

COUNTRY STYLE

GOING TRAD IN SOUTH AFRICA

BY MAJKA BURHARDT ■ PHOTOS BY JAMES Q MARTIN

HOW BADLY CAN YOU WANT IT? I'm in the bed of a "bakkie" (South African for pickup truck), with snail shells raining on my head. They're the former inhabitants of a topper covering four people, climbing gear, and three days of food in a two-seater Nissan Hardbody bouncing north out of Cape Town toward Tafelberg. It will be our ninth of 10 stopovers in the world's vastest sandstone and quartzite paradise. We—Julia Niles, James Q Martin, Tristan Firman, and I—left Cape Town during Friday rush hour. We've moved just 40 miles in two hours.

Julia—equal parts guide, climber, and back-flipping cliff jumper—and I sprawl on Therm-a-Rests, our groceries balanced between our knees. It's December 2007. I've been in South Africa almost a month. Up front, Tristan, a local climber, mans the wheel; he's had an 80-hour workweek making nylons (as in, panty hose) and running Mad Rock's SA base. Q, a photographer, is fueling Tristan with GAME—South Africa's version of Gatorade. Tristan smacks

the steering wheel each time the speedometer dips below 30 mph...which is most of the ride. With every rattling bump, my tailbone aches and more dirt and snails rain down. Back home, I'd turn around. But I've been in South Africa long enough to know one does not cancel or complain when it's time to climb. One just goes.

IN SEPARATE PAGES

I'D ARRIVED SOLO IN CAPE TOWN in November 2007, starting my trip doing exactly what you're not supposed to: in my rental car, I drove on the wrong (left) side of the road, in the dark, on a highway under construction, past signs reading "Heavy Carjacking Area: No Stopping." I'd been eager to visit this politically troubled country, infamous as the onetime home of Apartheid, a policy of racial segregation and discrimination imposed by the white-minority government from 1948 to 1994. But once in SA, on hour 24 of a 28-hour push from my door in Colorado, I'd begun to wonder. ...

I'd lived in Ethiopia winter 2006-'07, and while climbing its crumbling sandstone cracks, I vowed a return to Africa's southern tip, where I'd heard the sandstone had actually *hardened*. Most climbers' first image of South Africa is likely of the Rocklands, for

LEFT: Majka Burhardt chases the setting sun on *Oscillation* (5.11a), Tafelberg, Western Cape, South Africa.





bouldering. But I sought trad, which is how it all began here, in the late 1800s. Like most countries, SA's first climbing took the form of mountain exploration. SA had an edge, though, since it has a 400-foot monolith smack dab in Cape Town: Table Mountain, first climbed in 1895.

I'd read up on the politics. Apartheid ("separateness" in Afrikaans), which separated access to everything—from health care, to schools, to restrooms—still colors SA's reality. During the 46 years of Apartheid, SA faced violent turmoil. Most infamous might be the Soweto Riots, a 1976 uprising during which Afrikaaner police killed hundreds of black South Africans. Fifteen years later, a new image arrived—Nelson Mandela leaving Victor Verster Prison, where he'd served 27 years for anti-Apartheid activities. (In 1994, Mandela became SA's first democratically elected president since 1652, the year Dutch colonizers landed in Cape Town.)

Although post-Apartheid South Africa has stabilized, it's far from peaceful. Considered the murder capital of the world (2007 saw on average 10 killings a day, or 65 per 100,000 people), SA is plagued by

rising violence. Financial and societal discrepancies are growing, creating economic tension in the country's poorest neighborhoods, where a recent influx of immigrants from Zimbabwe and Malawi has sparked a violent backlash. The entire country is heating up thanks to an upcoming major election and World Cup, and the aftermath of Zimbabwe's sham election of March 2008. And the climbers? They're doing what they've always done: climbing in their homeland. Once the only option under Apartheid (when other countries denied South Africans travel permits), cragging locally is still an easy choice given SA's staggering quantity of virgin rock.

