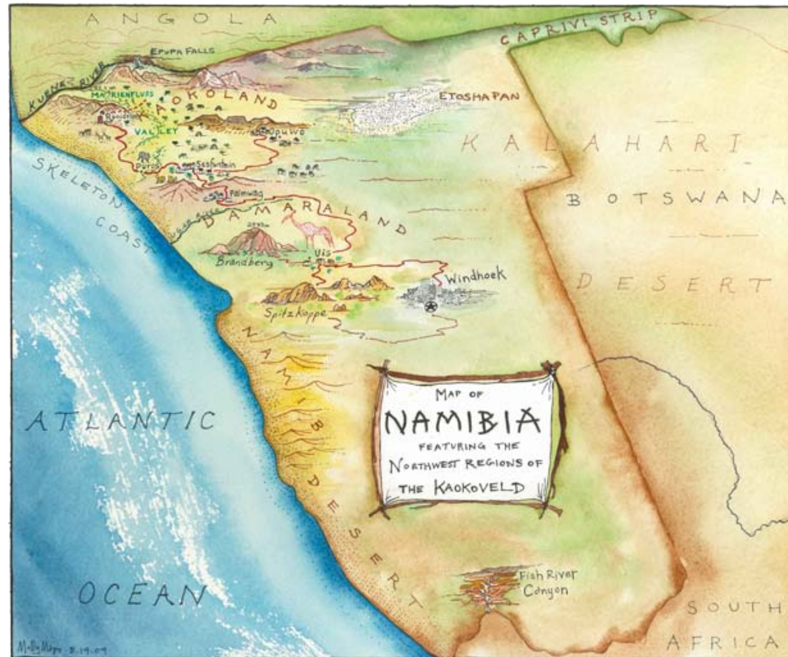
Searching for Namibia

Majka Burhardt

The Arctic Ocean can swallow a nine-foot canoe, and the two women in it, with one breath of a wave. Six of us dipped and sliced our wooden paddles, each keeping one eye on the pattern of the water and the other on the shore. Dark waves turned frothy and light as they met earthen sand and tundra. By group consensus, we'd sealed our watches with duct tape. The midnight sun circled the horizon, never setting. We'd been on our journey for thirty-three days, a number we arrived at by counting how many times we slept.

Up ahead, a stretch of green land shimmered with potential: a place to rest or a mirage we'd never find on a map. The specter of a structure rose with hard, angular lines unfamiliar to nature. Vertical silhouettes appeared next to the building. They began to move. Closer still, I saw faces.

The bow of my canoe made contact with the sand. A small Inuit boy reached his hand out to catch a line. I kept my paddle in the water. "Welcome to our home," his family said. Their English was clearer than my own. I shielded my eyes. *The whole point of a pristine wilderness experience,* I thought, *was to be completely alone.* That night, I wrote in my journal in a seventeen-year-old's scrawl: "My expedition is over. Today, we saw people."



One hand can bridge a two-inch fissure of Ethiopian sandstone. I reached both of mine far into an orange seam and felt the outside layers break against the pivot of my elbows. Inside, out of sight, flesh and rock held together. Feet torqued toward each other, automatically, and I was familiar to myself on foreign stone. I looked down at my belayer: Helen was a single British dot among a sea of Ethiopian children. Below us a terraced hillside sheltered homes, families, donkeys and cows. The rock ahead grew more solid, my cams bit, young laughter lifted from the crowd, and I was happy, for a bodylength, until the stone began to peel again. I lowered off a collection of pieces. Before my feet hit the ground, my body was covered in small hands.

When I first fell in love with the wild, I saw it as a place where humanity and structure were absent. Adventures allowed me to enact my daydreams across an unfamiliar geography—a space where I could imagine myself free from the restrictions of daily existence and urban life. Even before I became a climber, I treasured remoteness as an unquestioned value: the farther I hiked into the backcountry to get to a peak, the more I could encounter life in an elemental, unmediated way. And if I could get far enough afield, the reward would be total seclusion. Rawness.

