

# Soft Kor

seven can-do classics courtesy of layton kor

BY BRENDAN LEONARD

**CLIMBING** is one of the few disciplines in which you can literally walk (well, climb) in the footsteps of the masters. If you brought your own paintbrush into Spain's Reina Sofía Museum and started tracing Picasso's "Guernica," you'd be arrested. But as climbers, we can pull on the same holds John Bachar used on the *Bachar-Yerian* or do Sharma's heroic full-body dyno on *Es Pontas*—theoretically, anyway.

We can also walk the same lines as the legendary Layton Kor, who put up scores of visionary first ascents in the Utah desert, Eldorado Canyon, the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Rocky Mountain National Park, Yosemite Valley, and dozens of other crags and alpine faces across the continent during a decade-long frenzy beginning in the late 1950s. Kor has acquired mythological status through his infinite energy and courage, especially on steep, rotten, terrifying terrain.

Fortunately, you don't have to climb loose, unprotected 5.10 offwidths in the Black Canyon or nail up muddy walls in the Fisher Towers to paint in Kor's brushstrokes. Here are seven classic, safe-enough moderates, courtesy of the legendary "Hard Kor."

Facing page: Shingo Ohkawa ponders his next move after leaving the namesake feature of *The Hook*.

## *The Hook* (5.8, two pitches)

Gate Butress, Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah

Although relatively small at only two pitches, *The Hook* brought together two of American climbing's larger-than-life first ascensionists: Kor and Fred Beckey. Reach this trad climb via *Schoolroom* (5.6), *Schoolroom Direct* (5.7), or *Bushwhack Crack* (5.8)—but make no mistake, you're here for *The Hook*, the aesthetic, quintessentially Kor flake that makes up most of the first pitch. When the flake ends, face climb right and then up to the belay—clip the bolt added by other climbers, or skip the clip and climb it with an "R" rating as Kor did. The final pitch ascends a wide 5.5 crack to a shelf, where you can downclimb to a rappel. Savor the green-and-granite views of Little Cottonwood Canyon, sublime in autumn or at sunset.

