

# area profile

Kristie Arend  
and Majka  
Burhardt rappelling  
off the Wizard  
having just com-  
pleted The Yellow  
Brick Road 5.9







# The California Needles

## Perfect, Multi-pitch Granite

Story by **Majka Burhardt**

Photos by **James Q. Martin**

**How many times in life** does a place exceed expectations? It's 3 p.m. on a late September afternoon and I'm hiking into the Needles in southern California. For more than a decade I've been trying to get to this exact spot – 2,400 m above sea level in Kern River Valley in the High Sierra. I try not to be too excited. I try to remind myself that anticipation can kill reality. But then I spot the first granite dome.

Shocks of blue-white rock covered in Technicolor lichen split the sky. Ridges form gentle shoulders on some towers while others jut straight up in the vertical. Cracks and corners fill my view. My partner Kristie and I walk faster despite 20 kg packs laden with a double rack, rope, tag line, and eight litres of water. The plan had been to carry a load up the five km approach trail and be back in time for dinner. Thirty minutes later, I'm lacing up my climbing shoes instead.

Mention the Needles to almost any trad climber and they're likely to tell you one of two things – that they've been and it's the best granite they've ever climbed, or that they want to go because they hear it's the best granite they will ever climb. I've wanted to go to the Needles since I began climbing, but trips never worked out. Even this time my van caught fire on the drive south from Fresno, threatening to end my trip before I got to the Needles, but 10 years







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Opposite top: Charlatan, The Sorcerer and The Wizard's West Faces

Opposite bottom: **Majka Burhardt** linking up Igor Unchained 5.9+ and Airy Interlude 5.10b on The Witch

of Needles desire triumphed and got Kristie and I through a night camped at a repair shop and a morning cajoling a mechanic to fix my van.

Located four hours north of Los Angeles in Sequoia National Forest, just south of Sequoia National Park, the Needles form the southern end of the Sierra upthrust. The Needles proper are a cluster of 60- to 300-metre-high domes full of huecos, knobs, tips cracks, polished faces, flakes, offwidths and chickenheads.

Some consider the Needles a climbing paradise with a dark side, steeped in lore and mysticism. The names of the formations add to the mystery: the Witch, Sorcerer, Warlock, Magician and Wizard each have an array of climbs and obstacles to surmount. And then there are the obstacles in your head. Climbing is a constant battle between absurdity, risk, and reward and climbing itself is often the best way to avoid thinking about climbing. But this is impossible in the Needles. The landscape amplifies analysis and fear that might otherwise be muted. Howling updrafts, spindly clouds and mist, deep exposure and thin, crisp flakes alternate with just enough solid cracks to keep you on the edge of reason. Climbers walk the edge all the time; maybe the reason the Needles are seen as the promised land of granite cracks is because it's here that edge is most obvious.

Looking back, I don't know why I've always wanted to go to the Needles; I just knew I had to go. I'd seen photos over the years of perfect finger cracks and wanted to test my mettle in the same fissures. When trips I'd planned didn't work out, the Needles became even more of a Shangri-La for me – it was the place I could never seem to get to, which clearly meant it was the place I had to go. Photographer James Q Martin, another Needles virgin, felt the same. Kristie, a climbing partner of mine for five years, had been once before, and Corbin Unsinger, a 19-year-old slackline pro and Valley rat with two Needles trips under his belt, rounded out the group. Talking together in the van on our first night, we all decided to start with the Sorcerer, the Needle with, hands down, the best assortment of quality testpiece routes. Shade covers the face by midday, making it a popular destination in the summer and a cool, questionable decision in the fall. Unfortunately for us, Kristie

and I had an agenda, with four routes on the formation, all on the east face, all on cracks and flakes that became repositories of cold air the minute the sun left the face. Kristie and I share a mutual stubbornness that, on this trip, kept resulting in the screaming barfies on the Sorcerer. Our first afternoon, ignoring the glorious sun on the Witch across the way, we made our way to Thin Ice 5.10b. Not wanting to interpret anything from the name, I headed up into the not-so-glorious shade and quickly felt my hands and feet become waxy blocks.