There are few places, however, where you can climb without encountering people who consider that "wilderness" their home. As historians Michael S. Reidy, Gary Kroll and Erik M. Conway write, "The ideal of exploration was historically predicated on the faulty assumption that the wilderness has no previous human presence…. The term 'terra incognita,' meaning unknown land, was always uttered by people coming from the core [of the developed world] who rarely appreciated that the periphery was already known by other people."[1]

When I came back from the Arctic and went to college, I felt severed from my canoe mates, and I took refuge in anthropology seminars and the exploration of groups. Four years of study folded me into a new curiosity about the intersection of culture and adventure. I started writing, I began learning about climbing history, and I kept asking questions.

Since the 1960s, when American climbers forsook mainstream society to dwell in Yosemite's Camp 4, we've often pictured our lifestyle as part of a counterculture, belonging more to the "periphery" of the developed world. We like to distinguish ourselves from tourists. But does sticking our hands and feet in cracks really result in a more enlightened vision of other marginalized groups?

In 2007 I traveled to Ethiopia to write about the wild coffee forests. As I passed the shrouded southern basalt plugs, I imagined what might be in the drier north. A local publisher invited me to work on a book about how a foreign climber viewed the Horn of Africa. I received an email from a prospective climbing partner: "Hey, do you think we'd be able to stop at an orphanage for a half day or something so we can make this a social action trip?"

I cringed at those words, yet I wondered. During foreign expeditions, many climbers produce photos, movies, slideshows, articles, blogs—including pictures and stories of the local people. What responsibility are we taking on when we display images of another culture without acknowledging the risks of misrepresentation? What are the consequences if we ignore the people altogether and just focus on the pitches?

In northern Ethiopia, the population overlapped the base of the sandstone spires; it was impossible to distill adventure from culture or vice versa. Exploration suddenly seemed to align for me in that juncture—and all the time I spent outside made more sense.

Photos of echoing emptiness drew me to Namibia. In the first picture, a scraggly rock face rose to a beveled granite prow. Its curve mirrored the shape of a mud-covered hut below. The cliff was three fingers high; the building was two. How tall was the unseen person who lived in that hut? How small would I be if I found my way to the granite behind?

The woman in the second picture was looking away. What was so interesting off in the distance that I couldn't see? Her hair was tightly wrapped and coated red. A leather headdress adorned the top of her head, silhouetted against the same blanched-out background of the first picture. *She is looking at the hut,* I thought. Except I didn't really know this. I didn't know anything about her at all.

By the time I left for Namibia in 2009, my research files were twelve inches thick, and the gaps in my knowledge seemed only to have widened. The rock face, the hut and the woman with the ochre-covered hair were all in the northern edge of the country, in the Marienfluss Valley of the Kuene Region (aka "Kaoko"). I had GPS coordinates for the location; printouts of distances, fuel costs and water stations; and information about the local Himba tribe. As far as I knew, no one had ever climbed on that massif. To me, the stone looked wild and remote. To the people who lived nearby, it was their backyard. Between those perspectives lay an expanse that seemed bewildering. I wanted to comprehend the space that separated the woman, the rock, and myself—to find out whether the act of climbing gave me any means to connect.

During the late 1800s, when Germans gained control of Namibia, they settled mostly in the south and along the coast—areas that had mineral, farming or fishing resources. The arid north remained a frontier land, isolated and difficult to reach. In the imaginations of the colonialists, the legend of Kaoko as a "mysterious," "unfathomable" and "fantastic" place began.[2]

After World War I, South Africa took over from Germany and established a policy of "containment," limiting travel into—and out of—Kaoko, partly to create a buffer zone against Angola and to prevent the spread of livestock disease to white-owned farms in the south. Some South African government officials argued that this separation would preserve an "unspoiled" native culture from the outside world. By doing so, the government erased a complex past in which ethnic and national boundaries were more fluid[3]: some of these supposedly 'pre-modern' people had previously served as mercenaries in the war with Angola, worked on plantations and traded with the Portuguese. Now cordoned off from the rest of Namibia, they returned to a pastoral, nomadic life.[4]