**Kor Says:** "*The Hook—I don't remember it. You should call Fred Beckey. He remembers everything he's ever climbed.*"

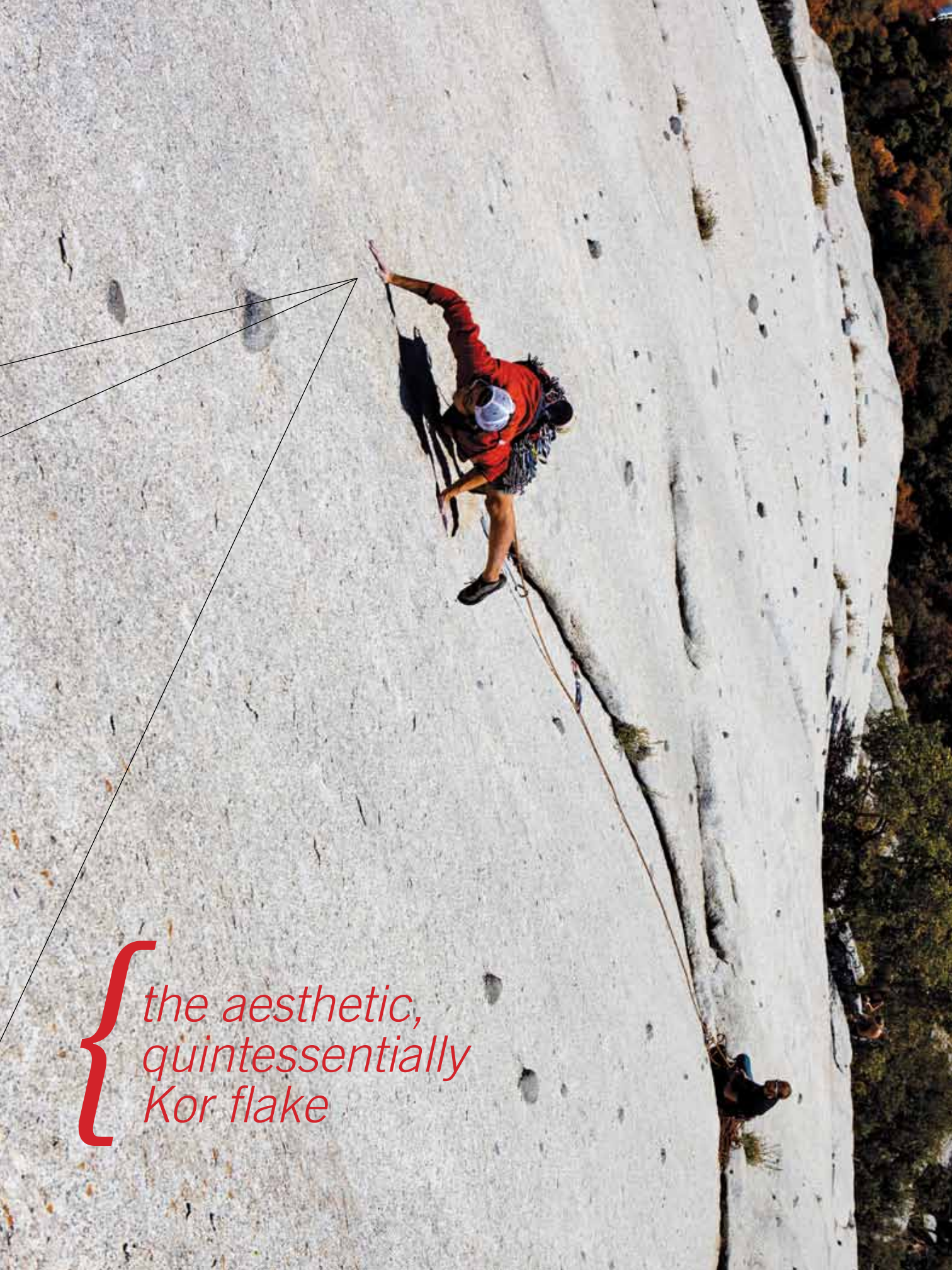
**FA:** Kor and Fred Beckey, 1961

**Gear:** Standard rack

**Approach:** Drive 1.25 miles from the neon road-conditions sign at the intersection of Highway 210 and Highway 209 and park. Follow the trail west of the north-side parking pullout through the Gate Boulders. Past the boulders, where the trail forks, take the right fork and head east to the base of the *Schoolroom* routes.