The inland savannah landscape is riddled with steep sandstone/quartzite formations ranging from four-foot boulders, to 1,200-foot faces. SA has hundreds of destinations, with route counts from six to 600, from one to 13 pitches, from 5.1 to 5.14b. And the rock's good. As in stonker good. As in "lacquer," as the locals say.

This is the home of Andy De Klerk, whose FA list is as massive as the anxiety his routes (here and abroad) provoke. De Klerk often free-soloed his FAs, their

grades reflecting the entirely different headspace needed to waltz up to a 5.12 crack and try it, for the first time, ropeless. De Klerk's mentor and partner was Ed February, a botany professor and one of the world's most famous black climbers, who struggled to pursue his passion under Apartheid. Today, Charles Edelstein—"Snort"—an orthopedic surgeon, has been going after it three decades while stewarding in such new climbers as Clinton Martinengo, a rising phenom. And then there's Justin Hawkins, 30, already a regular on the bouldering and sport scene for half his life.

But what makes SA climbing most special might be the significance of the activity itself: it's an escape from a post-Apartheid world where money is tight, race relations tense, personal safety compromised, and politics corrupt. An escape from the constant reports of robbery, rape, and murder. An escape into a wild landscape so unpopulated and pristine that in 20-plus days at 10 areas, we saw only six other parties.

*Burhardt leads, Julia Niles belays, high on the FFA of *Book of Baloo* (5.11-), Blyde Canyon, miles of untapped stone in the distance.*

THE WORLD AHEAD

I STARTED MY TRIP CLIPPING BOLTS in a bucolic valley east of Johannesburg — Waterval Boven—SA’s premier sport destination. It has more than 600 routes on quartzite, a climber’s hostel, two-bedroom chalets in grassy fields . . . and a rash of recent burglaries, arrests, and an armed guard on constant lookout. Next, I drove back to Joburg to pick up Julia and Q.

Ian Kotze and Hector Pringle were our first South African trad ambassadors. We joined them in Magaliesberg, a 116-square-mile greenway 65 miles northwest of Joburg. It’s in part protected and owned by the Mountain Club of South Africa, with canyons intertwining to form hundreds of one- to three-pitch trad climbs. Ian was already there with his wife and 10-month-old son when we rolled in. He told us—while we parked next to perfectly good car camping—we’d be hiking into a bivy. All our gear mingled in the trunk. We’d just bought eggs. I started to object but then recalled a conversation I’d just overheard at a party.

“Did you hear about Jeffery?” one man asked another. “Mugged at the Island at Boven. . . .”

“No, the Coven.”

“I heard it was the Wilds,” another fellow chimed in, mentioning a Joburg bouldering area.

Back at Magaliesberg, I dutifully stuffed my sleeping bag. “Because otherwise we’ll get mugged?” I asked Ian.

“What?” Ian asked, puzzled. “No, because who wants to sleep next to the car when you can sleep in the bush?” Fifteen minutes later, we followed him to the bivy amidst a vista of cauliflower-shaped quartzite towers.

Hector and Ian live in Johannesburg, ranked the official murder-capital city of the world’s murder-capital country. Much of the violence follows racial divides. In Ethiopia, most everyone I associated with was black, and I’d made friends on every street corner. In Johannesburg, houses are gated, locked, and gated again. Nevertheless, break-ins are common. And though people still congregate, it’s only in restaurants, clubs, bars, etc. Take one walk through Joburg’s Apartheid Museum, and you’ll understand why.

Everyone I talked to in SA had stories: family members carjacked; homes broken into; muggings. This creates a paradox for

visitors trying to understand the country beyond its violent reputation—your constant vigilance exaggerates your perception of threats. During my month there, I never witnessed a crime nor was I in imminent danger. Still, I was ever ready. “When you get robbed in New York City, they take your money,” one friend, David, put it. “When you get robbed in SA, they take your money, shoes, and shirt. And when they reach for your car keys, you hand them a pre-written note explaining how to disengage the security system and run the radio.”