The trick to climbing any formation in the Needles is to time the sun and shade correctly. The Needles are real deal alpine climbing in a crag-like setting. When it's nice, sunny and calm, the routes can feel casual and social. When it's cold, blustery and cloudy, they can feel high-consequence and scary. A normal day in the Needles seems to involve a combination of the two experiences as the weather changes slam into the granite upthrust quickly and consistently. Kristie and I had planned our trip around her time off as a full-time ER pharmacist. Late September in the Needles had seemed like a good idea. The snow forecast we saw on-line the day we left Fresno? Well, we hoped some crazy California meteorologist was spending too much time in Mendocino. When we woke up to white flakes on the third day, we realized we were the ones in the wrong.

Snow or not, it's hard to pass up the routes on the Sorcerer's east face. Thin Ice, at 10b, is the easiest route on the face. If you've ever considered climbing in the Needles you're bound to have heard of the others: Ice Pirates 5.11b, Atlantis 5.11c, Don Juan Wall 5.11b, Davy Jones Locker 5.12b, Sirocco 5.12 – the list keeps going. Kristie had been on Atlantis years before and wanted to come back and lead the crux. To get there she had to start with a consistently pumpy 5.10c layback to a short, scary face sequence on hollow flakes. By the time I got the belay before the crux the shade had settled over the face, so I donned two layers of down and a pair of gloves, and asked Kristie if she might give me her hat to put on top of mine. I swaddled below while Kristie started the crux, right off the belay ledge. Good gear and an attentive belay allow you to clear the ledge if you fall, but it's not over after the first moves. The thin, shallow, left-facing corner requires

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mental mettle, precise feet, and a willingness to keep throwing for side pulls even when pumped out of your gourd.

While belaying in the Needles, it's easy to get distracted by another line. If your partner takes a while, you have even more time to scope out your next objective. While up in the shade on Atlantis, I noticed that Don Juan had sun for almost two hours more and made the executive decision to go there the next day, hoping to be able to climb wearing less clothing.

With one 5.9, one 5.10, and three sustained 5.11 pitches, Don Juan is a demanding endeavour. Exposure can also be a factor because it is perched on the southeastern edge of the Sorcerer, where the wall cleaves down below as you climb corner systems and flakes. Even further below lies the Kern River Drainage, the source of the howling updrafts that barrel up 1,200 m of elevation to shove me around just as I made the delicate moves outside of the corner on pitch three. I had the sun to my advantage, and a crack to leave and another to join, but the space in-between expanded in my head to become a gulf of insecurity. This is a common feeling when climbing in the Needles.

The Needles are an oasis of solitude compared to granite crack

destinations like Yosemite and Squamish; I knew this and planned for it in the middle of a six-week trad tour of the west. Part of the lack of crowds has to do with the remoteness of the area, the altitude and the lore. During our seven-day visit we saw only five other parties. Half of these we also saw during our rest day at the nearby Ponderosa Lodge, home to burgers, beers, Wi Fi, and enough James Taylor to infect every climber we ran into afterwards with Sweet Baby Jane.

Other tourists visit the Needles, like the 45-member Japanese tour group that pulled into what we considered our own campsite on day four. Thankfully, they just hiked to the lookout and patted our packs as we passed them. Warm fall weekends can be busy, with hikers and climbers alike, but the Needles swallow climbers into their various cirques and the rock demands a focus that makes any neighbours you have disappear. There is a plethora of routes, though finding information on the more obscure ones can be difficult. Guidebooks to the area are hard to come by and the 1992 *Southern Sierra Rock Climbing*, by Moser, Vernon and Paul, is out of print and so rare that the one copy we had on the trip was referred to as The Bible. Still, we were in better shape with this than the mimeographed, dog-eared pages a party from Arizona had for their reference.







