

EYE ON THE NEEDLES

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PYROMANIA
(5.13a/b)

When, in the early 1980s, Tony Yaniro attempted to free the splitter of *Pyromania*, I was blown away by how difficult the climbing looked from my belay. Yet the route went free, and was well within Tony's range. He climbed it in style, too. Each time he fell he lowered and cleaned his gear, a departure from today where most hard cracks sprout pre-placed pro and feature an R or X for serious fall potential. When Tony slotted his little hexes (museum pieces today) behind the flake, he didn't give long falls a thought, and just ran it out. In this photo, Josh Janes plugs and guns up this Needles testpiece.





THE NEEDLES

The Needles are one of the most stunning climbing areas in the United States. From a distance, the granite spires look impossible to climb, but close up, move-by-move, they keep delivering holds and cracks. Don't be deceived by the close proximity of the spires, either. The terrain between the formations is surprisingly hard to negotiate. Because of this, most climbers accomplish fewer pitches than they plan, but have a better time than they could have imagined.



ATLANTIS (5.11a)

The final pitch (5.11a) of *Atlantis*, climbed here by Maja Burhardt, brings you to the summit of the elegant East Face of the Sorcerer. Below this pitch is an amazing hand crack, and below that, a 5.11c tips lieback. The first lead is an enjoyable 5.10c right-facing hand crack/lieback.

Atlantis is the equivalent of the Yosemite's famous Nabisco Wall on the Cookie Cliff. When we first arrived in the Needles in the late 1970s, Tony Yaniro, Dan Hershman and I aided a nearby seam, but a few years later, after we had more free climbing experience, we realized that, just like the Nabisco Wall, this one held potential for innumerable free routes. What followed were first ascents and first free ascents of many classics, *Atlantis* included.

In retrospect, there was a lot of low-hanging fruit at the Needles because the locals had deemed the steep, splitter lines impossible to free climb. So, we had our pick of perfectly ripe pears, crunchy apples and luscious oranges.



INNER SANCTUM (5.9)

Leave it to the peripatetic pioneer Fred Beckey, who turned 94 this year, to have nabbed *Inner Sanctum*, climbed in this photo by Peter Doucette.

The first ascent of *Inner Sanctum* in 1974 was a typical Beckey expedition, where he coordinated a climbing trip to a new area with his travels as a paper salesman. One of his partners on that climb, Steve Eddy, describes Beckey as a hound dog. Fueled by an insatiable coffee habit, Beckey would sniff out the best available rock using the old-school version of Google Earth: geological maps. With the Needles, Beckey found the mother lode of perfect granite, and with Eddy and Tahquitz climber Dave Black, the trio easily climbed *Inner Sanctum*. Although the climb was well below their abilities, Beckey still recalls *Inner Sanctum* as one of his best routes. Probably the most exciting part of the day was when Eddy's future ex-wife dropped Beckey's camera, which luckily stopped short of sliding down the entire cliff.



ATLANTIS (5.11+)

The four-pitch *Atlantis* joins the all-star lineup of *Scirocco* (5.12a), *Don Juan Wall* (5.11b), *Thin Ice* (5.10b), *Ice Pirates* (5.11c), and *Pyromania* (5.13a) on The Sorcerer. Anywhere else, each of these routes would be showpieces. Even Yosemite would be happy to get one.



ROMANTIC WARRIOR (5.12b)

Romantic Warrior is the crown jewel of the Needles. It has enjoyable technical movement, splitter rock and singularity of line on a grand scale—it tackles nine pitches up the southwest face of the Warlock.

When Tony Yaniro and I did the first free ascent in 1983 (wearing E.B.s!), we took obvious finger cracks on pitches four and five, bypassing the RURP crack that splits off of pitch

four. Our free version, climbed in this photo by Dylan Johnson, differed slightly from what E.C. Joe and John Peca aided on their first ascent, but we wanted to honor Joe and John so kept the route's original name.