Over time, what anthropologists now call the "Kaoko myth"[5] developed into images of a "timeless" wilderness, "a place without history."[6] Among the groups living there, the "Himba" came to be most closely associated with this raw landscape—as if they were human embodiments of an untamed and untrammeled nature.[7] After Namibia gained independence in 1990, tourist companies advertised tours to visit the Himba and see the last of "old Africa" and the "Real Namibia." Photos of Himba women appeared in postcards, foreign magazines, books and websites that displayed them as "primeval beauties" and focused on their breasts.[8] Depending on their political aims, government members, indigenous rights groups and environmentalists portrayed the Himba lifestyle as idyllic or backward, sustainable or impoverished, in perfect harmony with the earth or in desperate need of development.[9]

[Opening Spread] **Spitzkoppe, Namibia.** Gabe Rogel | [Facing Page] **In 1990 Namibia cast off South African rule and wrote conservation into its constitution. The name "Namibia" comes from the Namib Desert, which stretches 200 kilometers inland from the Skeleton Coast and contains the largest conservation area in southern Africa. In addition, Community Based Natural Resource Management—a system wherein a local community forms a "communal conservancy" to manage its land, wildlife and tourism assets—is growing. As of 2010, fifty-nine conservancies cover 130 square kilometers. Much of Namibia's population still relies upon subsistence agriculture, but in 2008 tourism brought over $5 million US to the country.** Majka Burhardt collection | [This Page] **Peter Doucette, Kate Rutherford and Majka Burhardt at the Brandberg (8,550').** Gabe Rogel

In many of these narratives, a common thread persisted: the fantasy of Kaoko and its various inhabitants as the opposite of modern civilization, the ultimate 'Other.' In 1925 the Denver African Expedition had set off to the Namibia with headlines announcing: "Tiny Ape and Pigmy Bushman to Be Sought by Denver Party." They returned with exotic-looking pictures of the San people that helped create the stereotype of the 'noble savage.' Today, anyone would find the racism of that concept horrifying. But how much had changed since colonialism and apartheid, beyond a shift in rhetoric?

In my own voice, while I worked to get my climbing expedition funded, I presented the Himba as the Last Great Southern African Pastoral Tribe. As a climber, I instinctually longed for the unknown, the mysterious, the 'undiscovered' in nature. Post-World War II air travel opened many areas of the globe to exploratory climbing. Yet the long years of containment had kept Kaoko mostly off the map. Looking through the frames of the photos, I couldn't help dreaming about a pristine rock face at the edge of a rugged land, a marginalized culture, and something else that seemed more enigmatic—and possibly troubling—the myths that haunt all our desires as climbers in foreign lands.

On my first pitch in Namibia, the granite slab seemed to grow and shred beneath my fingers and toes. In the corners of my eyes, an ocean of dry grass unrolled toward the horizon, splotched here and there with acacia trees and shadows. Lunar, scalloped huecos and thin granite fingers reached toward a sky of nothingness. I couldn't get my feet or my mind to grasp this place. Everything—stone, desert, sky—seemed vast, stark, scarcely differentiated. Footholds crinkled to dust like old paper. Arms shaking, I pinched the carabiner open as far as it would go and groveled toward the first bolt.

Before I could say, "Take," my partner Kate Rutherford had me tight.

I leaned on the rope, my body barely changing position in a shallow tripod with my feet and harness as the points. Kate and I were a mere three hours from the capital city, Windhoek, still waiting for the rest of our five-person team. Spitzkoppe, the 1,200-foot granite plug that was supposed to provide our "warm-up," had been at the center of Namibian climbing for the past 100 years. By most accounts, however, there are fewer than twenty Namibian climbers. South Africans had established the majority of the ninety-plus lines.