**Guidebook:** *Rock Climbing the Wasatch Range*, by Stuart and Bret Ruckman (\$35, [falcon.com](http://falcon.com))

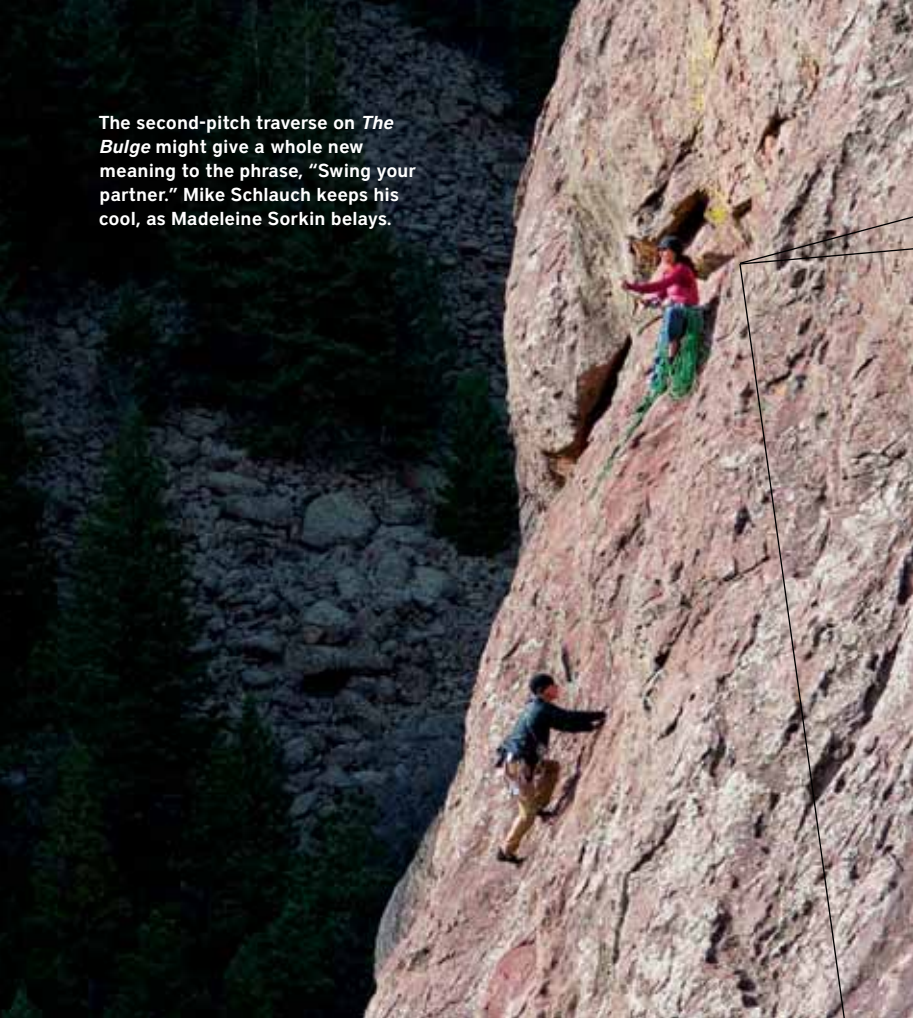




{ the aesthetic,  
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Kor flake



The second-pitch traverse on *The Bulge* might give a whole new meaning to the phrase, “Swing your partner.” Mike Schlauch keeps his cool, as Madeleine Sorkin belays.



## **Pear Buttress** (5.8, five pitches)

The Book, Lumpy Ridge, Colorado

The start of the 500-foot *Pear Buttress* is the mental crux: no pro till you master 20 feet of 5.7 slab and make a committing stem onto a huge flake. The technical crux—stepping from the big flake into a finger crack—comes later on the pitch and will feel like gravy after that scary start. Above is one of Colorado’s best granite hand and finger cracks, followed by pure Kor climbing on the Cave Exit—a roofed alcove with fun, thoughtful, 3-D turning and stemming moves. From near the top of the Book, pine forests and golden-green meadows sprawl below you, with views of Rocky Mountain National Park’s high peaks, Estes Park, and Sundance Buttress.

**Kor Says:** “I went back and repeated it with Steve Komito. There’s this big, long layback crack that I did on the first ascent, but that time it scared me. I went around it and found an easier way. I also did five routes on Sundance Buttress, but I got credit for only three. That perturbed me.”

**FA:** Kor and unknown partner, 1963

**Gear:** Rack up to three inches; two of the largest pieces are nice

**Approach:** Park at the Twin Owls trailhead, and walk the Black Canyon Trail to a signed turnoff for the Book. Head straight uphill to a large boulder, and then head right to the start of the climb.

**Guidebook:** *Rocky Mountain National Park: The Climber’s Guide: Estes Park Valley*, by Bernard Gillett (\$30, [earthboundssports.com](http://earthboundssports.com))

## **The Bulge** (5.7R, four pitches)

Redgarden Wall, Eldorado Canyon, Colorado

Don’t make this the first Kor route you try... or your first Eldo 5.7... or a route you climb with an inexperienced partner. The runouts are long, and the route zigzags, making big swings a serious issue for the second. *The Bulge* is a window into Kor’s mind early in his career: It was his first major first ascent in Eldorado, and the blankest piece of rock yet climbed in the canyon. The steep, wandering face climbing comes to a head at the namesake third-pitch “bulge” with some in-your-face 5.7. You won’t find the solid cracks typical of other moderate classics in Eldo; instead, it’s all face holds and huecos, making it feel more like the hard-to-protect east faces of Boulder’s Flatirons, only tilted to near-vertical. High above South Boulder Creek, you’ll have bird’s-eye views of the Bastille and the Wind Tower, home to many more Kor routes.

**Kor Says:** “I can’t forget that route—there was no protection! I was originally attracted to that beautiful section of cliff. I thought we had a chance to do the route because the rock in Eldorado is rough, lots of holds, lots of jugs. I went back later and rappelled down and put a bolt in. I placed the bolt because of complaints from other climbers. They thought it was highly risky. I didn’t want an accident on my conscience.”