There is a lack of available information on obscure Needles climbs, so most people tend to climb the same routes. The classics are classic, after all, for a reason. Igor Unchained, Airy Interlude and Yellow Brick Road are all 5.10a or easier. All offer technical climbing at their grade. Expect steep faces, serious jams, thin stems, fine granite and the biggest crowd the Needles can drum up. Thankfully for us the more moderate classics all had afternoon sun and made for good rewards after the chilly Sorcerer's east face.

The 120 m wide main cirque of the Needles contains most of the prominent climbing features: the Sorcerer, the Witch, the Charlatan and several other smaller sub-needles. It's easy to move across the chasm from one feature to another and chase sun or shade as the day requires. However tempting it may be to stay in this drainage, the other faces and formations are worth exploring as well, though it's best to use the more established route into and out of the various drainages. Kristie and I, deciding that a dashed line on a topo clearly meant a good trial, ended up circumnavigating the main cluster of the domes on our second day. Though we got to know the area a

bit better, the extra two-hour thrash through manzanita and scrub oak, followed by endless scrambling, seemed a bit like overkill. Still, it got us to our objective for the day, the moderate Yellow Brick Road 5.9+, a 100 m, two- to three-pitch route climbing a wide slash of yellow lichen on the Wizard's west face.

Like any climbing area that ranks high on the hit list for trad climbers, the Needles make you earn your pitches. It isn't always obvious or easy to get to your intended routes, and the more you veer off the beaten track of the dozen more trafficked routes, the more this is true. Expect to scramble and be constantly looking for ways to link up ledges, boulders, and ramp systems to the base of the formations. You'll be rewarded if you do. Case in point: the Raven 5.11b on the west face of the Sorcerer. After three days shrouded in down on the east face of the formation, we headed west to catch afternoon sun on the orange and yellow rock. While it had been nuking the drainage to the east, the wind was calm just around the corner. We shed down jackets and hats and climbed a warm right-facing tips crack and stemming corner.



The Needles are an oasis of solitude compared to granite crack destinations like Yosemite and Squamish.



Majka Burhadt on The Don  
Jaun Wall 5.11b, The Sorcerer

## Season

May to October is the best time to climb in the Needles. Contact the forest service to ensure the Needles Lookout Road is open.

## Guidebooks + Topos

The out of print *Southern Sierra Rock Climbing: Needles*, by Moser, Vernon and Paul, is a great resource if you can find it. On-line, check out Clint Cummings and Alex Cooper's *Needles Mini Guide* at <http://www.monsteroffwidth.com/NeedlesMiniGuide/index.html>

## Nearby Attractions

The Ponderosa Lodge is a couple of km from the junction of the dirt road (21s05) and 190. Gas, Internet access, staples, food, pool, beer, and the occasional Harley meeting can be found here. The California Hot Springs, a resort, is an hour away and charges \$10 for a dip and a shower.

