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Uganda Granite



The dome of Ruoth (the Chief) in Abim district, northern Uganda.
(Pat Littlejohn)

First tip – if you want to climb in Uganda, fly to Uganda. Obvious you'd think, but John Mothersele, Steve Sustad and I had the idea that an overland trip from Kenya would be pleasant. What we hadn't figured out was that we'd be travelling along the Trans Africa Highway – main supply route from the port of Mombasa to Uganda, Rwanda, Congo and South Sudan – nose-to-tail juggernauts belching black diesel smoke, constant road works and hidden speed bumps that rearranged your intestines as well as everything in the vehicle. Just to get across the border took half a day and many dollars, as the hire company had thoughtfully screwed up the paperwork.

Once in Uganda, everything changed. The price of everything halved and we could quit the Trans Africa and head north through a land that was becoming noticeably richer and more fertile with every kilometre. By the time we reached Mbale we could appreciate why Winston Churchill had said that if you pushed your walking stick into the ground in Uganda, it would grow. We were making for the Abim district, a region of granite

mountains that I'd researched, but there were a few places to check out on the way. The great volcanic plug above the town of Tororo was a disappointment, too vegetated for good climbing. Then there was Mt Elgon, a vast 4321m extinct volcano with cliffs dotted all over it – definitely climbing potential on the higher crags but these are 1-2 days' walk-in and also involve hefty park fees. On to Soroti, a nice little town which wraps itself around the base of a 120m granite dome. Here we walked around the cliff base where people were digging chunks of granite out of the ground and using hammers to break them into different grades of gravel, which they then sold. Very humbling. Sadly the granite walls were smooth and crackless, somewhat mocking our philosophy of exploring African crags with just a trad rack.

Abim is the best part of a day's drive north of Soroti on reasonable dirt roads. You enter the town (called Wiawer on some maps) and straight away it has a nice feel. The best hotel in town (where rooms cost a princely £9 a night) had been commandeered for the foreseeable future

by Chinese geologists preparing to plunder Uganda's mineral wealth. However the next best was just fine with rooms at £6 a night (Uganda is relaxingly cheap).

Beyond Abim we soon found ourselves staring at the incredible piece of rock we had come to climb, an immense granite dome called Ruoth (The Chief). The main face was 500m of smooth, black, undulating granite, not devoid of weaknesses but without doubt extremely challenging to climb with a trad rack (and make no mistake the challenge *is* to climb it with a trad rack – any fool could bolt it). The most daunting problem for us, however, was that at this time of year (British winter) it gets full sun all day. Luckily, as far as we could ascertain the whole dome was unclimbed, so we applied ourselves to finding the easiest weakness on a shadier side, and after a recce we hit upon a corner/gully system in the south-west ridge which was enclosed enough to escape the sun most of the day. We learned that evening (from talking to the District Councillor) that local people believed the dome to be inhabited by evil spirits and that there had been two attempts by Europeans to climb it, both unsuccessful. Worryingly, one of the attempts had been foiled by killer bees.

Next day we started walking in at first light, making good time through bush that was surprisingly friendly by African standards, and then we were



Pat Littlejohn and John Mothersele on summit of Ruoth. (Steve Sustad)



The dome of Amyel near Paimol, northern Uganda. (Pat Littlejohn)

stopped in our tracks. Though nothing was visible, we were surrounded by buzzing of such power that the whole forest seemed to be alive. We had to get out of that area, and without upsetting the bees, so we carefully moved off to the right until the buzzing faded. The route proved to be a 'classic' African expedition, nine pitches of corner, crack and chimney climbing with lots of interesting vegetation (both dead and alive) to cope with. All the way up we were looking for traces of a previous ascent, but found none. At the summit we scratched our heads at a scattering of flat stones on a big boulder. Did they occur naturally or were they once a cairn that had been struck by lightning? Only time will tell. We decided to name the route *Ghost Gully* after the spirits of the mountain, and gave it UIAA grade V (using the somewhat tough Kenyan grading system). Not a high quality route perhaps, but as the easiest way up an amazing dome it should get more ascents.

We continued northwards. Another impressive dome near Paimol caught our eye then we reached Kalongo, a small town overlooked by a massive granite crag. Unfortunately this was south-facing too so pretty hopeless in winter; in summer it would be in the shade and a very worthwhile project. We found out that the dome we'd seen was called Amyel, and since it was bound to have a shady side, this became our objective. We drove there before dawn, waited in the vehicle for first light, then approached through a village and soon had an entourage of willing guides and porters. They even started guiding us up the cliff and for a while I thought they were going to take us all the way to the top, but at 200ft they stopped on a pedestal and pointed to the way ahead – an obvious line of chimneys and cracks up the north ridge.

We started climbing; the rock was perfectly solid and surprisingly clean. After two pitches we found out why. On one of the stances three names

and a date had been carved in the rock. It seems we had stumbled upon a well-used route first climbed in the sixties and still getting an ascent about every five years according to the villagers. Despite passing through a nesting area of giant marabou storks (who seemed entirely unfazed) this five-pitch Hard Severe was certainly a classic and well worth seeking out for any climbers visiting this area.

On exploratory trips you have to be ready for disappointments. We had hopes of finding something good on Mt Moroti, another huge 3000m volcanic mountain on the Kenya border. Moroti itself seemed an edgy, threatening place with armed guards and razor wire everywhere, and none of the rock on the Uganda side looked to be worth the big approach. The Kenya side may be different but we couldn't find out because our small, cheap 4wd was starting to struggle with the roads and in such a remote area the consequences of a breakdown would be truly epic. So we carefully trundled back south to Mbale and the Sipi Falls, which proved to have some French-created sport climbing! Kenyan climbing was more to our taste though and so after a lot more travelling we rounded off the trip at the brilliant venues of Hell's Gate and Lukenya – thus finding a good reason to start and finish the trip in Kenya after all.



John Mothersele climbing a five-pitch Hard Severe on Amyel that seemingly dates back to the 1960s. (Pat Littlejohn)

Summary: A rock-climbing safari by Pat Littlejohn, John Mothersele and Steve Sustad in Uganda and Kenya in February 2013, including a likely first ascent of a granite dome called Ruoth (The Chief) in Abim District, northern Uganda (*Ghost Gully*, 300m, UIAA grade V).