THE WORLD AHEAD

AFTER A FEW DAYS OF QUALITY two-pitch cragging in the Magaliesberg, Hector and Ian returned to their day jobs as a mechanical engineer and software engineer, respectively, and sent us to Blyde Canyon. Blyde is a gorge in Mupulanga National Park (about 264 miles northeast of Joburg), with 40-odd buttresses of quartzite cracks.

The rock here is brilliant silver, with lichen flakes that pattern like kaleidoscopic texture in an MC Escher painting.

Back when I was emailing the SA folks, I’d mentioned an interest in first ascents. I live in Colorado, where mentioning such an intention is akin to firing a starting gun at the “sending races.” In contrast, Hector and Ian flooded my inbox with suggestions. The duo loves nothing more than “missioning around”—hunting for first ascents—and willingly shares that energy with others. When I first met Ian, he’d pulled out a guidebook for Blyde and showed me unclimbed lines. His instructions were so good we easily found what would become *Prelude to Luka* (5.10+)—a slightly overhanging face to a short roof with a hand crack and looming corner above. The rock was perfect, the climbing flowed, and the gear was slammer. We were the only climbers in Blyde that week. The second FA that first day was *Aqua Balls* (5.11), an 80-foot, jagged, fingers-to-fists seam on an adjoining buttress that Julia finished in less than 40 minutes.

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That following weekend, we traveled back west to meet Hector at Blouberg, called the country’s biggest “alpine” wall because of its height and remote, northerly location. At 1,200 feet, it’s, as Hector put it, “the place for the American Trad Climbers to show us their stuff.” The locals do the same here, with free (up to 5.13) and aid climbs up to 13 pitches on an ominous north face more than three hours walk into the savannah. Every South African I’d emailed urged against trying to reach Blouberg on our own—the



Thin crack and face at Magaliesberg: Niles reaches into a lock on *Hyperadrenia*, a 5.10+.

maze of roads to the cattle-outpost trailhead can derail you before you even tackle the approach.

We met Hector, Ian, and Alan Grant, another Joburg climber, in Pokolwne under

black skies and 98 F heat, and caravanned north. By 10 p.m., when we arrived at the farmer's carousel, torrential rains had started. Floodwaters reached my ankles when I stepped out of the car and sprinted for Hector and Ian's rig.

"So," I said, "it's raining."

"Yup," Hector said.

"Yup," Ian said.

The inside of Ian's car flashed lightning white. We jumped. "Raining hard," I added, watching Hector lace his shoes. "Where's the hike go again?"

"Up there," Hector said, pointing above as another strike blasted a ridge. "Right there," he said. Bolt after hammering bolt, the lightning combined in horrifying horizontal connections that seared the heavens. The thunder echoed into the night, sound crashing so close it was impossible to distinguish one pairing of light and noise from the next.

I'd later learn that, just beyond where Hector pointed, Edelstein, Stewart Middlemiss, and Martinengo hunkered in a cave three pitches up, poised to complete *Dog of Thunder*, a four-year project and now SA's most impressive 5.13 (with one point of A0). They'd bivied, determined to make this, their sixth attempt, work. To reach the cave, they'd climbed with headlamps through the storm.

They were likely hunkered down while I crossed the path-turned-raging-river back to our car to chat with Julia and Q.

"I'm *not* going out there," said Julia, a woman consistently up for any challenge, be it a headpoint, solo, or tequila shots. "This is insane."

"Think of my cameras," Q added.

It took 30 minutes for us to ratchet up the nerve to tell the local hardboys. We soon rolled out farther south, to a different crag.

