



BOLTING FOR TOMORROW

Re-creating climbing and self in East Africa

| By Majka Burhardt ■ Photos by Peter Doucette |

SOME DREAMS DIE HARD. Take Ethiopian rock, for example: It shimmers with the promise of high quality. Ribbons of ruddy sandstone arc high and cleave into precise cracks, and convex buttresses offer singular summits. But I'll be the first person to tell you that, despite its appearance, Ethiopian stone is mostly rubbish—and I'll be the last to listen.

Last September, I made my second climbing trip to Ethiopia. The first time, I'd gone with four of my favorite climbing partners and a quintuple set of cams. This time, I arrived with James Mills, a journalist with whom I'd never climbed, and 38 bolts.

I am not a bolter. I am a trad climber who clips other people's bolts when they're convenient. But before we get into an ethical debate, I'll tell you this: I don't really have anything against bolts. What I've always been against is how much blasted *time* it takes to bolt. Before heading to Ethiopia with 40 pounds of bolting gear and a borrowed Bosch Annihilator, I'd usually been the one waiting for the bolter to finish up the job. During the time it's taken to drill a bolt, I've done entire belay-yoga sessions in Corsica, removed a summer of calluses from my hands on top of Lumpy Ridge, and twisted in the wind to the point of puking on a hanging belay at Washington's Goat Wall.

But I didn't tell James all this before we went to Ethiopia. I just told him I had a plan. I also had a job: I was a co-leader for Imagine Ethiopia 2010, an expedition combining community stewardship and adventure. Adventure, as it were, needed a toprope area.

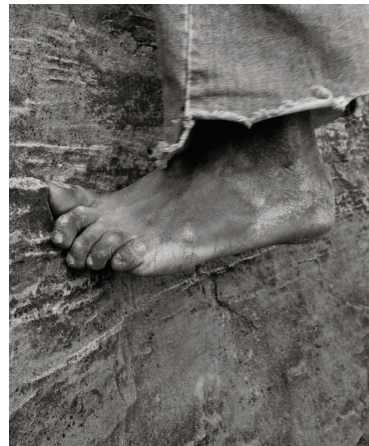
WITHIN 48 HOURS of landing in Addis Ababa, James and I were at the Gheralta Massif in northern Ethiopia. I spied a line, racked up, and began climbing, leaving a pile of bolting gear with James at the belay, with instructions to send it up when I asked. Eight feet later, I asked for the gear.

Two things might be helpful to know at this point: One, I am a bit of a wuss when

it comes to running it out above the ground; and two, the rock in Ethiopia is truly horrible. I'd already seen a perfectly good-looking hold turn into an airborne encyclopedia in those first eight feet. I wanted protection. I wanted it now.

Up came the Bosch, the 12.5-inch-long, half-inch-diameter bit, blow tube, hammer, wrenches, hangers, and a half dozen 5 3/4-inch Rawl 5-piece bolts. (To his credit, James never suggested I just step down two moves so he could hand up this gear from the ground.) I held my stance on a sloping ledge, readied the drill, zeroed in on the highest spot I could reach, drew back—drew way back to accommodate the monster bit—and drilled.

It's not normal for people to power-drill on lead with a 12.5-inch bit. I never would have tried if I were on granite. But I had a theory—one formed from a dozen interviews with some of the most experienced bolters of choss alive. The moment I depressed the trigger, I knew they were right: Bigger is better when bolting dried mud. The rock was like butter—warm, whipped butter—and the bolts would have to be long to be any good. As the bit broke through the rock, I had to try to *not* drill deeper—the rock seemed to suck in the steel. Within moments, I'd placed my first Ethiopian bolt. Ninety minutes and 80 feet later, I'd established a new climb: a glorious 5.5 with an optional 5.7+ finish. I was not in Ethiopia to do a star-spangled 5.15 first ascent. First, I would have to be able to climb 5.15, but that's another matter entirely. I was in the Horn of Africa to create a toprope area—a few good 5.5s, maybe up to a 5.9—and I was on my way.



I SPENT THE WHOLE day bolting. My hammers and wrenches—even my blow tube—sport a spiffy little piece of red p-cord so I could clip them to my harness. Everything clanked and jingled, almost like cams and nuts—but better. Better, I realized, because it was new. That same feeling I'd had back when I was 18 and first racked up to climb came alive again. There is nothing as intoxicating as being adorned with dozens of things you barely know how to use.

James patiently belayed me, never once complaining, never asking if I might be able to speed it up. He even eagerly tunneled his way up the first ascent of one of our easier lines, a sandstone-shedding chimney with bushes that gave him a rash. He was, I could see, a far superior bolting partner than I had ever been. I could have stopped to admire this about him, but I had a job to do. I flitted above in my mechanical playground and connected imaginary lines with real bolts.

Back in 2007, when I was first in Ethiopia, I'd avoided face climbing at all costs.

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Kristie Arend, Caroline George, Helen Dudley, Gabe Rogel, and I ensconced ourselves as deeply in cracks as we could—it was our only safety. And even then, it wasn't that safe. Our dreams of solid rock were pulverized within our first days of climbing. Looking at Ethiopian stone from afar is like being a kid in a fun house who knows the mirrors are distorting reality but still wants to look and to pretend, for just a minute, that what she is seeing might be real. That might be why I said yes when Imagine1day—a non-profit that builds schools in Ethiopia—asked me if I'd like to craft a climbing expedition with them. Thus, Imagine Ethiopia 2010 was born, and I started asking around for a drill.

This time, I knew not to expect greatness from the rock, but I also knew I had to try to deliver a form of greatness to the two dozen expedition members who were about to join me for their first time in Ethiopia. For them, climbing was part of an experience of a new place. This is likely true for any of us climbing in a new land, but sometimes I get so distracted by climbing that I almost forget where I am. Which is why the drill made all the difference.

IN AVERAGE "good" rock, a Bosch Annihilator battery will drill four, maybe five holes. In Ethiopia, one battery drilled 26 holes, and even then it was only halfway drained. This is a very scary fact, as well as an example of the efficiency of bolting in Ethiopia: You can get a lot done in a short amount of time. You can then move on to other important things, like helping to plant 1,000 mango, papaya, and avocado trees surrounding a new primary school. Like laying the brick for a building that will allow children to go to school close to home, when previously they'd walked seven miles on a road where eight of their

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friends had lost their lives in the past year.

I never wanted to be a bolter until bolting added a way for me to reinterpret the meaning of being a climber. Last month in Ethiopia, being a climber meant sharing climbing with others, safely, in a fun environment. Granted, the rock still crumbled, large birds knocked off fragile chunks when they flew in and out of their nests, and our one 5.9 top rope is now 5.10+ after wear and tear. But amid all of that, six routes got climbed by new climbers—Ethiopians, Canadians, Australians, and Americans—and they all said it was the time of their lives.

It's now a month later, and I've bought that drill off the friend who loaned it to me. In part, I did this because I'd blown up his charger with the electrical current in Ethiopia,

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but I also did it for what the drill, a new charger, and I could create. I'm not saying I'm on a bolting binge, or that I have my eye on a new crag near my home in Colorado. But I do recognize that climbing satisfaction, this time, came from a new source—and I might be ready for more. Back when I hated the bolting process, the bolters I hung out with had been climbing for about the amount of time I have now—around 15 years. Maybe that's the gestation period for a new outlook, with or without a drill in hand.

Majka Burhardt does not encourage indiscriminate bolting, or indiscriminate anything. See more about her trip at Majka-burhardt.com/imagine-ethiopia-2010.

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