**FA:** Kor and Ben Chidlaw, 1957

**Gear:** A light rack of wires and cams will suffice. All belays are bolted.

**Approach:** Park at the east lot in Eldorado Canyon and hike/scramble up the gully east of the Whale’s Tail.

**Guidebook:** *Eldorado Canyon: A Climbing Guide*, by Steve Levin (\$39.95, [sharp-endbooks.com](http://sharp-endbooks.com))

# *this aesthetic route amps the fun factor, minutes from downtown*

## **The Owl**

(5.7, two pitches)

The Dome, Boulder Canyon, Colorado

Although Kor was a Boulder-based climber, he did relatively few first ascents in Boulder Canyon, usually opting for taller and more dramatic challenges. He made an exception for *The Owl*. This aesthetic route amps the fun factor into two pitches on a formation just minutes from downtown. The first pitch features an exposed move onto knobs, followed by a solid fist crack. The second course serves up an overhanging A-frame roof. Most leaders take a minute (or five) to determine how best to pull through this “Kor-ian” puzzle. Some never find a way to do it at 5.7, while others utilize novel techniques like the “head jam.” Be creative, so as to better entertain the cyclists, joggers, and walkers who will likely be spectating from the Boulder Creek path below.

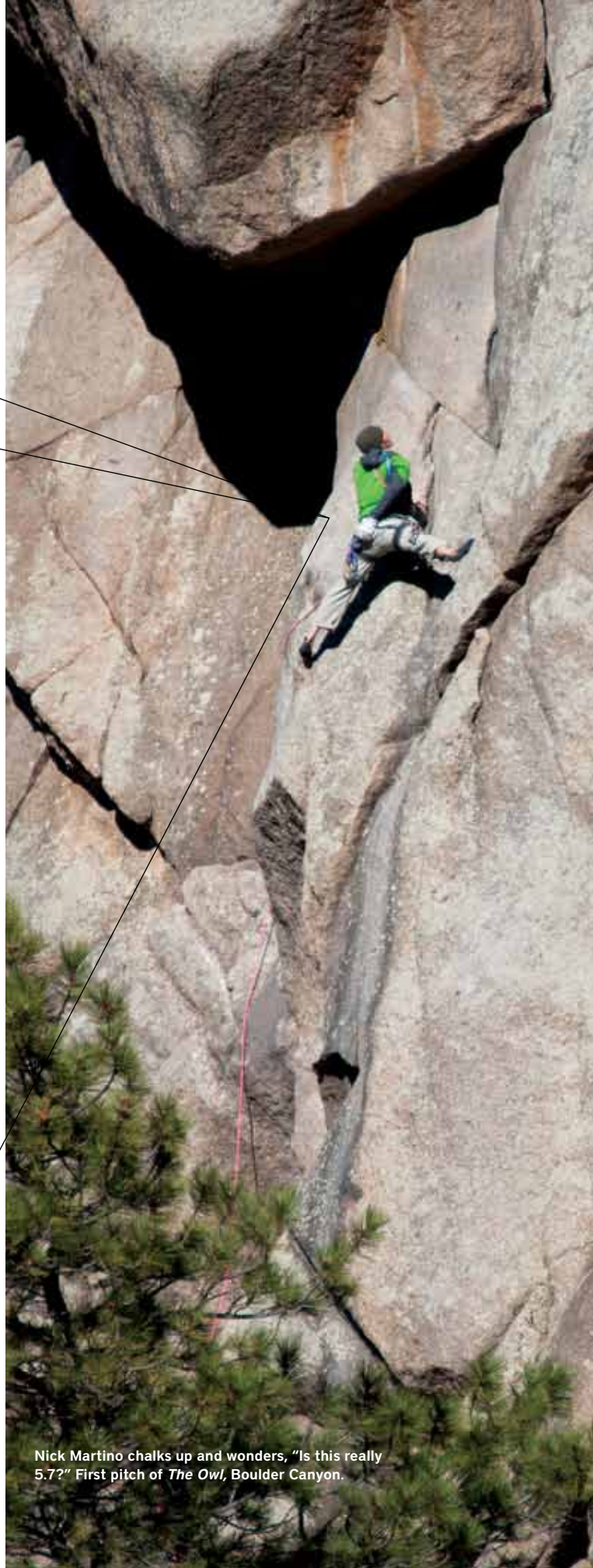
**Kor Says:** “Hmmm, *The Owl*. I don’t remember that route. I must have done it if the guidebook says I did, but I climbed a lot of routes in Boulder Canyon in those years.”