I twisted so I could see Kate, fifteen feet below. *That initial bolt was almost my last.* "I get it," I said. "I thought you'd given me the first pitch to be magnanimous."

Kate was in the shade, her whole posture relaxed until the moment she needed to perform. She swaggered a bit. "I gave it to you because this was your idea."

My fingertips were sweating. The stone vibrated in the sun. I stood on my feet, palmed the rock, and moved upward to more that was new.

A week later, our teammates began to arrive. Gabe Rogel's eyes were as big as his camera lenses. Peter Doucette, my boyfriend, looked flushed even on a cool, 90°F Namibian day. After Chris Alstrin, clad in an orange shirt (one of two he'd brought for the month) picked up our

[Facing Page] **Doucette climbs Watersports (SA Grade 20: 5.10+, Hüfner-Modrewski-Pretorius, 2001), Spitzkoppe.** Gabe Rogel | [This Page, Top] **The Damara people mine the open land near Spitzkoppe for gems and minerals.** | [This Page, Middle] **Men in the northern Kaoko area often dress in Western clothing, while many women maintain traditional outfits.** Peter Doucette (both) | [This Page, Bottom] **A model "Himba village" in Kaoko, where people demonstrate traditional practices. "At first," says Burhardt, "paying admission in what we feared was some open-air zoo seemed inappropriate. But who were we to decide what was inappropriate?" Local people told her that the village gave tourists a better understanding of regional life. "If they come to my real home next," one woman explained, "they will know what I am doing."** Gabe Rogel

second truck at the airport and drove to Spitzkoppe, we spent two days climbing routes that Kate and I had sussed out. At night, we grilled boreworst, yams and butternut squash and washed our faces with hot water. A circle of trees and boulders protected our tent from the light and heat of the plains. Israeli and South African climbers camped next to Namibian and German hikers. *We might be in Joshua Tree,* I thought. *Only with bigger rocks.*

"Why leave?" Gabe said on our rest day. He reclined on a camp chair, while his laptop charged in the truck. We had tuna and cheese sandwiches and cold beer for lunch. "It's perfect here." He rolled his head. "And there are routes, already."

By now I'd grown used to the runout slabs. The granite outcrops that marked the open grassland seemed familiar. Local Damara families lined the surrounding roads, displaying chunks of feldspar, topaz and aquamarine for sale. We stopped and picked up crystals from their tables, just like the Namibian tourists who came out from Windhoek to camp here on the weekends. Spitzkoppe is a part of a conservancy, a land management system recently created to enable rural people to self-govern their resources. We paid a camping fee to the community, took showers, climbed arching cracks and clipped bolts. Our roles were easily defined. Why *would* we leave? Northward, toward Orion's upside-down belt and the limitless plains, lay that Romantic unknown that I cherished and questioned at the same time.

Piet Steenkamp, a fourth-generation Namibian who paraglides at Spitzkoppe, marked all three fuel stops on the way to Kaoko on our map. "Never pass up petrol," he said. "Ever." When he'd learned we were climbers, he decided we were part of the same tribe of adventurers. He put all five of us up at his house and lent us scads of camping equipment. He'd been to the Marienfluss Valley a few months before. "Not to climb, no way," he said. "Just to get out." When I'd asked him how it was, he said, "It was the real Namibia."

For the next five days, we drove our two trucks into a landscape where there was only one person for every two square miles. Villages appeared like dots between vast stretches of open land. English is Namibia's official language, but here we found few speakers. None of us knew the other languages used in the north: the local Bantu dialects, Afrikaans, German or Portuguese. Our budget was too small to hire a guide.

Every mile made me more aware of our reliance on the trucks. I tried to remember Piet's ten-minute how-to-patch-your-tire-with-a-piece-of-thread lecture. Outside the windows, the high desert heat swelled above 100°F. Springbok darted across the road. Red-washed hills became potential cliff faces, then faded into gentle slopes. Blanched grasses blurred conical upthrusts and vertical bands.

"Is that?" Kate started.

"Any good?" I finished.