## Rack

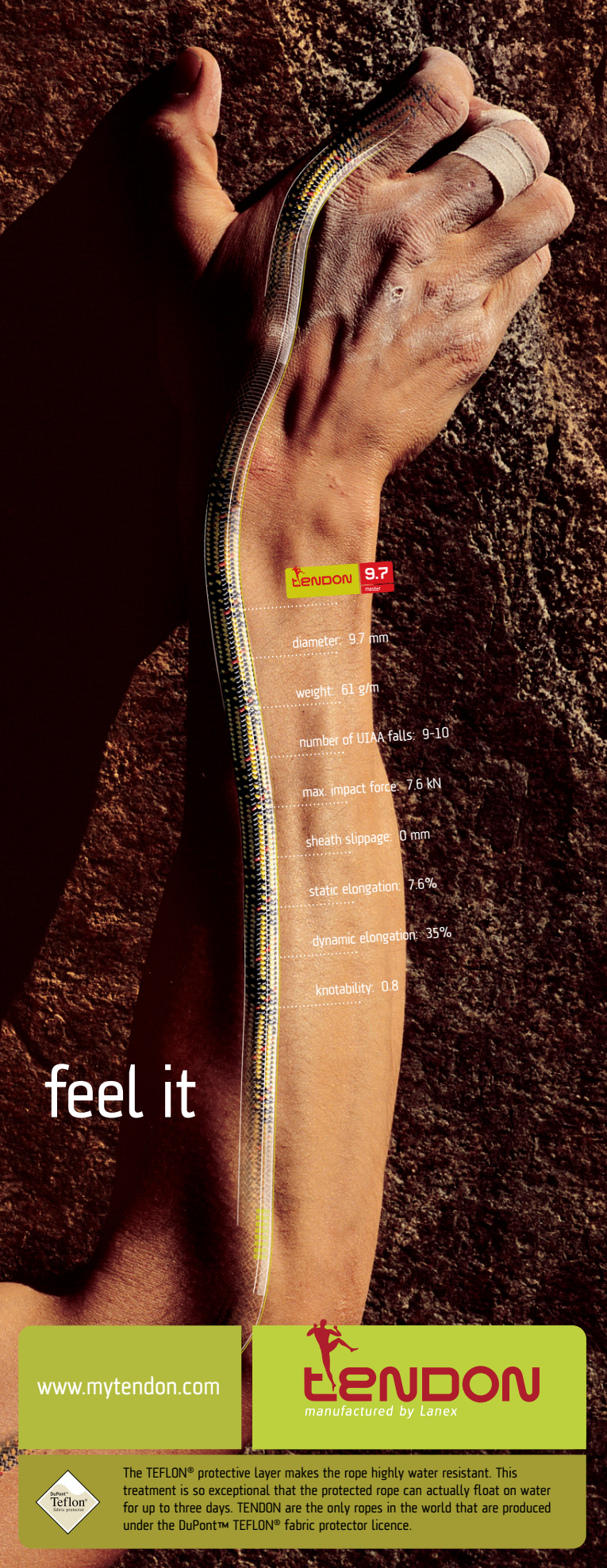
Bring a double set of micro nuts to 4" pieces. Many of the climbs in the Needles are outfitted with bolts, which makes retreat easy mid-route. Recent re-bolting has made the area

safer and more consistently climber-friendly. If you're planning to retreat, a tag line or double ropes make things easier, but watch out for the wind when tossing your ropes.

## Camping

Basic camping can be found at the trailhead to the Needles where there is a pit toilet, a handful of flat sites and no water. Further west is Quaking Aspen Campground with water and trash facilities. Camping is free at the trailhead and makes for the rare experience of a trip where you can park your car when you arrive and not start it again until you leave.





**TENDON 9.7**  
mm

diameter: 9.7 mm

weight: 61 g/m

number of UIAA falls: 9-10

max. impact force: 7.6 kN

sheath slippage: 0 mm

static elongation: 7.6%

dynamic elongation: 35%

knotability: 0.8

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Kristie Arend on Atlantis 5.11+, The Sorcerer

With so many climbs to do in the Needles, it's best to evaluate your appetite before doing the approach each day. We had seven days and wanted to climb ten days' worth of routes. Add funky weather, a snow day, and time to thaw, and it's no wonder we hiked out by headlamp each night.

The scalloped domes take on a lunar feel as the sun sets behind them. Rays of the moon cut through the branches of the giant evergreens, catching the massive pinecones perched lazily at the ends of branches like squirrel tails. The hike out stretches and contracts depending on how tired you are and conversations do the same. With each day we climbed, my fatigue grew, but so did my desire to wake up the next day and return for more. When people ask me why I climb I always say it's because it's the one thing that aligns my mind and body. I've never felt that to be truer than in the Needles. Going there made me realize that the ten years leading up to this trip were not about desire, but being haunted. Before I even knew what it would feel like to climb the delicate flakes or razor cracks I was infected by this place. As climbers, we're driven towards what haunts us. Maybe the Needles is the perfect place to go to understand why.

*Majka Burhardt is a writer and guide living in Colorado.*