

The Rock and Light Show **a few days at Peak Charles**

Ross Weiter

It was 3:30 am on Friday morning. Dinah and I have finally left Perth for Peak Charles, intent on making our Easter a special one.

This granite monolith half way between Kalgoorlie and Esperance has special magic for climbers; long scenic routes, a great camp site and no crowds. Its location 800 km east of Perth by road is hardly a drawback, in fact it could be considered its greatest asset. Far away from the well trodden climbs of the south west, a long way from the doof-doof music of caravan parks, miles from nowhere.

“Bush bashing” is a great Australian expression, typical in getting to the point of the matter. When approaching climbs on PC, it is not a matter of “if”, more like “how much”. The variables in the equation are your local knowledge and the location of the climb. I knew exactly where “Friends for Life” was, having done the first ascent with Jon several years ago. Getting to the bugger was another matter and bee-lining it directly was a poor choice. The chimney start was a light warm-up and soon I was over gripping on the moves higher up, placing gear where possible in between wondering how securely Dinah was tethered to the ground.

It was a humid day with many clouds. At the belay we briefly admired the motley collection of museum piece abseiling slings, but there was comfort in the sheer redundancy available. Where are the Natimuk Bolting Fairies when you need them, eh....

I was just about to set sail on “Spartacus” when water fell out of the sky and onto our plans. We skidded along the slippery base of the cliff until gaining the tourist track.

The camp site soon filled with several well known identities spanning the last 4 decades of WA climbing. Tony Fowler, ‘Mac’ McArthur and Michael Adams got comfortable and commenced talking and drinking too much grog. Sue Swain passed around home made coconut biscuits and Helen McArthur was out too, refreshing punters with a cookie made by an ancient recipe. The recipe is so ancient that no one remembers how to make them but the shelf life is apparently 10 years and without refrigeration too.

The evening light show arrived in the shape of two giant mushroom clouds that lit up with lightning like giant Chinese lanterns. Thor and his spurned mistress Brunhilde hurled fire bolts at each other in violent yet utterly silent rage. It was beautiful.

In between the acts ‘Mac’ told me about an unclimbed line in the Juluka area, uttering something about requiring a climber who was tall enough to reach the holds and good looking enough not to scare them away. At least I was overqualified on the first count...

Next morning, Dinah and I were the first ones out of the camp site, heading up the misty slopes towards Central Gully. The mist rose before us until we stood before the rock wall with nothing but the blue sky to look at. I chose to start the route up “Constipation Corner”, a great little corner/crack that is poorly served by the name. Where it finished we moved left and up the slab to the second belay of “Last Tango in Widgiemooltha”. A party of three was starting up the “Tango”, including Trevor McGowan - the man behind Adventure In, an adventure outfit from Margaret River. Trevor taught me to lead, a long time ago.

Anyway, the crux second pitch involved climbing directly up from the cave, bridging the void and then climbing the wall right of the crack. A third pitch and we stood at the top. Thunder sounded and dark clouds have gathered quickly and ominously. The problem with forecasting weather here is that it always comes from the far side of Peak Charles, so there often is little warning. The first drops of rain were beginning to hit the ground but I fancied a quick escape to some nice overhang. However the trusty old rope had other ideas and snagged on a rock horn ten meters below me, requiring an abseil and a thorough drenching. Luckily, the heavier weather was all over in ten minutes.

Unluckily for Dinah, she did not bring a rain coat.

Despite the pause, I grew suspicious of the weather and sensed more electricity in the air as we made for the biggest, driest cave we could find. It was located some 100 meters from the tourist track, near the base of the cliff as one traverses toward Onion Gully.

We barely sat down on the dusty cave floor when the sky outside opened and cats and dogs came screaming down. Lightning too, like luminous

scratches made by lunatic fingers. Thor clawed away again. One huge bolt seemed to come straight at us and its tendril seared the cliff on the left. It rained for more than half an hour, but the muesli bars tasted good and hey, what a show! We waited for a while until the rock dried a bit, then made for the tourist path and camp. Just as we arrived, rain No.3 started and found us under Mike's tarp. We tipped out of it a few gallons of water and fixed some of the ropes up a bit.

It was not long before cats started dragging in the rest of the tribe. Conrad looked a bit rattled, "How was it?", I said, knowing full well that it wasn't good. Conrad smiled at my cruelty and said softly: "I got hit by lightning !"

The storm found him exposed on a lead, with hands jammed into a water-filled crack when lightning crashed nearby. The jolt caused him to take a short fall and was confirmed by Tom Marshall whose belay was briefly electrified also.

David Moyses' large dreams of another massive girdle traverse "a la Grim Reaper" were postponed when Adams got briefly washed off while leading. Quickly regaining composure the duo sheltered under "psychological" overlaps and wisely bailed at the first chance, gear and all.

Trevor's party of three that was behind us on "Last Tango" was caught out too, rapping and abandoning their ropes and some gear, but saving their own hides.

Sue and the girls made an evening campfire to cook their dinner, and everybody gratefully warmed up their soaked bones. The baked potatoes were very nice.

Day three found us at the mouth of Karakoram Gully where I had unfinished business with a chimney I spied a few years ago. At first glance it looked too "classic" to contemplate, yet the challenge was there to climb perhaps the last real natural line in the area. To start off with, I skirted the chimney and climbed the cracks on its left lip. A few tottering rocks thundered off but this was better than the zawn beside me. At the bulge I entered the chimney proper. It was a deep one, filled with cool air that brought welcome relief from the heat of the day. I inched up to the point where the chimney constricted and placed a 3.5 Camalot. Stretching and bridging I managed to place two more cams a metre above. Things were now sawn up and I bridged up through the bulge. A few more moves on

edges and I was at the stance....just as well as I had almost no gear left.

The first prize for a big effort goes to Dinah however, since she grunted up the thing with a backpack. Those who have climbed chimneys with packs dangling below and snagging on rock and their legs will understand the score. The woman looked seriously abused by the time she reached the belay, yet still she smiled and said "Well done, that was great". Well, what the hell, eh...she was pleased when I decided to grade the pitch 20.

Four more pitches followed, easier rambling up discontinuous small cracks, with good belay stances. The heat was murder and we had no water, relying on occasional rain puddles. The expected afternoon showers did not happen, although the thunder organs did lament in the distance.

In the evening it was amusing watching Conrad explaining his lifestyle to David Moyses. No, Conrad does not drink, or smoke, or need money, yes, he is Scout of the Year. David was horrified of course, but recovered for long enough to gather some cold beer and roll up a smoke.

An Easter hunt erupted, codes were cracked and clues gathered. A clutch of chocolate eggs appeared, donated kindly by the Swains. My thanks go to Sue for showing me how to solve puzzles.

It was one of those evening when you talk for four hours yet you remember none of it. Sometimes it is not the information that matters. Sometimes it is just the still night, the stars, a tribe out in the woods - a pause in The Game or the very essence of it ?

Come along next time and decide for yourself.