"Choss rating, anyone?" Peter asked. He zoomed his camera in. I kept my eye on the road, although we were only going 10 mph.

"C3, maybe 4," Kate said.

"Do you think the heat waves make it look better or worse?" I asked.

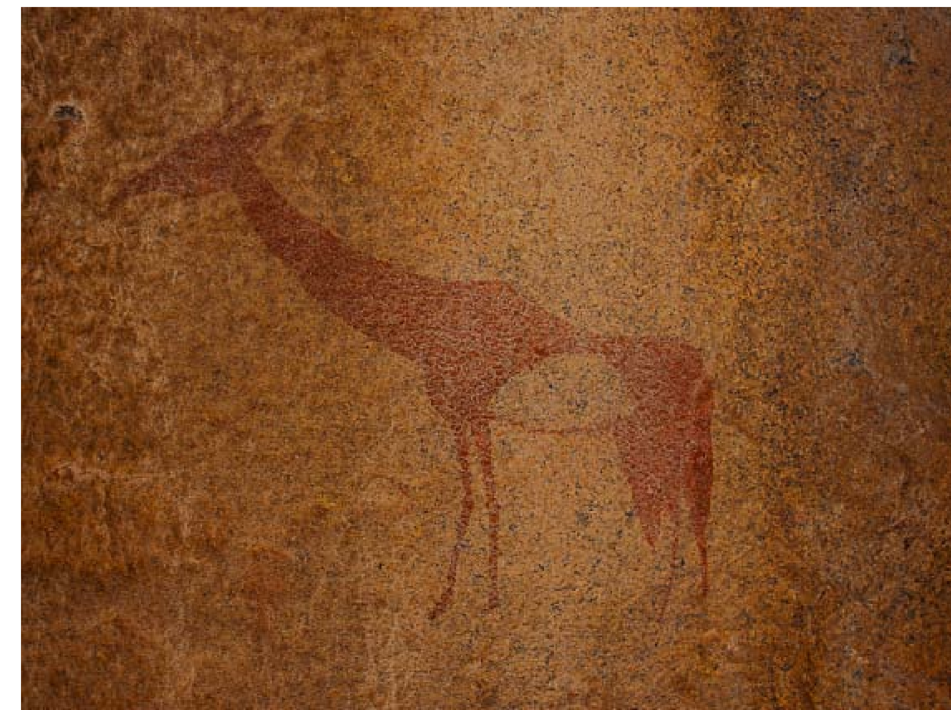
"I'm not convinced it's even rock," Peter said. He swung his camera to the other side of the car. "But those are definitely ostriches."

What makes a cliff worth exploring? I wondered. *Why were any of these less valid than what I'd seen in the photos?*

"It's gotta look good to get out of the car," Kate said. She put her binoculars back down.

"Any of it's probably possible," Peter said. He shrugged.

We kept driving. The winter before, in a snowed-in New Hampshire condo, Peter and I had tried to locate the rock face on Google Earth, but we never found anything that looked like our photo, and we never admitted that the face might not be striking enough to stand out in a satellite image. Piet said he saw climbable rocks up there, yet he'd told us that the ones we were now passing were climbable as well.



Over the days, the graded dirt roads gave way to riverbeds and sand. Endless washboarded expanses sliced our path twenty-five miles inland from the Skeleton Coast. Again and again, we got out of the trucks to navigate through massive ruts or to lighten the load over rocks with edges small and sharp enough to pierce all our tires. A similar vehicle rumbled toward us, pulling a trailer. All the toughness I'd felt diminished. While we were alone, the landscape had seemed like ours. Two more trucks followed in a caravan. I tried to erase the tourists' faces from my memory the instant I saw them.

In that moment, I didn't think too much about what I felt: I was just trying to reach northern Namibia without wrecking a truck and dying from heatstroke or snakebite. But now I can name that flutter in my sense of purpose. That same flutter had occurred when I arrived in the Windhoek airport and saw poster after poster of the Himba people as a tourist advertisement, alongside pictures of desert and giraffes. That flutter was my discontent at the reminder that I was not the *first*.