**FA:** Kor and Ben Chidlaw, 1959

**Gear:** Standard rack, including long slings for the wandering first pitch

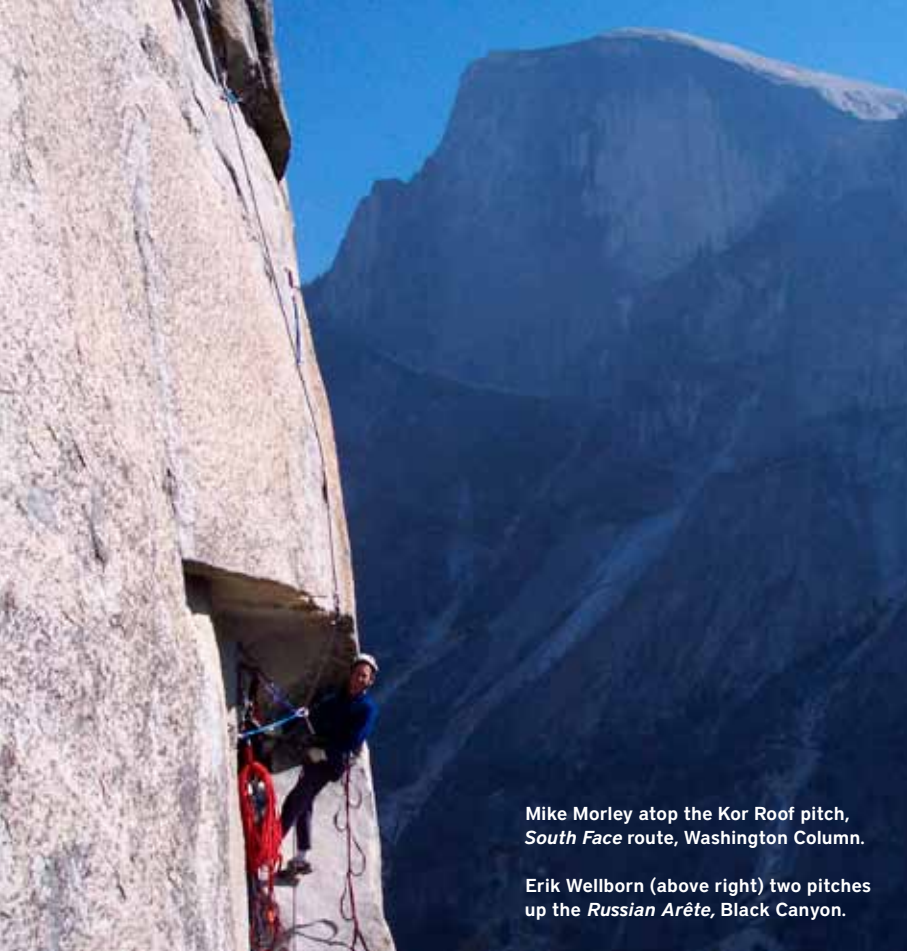
**Approach:** The parking lot for the Dome is 1.2 miles past the intersection of Canyon Boulevard and 3rd Street. From there, eyeball the base of the route, cross Boulder Creek on a bridge, and hike five minutes up the obvious approach trail.

**Guidebook:** *Boulder Canyon Rock Climbs*, by Bob D’Antonio (\$35, [wolverinepublishing.com](http://wolverinepublishing.com))



Nick Martino chalks up and wonders, “Is this really 5.7?” First pitch of *The Owl*, Boulder Canyon.





Mike Morley atop the Kor Roof pitch, South Face route, Washington Column.

Erik Wellborn (above right) two pitches up the Russian Arête, Black Canyon.



## Russian Arête (IV 5.9, 1,700 feet)

Black Canyon of the Gunnison, Colorado

In 1960, Bob LaGrange introduced Kor to the soaring, steep walls of the Black Canyon of the Gunnison, launching a several-year spree of first ascents. The *Russian Arête* is perhaps the most serious of our Kor “moderates” and, while certainly not pedestrian, it’s the Black’s mellowest full-length route. (*Maiden Voyage*, another excellent Kor route one gully upstream, tackles a much smaller cliff.) Follow hand cracks, chimneys, and face climbing for nearly 1,200 feet, taking time at belays to peer down at the Gunnison River rushing through the narrow canyon, reminiscent of a city street darkened by skyscraper shadows. After six to eight long pitches, connect brushy ledges right of the arête for 500 feet of third- to fifth-class scrambling to the rim. The *Russian Arête* is famous for keeping inexperienced parties out overnight—plan accordingly.