"THIS IS AFRICA"

AMERICANS ARE SPOILED: our GDP is 221 percent higher than South Africa's, yet we pay 15 percent less for gas and gear. You can't understand SA trad until you put it in this context. The country, visibly modern with its Internet cafés, mega-marts, universities, and freshly paved roads, can give an impression that life here is easy. But it isn't, which means there aren't many climbers. Our sport, after all, is a *leisure* activity.



"Want to know where all the trad climbers are?" asks David Vallet, a local guide who came to the States to get AMGA rock certified. "At work." More climbers might be entering the scene with the rise of the Rocklands, but if you climb trad or sport, you'll need a real job, and one that pays better than the GDP of \$7,800/person/year. (A high-school teacher makes about \$350-600 per month; a big-city engineer makes around \$1,200.) A cam costs \$70. Robert Beyer, the owner of City Rock, one of the two climbing gyms/stores in Cape Town, told me he couldn't remember the last climbing unit he'd sold.

"It's not the States," says Justin Lawson, who, with wife, Riki, is the vision behind

climb.co.za, the most extensive resource for South African climbing. "Can you imagine camping below Table Mountain? Now, *that's* where people get mugged. Almost every week."

When I ask why people don't dirtbag at the more remote, safer cliffs, Lawson says, "Want to live at Krakadow [a 1,000-foot cliff four hours from Cape Town]? OK, so eat some bugs. There is no dumpster diving, or Curry Village to take a shower. This is South Africa. This is *Africa*."

TABLE MOUNTAIN (AND) COUNTRY STYLE

AFTER BLOUBERG, we headed to Cape Town, at Africa's southern tip. Up north, people call Cape Town "not Africa." It's hard to



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT: Niles on P2 of *Maiden Voyage* (5.10), an FA on “lacquer,” at Blyde; the 5.10+ *Magnetic Wall*, at Cape Town’s Table Mountain, lures David Vallet over the void; Niles pulls off a stylish fourth ascent of the heady *Mighty Mouse* (5.11+ R), Tafelberg.

disagree when you see the European-flavored city. Perched above the Cape of Good Hope, it has everything from surfing, to sand volleyball, to Table Mountain (TM). More than 1.8 miles long, this sandstone monolith is one of the largest rock massifs inside a major city. The epicenter of Western Cape trad climbing, TM looms above Cape Town with endless cracks, steep roofs, and huge jugs and sidepulls.

Our first day at TM was sunny—I wanted to move to Cape Town forever. More than 600 routes from 5.2 to 5.14 cover the 400-foot-tall rectangular formation. For \$20, you can take a cable car up and rap in, though tricky downclimbs often guard the anchors. Also, the tempestuous sea air can rapidly

turn an afternoon of sunny cragging into a frightfest of hail, water, and wind.

To truly earn your ascent, hike up through the Fynbos, in the fifth-largest plains kingdom in the world, home to wild grasses, flowers, and dassies—a cross between a rat and a marmot that’s the closest living relative to the elephant. Our first TM climb was *Jacob’s Ladder*, an Arapilian 5.8. Your backside swings over the Cape of Good Hope while you reach up, pull, sidestep, and pull again. You can find several smaller, mostly sport crags around Cape Town (there are five-odd small caves within an hour, and eight-pitch bolted faces if you venture 100 miles and hike into Montagu). But for more trad, your next-closest option is Du Toits Kloof. Julia, Q, and I were feeling like SA veterans when we arrived in Cape Town. So when I saw topos for Du Toits’ *Armageddon Time* in the magazine *SA Mountain*, I knew we had our route. At 5.11+, it splits the Yellowwood Amphitheater via cracks and roofs.

“So what?” I asked our then-host David Vallet, at his Cape Town apartment overlooking the ocean. “10 pitches, a short approach—a quick day?” We packed his car in the gated and alarm-secured garage. (Even though Cape Town is safer than Johannesburg, robbery is still rampant.)

David shook his dreadlocked head. “These are *country* routes,” he said.

