and at the first sign of dawn the tired and weakened party made an immediate descent and returned to Cape Town.

In that same year, on 13 November, a party of 3, Hans and Else Wongtschowski and Jan de Villiers Graaff came to the Great Spitzkop each carrying $\frac{1}{2}$ gallon of water and food for 2 days. They first of all followed the line of beacons erected by the 1940 party to the 'gendarme' on the crest of the S ridge and then worked to the right to a double pointed pinnacle on the N wall which they christened 'The Policemen'. From here the party followed a series of gulleys and ledges to reach the large grassy ledge on which the July party had camped. They then made the descent on which the leader had come to grief and so round to the 'step pitch'. The leader ascended to the top step to assess what lay ahead and they then all returned to their bivouac for the night.

The party were back again early the next morning but had to wait for 2 hours for the very strong wind to abate before they could attempt the delicate operation of cutting a fifth step. This proved a formidable task and after some considerable effort only a 'mere mark' had been made on the rock. Wearing rubbers, the leader placed a foot cautiously on the mark and slowly friction walked up the slab to gain a stance about 12m higher. From there the climbing was more straightforward but nevertheless very exposed and of a high standard. The party continued upwards using chimneys and cracks where possible and friction walking from time to time on faces lying back at angles as steep as 50°. The summit was reached at noon, the final 120m having taken 3 hours. After a short rest the party started to descend and were able to abseil most of the way down.

There are many unclimbed freak pinnacles in South West Africa like Mukorob



60 *The Finger of God*

near Asab (the Finger of God depicted on the one cent stamp), Vingerklip on the Upper Ugab River and many others along the banks of the Orange River between Aughrabies Falls and Sendeling's Drift. Another rock in the Namib Desert which has attracted South African climbers is Dikke Wilhelm, about 20 miles from Aus, which rises some 220m above the plain. It is claimed locally to be the largest single rock in the world. Three sides are reputed to be unclimbable but steps were cut in the fourth in 1914 by the Germans. They then camped on the flat summit in order to observe the advance of the South African forces from Luderitz. It is a hard climb even now and takes several hours to complete.

South West Africa has much to attract the climber especially during the winter months when it is sunny, pleasantly warm and dry. Until recent years it was becoming increasingly popular, particularly with the South Africans, but things have now changed. It is now no longer safe to camp just anywhere in the 'bush' or in fact to leave the main all-weather roads between the larger towns.

Appendix

After the first ascent the Groot Spitzkop was climbed on a number of occasions in the period 1957-60 by the original route. 1960 saw a new route on the W wall (F. Schreiber, H. Lachenmann, R. Helm). A second new route was put up on the NE side in 1972 (R. Lichtman, T. Hughes).