Early adventure travelers began visiting Kaoko in the 1930s.[10] Anthropologist Dag Henrichsen, who grew up on the Namibian coast, remembers his father inviting him on a "*Herrensafari*—a gentleman's safari" in 1985. After obtaining government permits, white settlers ventured into Kaoko on extended road trips, almost as a rite of passage, an "'escape'…out of modernity." They re-emerged feeling as if they had "mastered a seemingly uncivilized, hazardous and unmapped region by putting their powerful 4x4s and themselves to the test." A generation later, Henrichsen interpreted such journeys differently. "Beneath such a sentimental pilgrim narrative," he wrote, "lies a clear imperialist logic, that of appropriating space and history."[11]

The blanks on our vertical maps may also suggest pure, empty spaces where any dreams could be realized and any terrain could be conquered, named, possessed. I'm not convinced, however, that climbing is inherently a colonialist impulse. Perhaps that's what I'm writing this story to find out.

Our journey was bringing us into a landscape already marked with European names: the Hartmann Mountains, the Van Zyl Pass. At last, a final scar of road led over a slate-covered rise, through a dried-out riverbed and into the Marienfluss Valley. The stretched-out landscape tightened, and hundreds of gentle craggy peaks and ridgelines filled the view. In the afternoon light, the heat of the day became opaque in its radiant yellow. Deep inside that glimmer, the rock face from my picture lined up with the one on the horizon.

Two hours later, only a long valley separated us from the face. The broad granite prow left a series of smaller prows in its ancient wake. We pulled off the side of the road to park. A young Himba girl came running from a nearby homestead to meet us. Her ochre-covered braids reflected the sun. Her home was not the one I'd seen in the photo.

Chris and Gabe had their cameras out and Kate and I stepped forward. "Hello," we said, almost in unison.

"Sugar?" the girl said.

We smiled. "Hello," I said again.

"Sweet?" the girl said.

Kate shook her head. She pointed at the rock face. We shuffled back and forth, pretending to hike. We looked up at the rock, back at the girl. I smiled. The girl smiled. Kate, Peter and I laughed. The girl laughed, then her gaze moved between all of us. "Water?" she asked.

Inside our trucks was a case of staples—cornmeal, flour, extra vegetables—for when we needed gifts. We hadn't decided what "needing" meant. It was our first day. We didn't know how much water we required for ourselves. How do you explain any of this without a language?

More people—*The girl's family?*—joined us. They all seemed to be waiting for us to go home. We tucked ourselves back into our familiar trucks and passed other homesteads. *Whose land was whose?* The sunset accentuated miniature valleys and slanting rock domes, stretching the valley long in front of us. Mountains and hills tripped against each other and poured into the plains. We were caught between them all.

We camped two miles away. An hour after sunrise, we followed a cattle track toward the face to scout our route. In less than thirty minutes, I drank a liter of water. Two miles away, the prow had been in the sun since daybreak. A checkered patchwork of discontinuous systems fractured the rock.

[Facing Page] **Throughout Namibia and the world, most media publications portray the Himba lifestyle as the opposite of modernity. The woman in this photo allowed Gabe Rogel to take her picture after Burhardt and the others climbed near her home. Yet does the image still perpetuate a simplified view? In a 2008 *New York Times* article, Elinor Burkett describes a Himba woman's willingness to trade traditional dress for factory-produced clothes.** Gabe Rogel | [This Page] **The rock art at the Brandberg is estimated to be 4,000 years old. On this same mountain in 2009, Burhardt's team established the first ascent of Southern Crossing (V 5.11+) and Painted Giraffe (V 5.9).** Peter Doucette

"It looks scruffy," I said, "like it needs to shave."

"It looks hot," Peter said.

"Maybe if we got up super, super early?" Kate said.

"We could climb the whole thing at night," Peter said. "But even that is hot."