“Excuse me?” Julia asked. Country Style, it turned out, means big-deal approaches and commitment. In SA, there are no grades III, IV, and V. These just cluster together

BIG-DEAL APPROACHES, INTIMIDATING ROUTES, AND HIGH COMMITMENT—IN SA, THERE ARE NO GRADES III, IV, AND V. THERE’S ONLY “COUNTRY STYLE.”

under “Country Style”: routes having involved hikes with debatable trails, sometimes through waist-high grass and blister bushes—a twiggy, painful brush with shiny leaves best avoided.

Armageddon Time, with each pitch slightly harder than the previous, seemed a perfect intro. Finger slots appear as slivers that get you by just enough to reach that next incut horizontal. And tapers appear for that one exactly sized nut just when progress



ABOVE: Clinton Martinengo warms up on *Edge of Time*, an Andy De Klerk 5.12b, Tafelberg. **BELOW:** Tristan Firman on *Comes a Time* (5.10), Tafelberg.

seems blocked. David (with us on the climb) knew these would exist—he is a South African. Julia and I are western-US trad climbers who get nervous on steep terrain, and it took most of the climb to understand we'd have to buck up. The result was the most consistently good route I've done in years.

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OUR LAST TRIPS WERE INTO the Cederberg, best known for the Rocklands but also hosting perfect trad lines. First up was a jaunt to Wolfberg: an hour's approach, choice of chateaus or lush, green campsites, and a 360-degree monolith with varied six-pitch



crack and roof lines to a pocketed lunar landscape on top. Add in a cliff-jumping hole and a local vineyard, and Wolfberg really is Country Style (minus). Next up was Tafelberg: three hours into the savannah, with local Beta on water sources required. Tristan was our tour guide to this zone, which features more than 100 trad lines from 5.3 to 5.13. Our goal was *Oscillation*, a six-pitch 5.11a.


Tristan randomly wears holiday-themed socks (on our drive to Tafelberg, he had Halloween kitty-cats peeking out from his shoes), is into hugs, has hair that always looks like it needs brushing, and has a congenitally short right arm due to his mother's suffering German measles while he was in-utero. One of his fingers has a fused bone that he tapes and uses as a hook that works better than most climbers' hands. Tristan drives quickly—especially to the crags. After our snail-showered ride out of Cape Town, we met friends—Martinengo and Julia Wakeling—at camp in a basketball-court-sized cave below the cliff.

It had been two weeks since the thunderstorm at Blouberg, during which time Martinengo also sent *Streetfighter* (5.14b), SA's hardest sport route. Martinengo is soft-spoken and sinewy, and the next morning at Tafelberg, I watched him onsight warm-up on a De Klerk 25 (5.12b) on which I couldn't pass the 15-foot mark. Our team

spent the day's fading light on *Oscillation*, which angles gently on the south side of the Spout formation. By then, we were used to the climbing: there are holds when you need them—if you go find them. Later that night at camp, over pesto pasta, Wakeling spun a fork at me and asked what I thought my article would bring: "Will climbers swarm us?" she wanted to know.

The air was still, save the occasional shriek of a baboon. An hour earlier, I'd hiked 30 minutes to a secret water source, a coffin-shaped pool in a deep quartzite cave. We six were the only folks at Tafelberg. "Do you want to be swarmed by climbers?" I asked.

Wakeling thought for a moment. "The good ones," she said. "The ones who understand what we have here. *Here here.*"

As silence surrounded us, I looked around at the vast, unsullied wilds—wilds in which risk comes in a vertical form. The financial, social, racial, and cultural collage that was South Africa lay far away. It was down in the horizontal plane, countless removes from our vertical perch, high in a scalloped cave beneath myriad unclimbed cracks. 

Senior Contributing Editor Majka Burhardt (majkaburhardt.com) will continue her African odyssey with a trip to Namibia. Visit climbing.com/exclusive/features/countrystyle for her sidebar on South African travel logistics.