Exposed, long and slippery, *Romantic Warrior* requires endurance and attention to every detail. The stem, lieback and body English moves on pitch seven are especially grim, and it is mind-boggling to imagine that *RW* has been free soloed by Alex Honnold and Michael Reardon. Reardon's ropeless ascent in 2005 was reportedly ground-up, onsight, a feat that even Honnold, the boldest and best soloist in

the world, was unwilling to repeat. Prior to his ropeless ascent, Honnold rehearsed *Romantic Warrior* on toprope, self-belaying with a Petzl Mini Traxion.

Reardon's solo was so ahead of its time it was unbelievable for some climbers, and whether he really pulled it off may never be known. He died two years later when an ocean surge pulled him from the base of an Irish sea cliff into the cold currents of the north Atlantic Ocean. His body was never found.



SCIROCCO (5.11d)

The windy conditions formed by the Venturi effect of the closely spaced spires inspired the name *Scirocco* for this Needles beauty. Most climbers redpoint the first pitch (5.11d crimp face), then call it a day. This ropelength usually taxes people more than they expect for the grade, so they are happy to bail at the first anchor.

Scirocco was established ground up, in the accepted lead-bolting style of the day. With one twist. The keepers-of-the-style believed that bolts should only be placed from free-climbing stances, but Tony knew that to bolt this steep face and arête he'd have to hang from hooks. This worked until the arête on the second pitch, which wouldn't hold Tony's store-bought hooks, so he made custom ones from rebar. These, sometimes used in opposition, gripped the arête's sloping edges and let him continue his work. Brett Mauer, who accompanied Tony, marveled at his hook shenanigans. I joined the team for the final FA push and was impressed by how futuristic the route was. Tony recalls how Mike Lechlinsky, who was a bad-ass ground-up run-it-out kind of John-Bachar activist at the Needles (with his own growing lists of bold first ascents such as *Terrorvision*), called him to criticize him for placing too many bolts.

Tony told Lechlinsky that he could, "chop any bolts you don't clip when you do the route."

No bolts were ever removed, but power drillers probably added some in the following years. This arête is action packed 5.12 climbing, complete with committing barndoor liebacking and toe hooking. *Scirocco* will test your game, and you will understand why it is one of Tony's favorite routes at the Needles. Photographer Bernd Zeugswetter confirms the quality of the first pitch in this photo.



■ *DON JUAN WALL* (5.11b)

The second pitch of the *Don Juan Wall*, climbed here by Hjordis Rickert, may be my favorite single ropelength at the Needles. I won the toss of "who gets to lead pitch two," when Yaniro, Mike Waugh and I did the first free ascent some 35 years ago. Tony and I inspected the upper pitches of *Don Juan* on rappel because they appeared filled with dirt and lichen. Our cleaning tactics were a departure from the ground-up ethic of the day, but we didn't toprope rehearse any of the route, and climbed from the ground, armed with a handful of wired Stoppers. I still vividly recall getting a locker finger jam above a perfect nut placement, then locking off for all I was worth to another perfect jam. The pitch was magical like that—whenever I needed something for the feet, an edge would appear. When I arrived at the belay, I was grinning ear to ear. I had to chuckle recently when I read the route description on Mountain Project: "I can't believe I'm saying it, but a climb like this puts routes like *Wunsch's Dihedral* and *The Naked Edge* to shame."

■ *AIR INTERLUDE* (5.9)

This is Ivan Mattenberger and NOT a photo of Michael Reardon soloing *Airy Interlude* (5.10b), naked, save for his climbing shoes and chalk bag. Reardon was a free spirit whose antics were often interpreted as acts of showmanship. However, his close friends say Reardon really just wanted to have fun. After all, he is the guy who, while wearing flip flops and carrying a blow-up doll, soloed Mt. Sill accompanied by Wes Goulding. Let's not even talk about how he liked to leave packets of lube, tiny action figures, and oversized women's panties in various jam cracks. Don't let Reardon's crude sense of humor fool you. He was a devoted husband to his wife, Marci. But I digress. It doesn't take a leap of faith to see how awesome *Airy Interlude* is for its grade. But please, bring a rope ... and clothes.