Our walking slowed. A worn-out tire track traced a path through the sand. Gabe offered to get one of the trucks so we could drive to a side valley, where the shadow of a high corner system appeared steeper, better and cleaner. The rest of us crept between spots of shade toward our original objective.

"Passable," I said.

"It's climbable," Peter said, "but do we want to climb it?"

Chris stayed in the shade to video our deflating sense of purpose.

From the shadow of an acacia tree, a Himba man and woman watched us. We hiked back down to join them. I gestured toward the rock, and Kate made climbing motions. The man nodded, looked in the direction of the face, and pointed at us. A dilapidated hut stood behind them. Squinting, I lined it all up. The photo. We were here. I peered at the woman—was she the one from the other picture? I looked closer. How would I know? I didn't, I realized, even know when the photo was from. It could be twenty years old; it could be two. I'd equated the woman and the hut because of the same landscape, but really, they might have nothing to do with each other. There was blanched-out land everywhere, if you took the photo right.

Like so many Western travelers before me, I'd chosen to meld all the images I'd seen into a singular perception of what I thought I would find. But now, stretched out by days and miles and experience, connections dissolved and were replaced by questions that were harder to answer, but more satisfying to have.

I wiped my brow, exaggerating the movement, shaking the sweat off my hand. The woman laughed. She pointed at the tree. We stayed with them until Gabe arrived.

An hour of sand-tracked driving later, we reached another, greener valley. A round homestead stood below the approach to the corner system. A young couple with their baby walked toward us. Kate and I started to re-enact our earlier pantomiming. They frowned.

"I think they're just waiting for us to leave," Gabe said. He motioned in the other direction, and the man nodded. This family's home presided over the only access. *Do those corners really look good enough?*

We shuffled back to the truck and drove away.

"That didn't feel good," Peter said.

"If it's not worth it," I said. "We don't have to do it."

It was 113°F on Peter and Kate's watches. We'd seen our first scorpion the night before. No matter how we approached the massif, we were miles of thicketed grass away from a marginal first ascent that promised only heatstroke, snakes, poor rock quality and a feeling of trespass.

Across from the mud hut in my photo, a tumbled-together hillside and boulder outcrop with an eastern granite face tentatively emerged from the plains. Cracks punctuated the face, ending mid-stretch

[This Page] **Peter Doucette on Painted Giraffe (V 5.9), an unintentional first ascent on Brandberg's 2,000-foot Orabeskopf wall. He and the others were trying to repeat Dogbreath (SA Grade 13–17: 5.5–5.8), but later realized they'd climbed the wrong chimney. Namibian Ron Lichman and South African Ray Blumgart had made the first ascent of Dogbreath in 1974. Blumgart's motto was: "If you're not having an epic, you're not having fun."** Gabe Rogel

upward or sideways. Scalloped protrusions suggested shallow corners. The face was ten times smaller than our intended objective, but it was in the shade. That afternoon, I showed my Ethiopia book to a group of Himba women sitting under some trees near the base. I pointed to one of the climbing pictures. They pointed to me. I nodded. I waved toward the short rock face behind us, then back to the page and I smiled. "OK?" I said. They smiled and flipped through the book. *Maybe I have permission.*

Gabe and Chris scrambled along the north ridge to take pictures. Peter led up a short ramp while Kate and I spooled out rope, not even bothering to put him on belay. "Tell me when you get a piece," Kate said.

Forty feet later, he placed two. "It's sick up here," he said, "5.6, maybe 5.7 sick." A hundred feet out, he stopped, because, as he explained later, he thought it would be nice to have two pitches instead of one on our ascent in northwestern Namibia.

Kate and I climbed next to each other. The stone radiated heat into our hands. I took the rack at the belay, moved a bodylength and placed another piece of gear. The rock felt substantial. I looked over my shoulder at the forgotten prow. I turned back and committed to what was before me. I frictioned over to another corner. Methodically I tested flakes and footholds, paying attention only to the act of climbing until there was no place left to go. Ninety minutes after we started, we were all on the "summit."

Down the valley, the higher prow gleamed in the evening light. Peter, Kate and I sat together on a perched boulder—the highest point of the granite nub. Below us, a steady stream of cattle worked their way up a dried-out riverbed toward their home.

A young Himba man waited at the bottom. When Gabe reached him, the man began clapping and smiling. By the time the rest of us arrived, the two had their arms around each other.

"This is my brother," Gabe said.

"Brother," the man said. He poked Gabe in the ribs. "Home?" he asked, and he pointed back to where we'd come from.

"Us, too?" Gabe said.

We loaded into the trucks, six of us now. The man was now wearing Gabe's shirt. His home was the one where we'd seen the first girl. Ten people were waiting. They stared at our bright green rope. Some of the women rolled it between their hands. They laughed at us, and we laughed back. An older man spoke in a language that sounded almost familiar. "Portuguese?" he asked.

"Angola?" I asked. *Is that where he learned it?*

He nodded and smiled. "War," he said in English.

He pointed to the summit, then swept one arm back, hand spread to catch the air. He made the other into a tight plank and shot it straight up, forming a mismatched triangle where the two met. He pointed to himself, elegantly swept his right hand toward us, and decisively took his left upward.

"You go this way?" I asked. He laughed.

I tried Spanish; he switched to Afrikaans. He crouched down; I did the same. We stood up together. We tried to find words for each other's actions in the mirror.

The women touched Kate's straight hair and my curls. They let us touch their wrapped braids. A light dusting of ochre soon covered my fingers. Mothers grabbed their children, and husbands clasped their wives to show who belonged to whom. Peter and I took each other's hands, and everyone smiled. A pregnant woman placed my hands on her belly, so I could feel her baby kick. She rapped at my empty stomach, as if knocking on a door. She shook her head and pointed at the rock face above. To me, the connections of those gestures and images made sense. I didn't know, however, what they really meant to her. That night, my fingers smelled of her perfume, and my hands could still feel the vibration of her baby.

I've had a year, now, to think about that moment. It wasn't the last climb of our trip. Afterward, we went back south and did a "proper" first ascent of a 1,200-foot granite crack system on the Brandberg, Namibia's highest mountain at 8,550 feet. But although it was much longer and much harder than the two-pitch route in Kaoko, it felt less meaningful to me. During the week we lived at the base, we saw a single group of South African hikers. Otherwise there was no sign of other people, except for a giraffe someone had painted on a nearby boulder 4,000 years ago. It was the context of a climb, I realized, that gave it nuance and dimension. Separate an ascent from its surroundings—from the history of the land and the stories of those who dwell in it—claim its terrain for your own, and it's just a line on a wall, a name on a topo, a form of vertical colonialism.

It's not the *terra incognita* anymore so much that fascinates me, but the *known* geography, something that, paradoxically, I've found more difficult to define. During the Kaoko climb, I can't help thinking that we shared *something* with the family below: whether it was a universal human understanding of clambering over stone, or the absurdity of our actions, or the willingness, nonetheless, to struggle and to try. Based on the laughter and the shaking of heads, it might have been the sheer comedy of the whole endeavor. Or perhaps whatever it was that passed between us is the gift of climbing. It's the soul of our sport. ∎

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10. Bollig and Heinemann (2002: 270).
11. Dag Henrichsen, "Pilgrimages into Kaoko: Herrensafaris, 4X4s and Settler Illusions," in *New Notes on Kaoko.* 159, 184–185.

[Facing Page] **Rutherford and Burhardt climbing at Spitzkoppe. A three-hour drive from the capital city, Windhoek, Spitzkoppe contains over ninety established routes, from granite slabs to intermittent cracks. A locally run conservancy offers camping to visiting hikers and climbers—part of Namibia's Community Based Natural Resource Management. Namibia is one of the least densely populated nations in the world, yet currently about one out of every eight Namibians is a member of a conservancy.** Gabe Rogel