**Kor Says:** “The first time I tried that route was with Jim McCarthy. A loose block broke off and hit Jim in his thigh. We had to rappel off. I went back with Larry Dalke and climbed the route. It took us seven hours from the canyon floor to the rim. It’s not the most solid thing I ever climbed. That’s why we gave it the name—it’s like Russian roulette.”

**FA:** Kor and Larry Dalke, 1962

**Gear:** Double nuts, double cams up to three inches, lots of slings and draws for the long pitches

**Approach:** From the North Rim ranger station, descend the infamous SOB Gully almost to the river. Head right around the toe of a sub-buttress and climb up third-class terrain to the main pillar.

**Guidebook:** *Black Canyon Rock Climbs*, by Robbie Williams (\$28, *sharpbooks*)

## South Face (V 5.8 C1, 11 pitches)

Washington Column, Yosemite Valley, California

If you don’t want to tackle the Longs Peak Diamond or the Black Canyon’s Chasm View Wall, you can still do a classic Kor wall. The *South Face* is perhaps the easiest and most popular big-wall route in the Valley—expect heavy traffic. Most parties break this 1,200-foot climb into two days, climbing three pitches to Dinner Ledge, fixing the Kor Roof on the next pitch, rappelling back down to bivy on the huge ledge, and finishing the next day. A solid 5.10 climber can free the majority of the *South Face*. Descend North Dome Gully, looking for cairns and being careful not to turn right too soon and end up on the “death slabs.” Don’t do the descent at night.

**Kor Says:** “I placed three bolts in an extremely steep section. I’ve heard since that people can’t reach the bolts without one of those sticks—what do they call them?—cheater sticks. It was steep but not so steep that I couldn’t stand in my top rungs. I used what we called a hero loop, a little sling for tying off pitons that was clipped to my stirrup. We bivouacked for the night about 300 feet above Dinner Ledge. We wrapped our aid slings around a flake and spent the night standing in them. Terrible night.”

**FA:** Kor and Chris Fredericks, 1964

**Gear:** Standard big-wall rack for clean aid; overnight gear

**Approach:** Head east on the trail from the back parking lot of the Ahwahnee Hotel, then head north where the bike path and horse trail nearly meet. Follow the drainage up to Washington Column.

**Guidebook:** *Yosemite Big Walls*, by Chris McNamara and Erik Sloan (\$29.95, *supertopo.com*)

## **Kor-Ingalls Route** (5.9, four pitches)

Castleton Tower, Utah

The *Kor-Ingalls* is a full-value 5.9 on an iconic desert tower, with four pitches of steep cracks. It's the most popular route on one of the Moab area's most popular spires, so you'll probably have some company. The crux on the third pitch can be done with either strenuous offwidth or delicate stemming technique, but some wide-crack thrashing is obligatory. White calcite deposits on parts of the route make for interesting face holds. Castleton is a lightning rod, so don't get summit fever if you see weather approaching—a climber was killed by a lightning strike here in 2005. Bring two 60-meter ropes to rappel the north face.

**Kor Says:** *"Huntley, way back when, worked for the government, and he found that tower. We placed a bolt at the crux pitch. I aided a little bit. It was pretty obvious climbing. We were happy up there. On top, the weather turned nasty. We could see a storm coming—bolts of lightning, black clouds. So we rappelled down fast. On the last rappel, I was already on the ground, under an overhang, when Huntley was shocked by a current coming down the rope."*

**FA:** Kor and Huntley Ingalls, 1961

**Gear:** Standard rack up to four inches. Look for small cam placements within some of the wide cracks.

**Approach:** Hike east out of the campground to the trail leading up the talus cone to the tower. Find the obvious dihedral system on the south side.

**Guidebook:** *Rock Climbing Utah*, by Stewart Green (\$26.95, [globepequot.com](http://globepequot.com))



*full-value 5.9  
on an iconic  
desert tower*

**Above:** "Is that next crack as good as this one?" Stephen Venables joins the queue on the second pitch of the *Kor-Ingalls* route, Castleton Tower.

### **THE KOR MEDICAL FUND**

Layton Kor, 72, suffers from advanced kidney disease. His insurance does not cover all his copays and monthly medical expenses, and donations for the Layton Kor Medical Fund are gratefully accepted. You can receive a signed photograph of Layton on one of his classic climbs for a donation of \$50. For more information or to make donations, write to [laytonkorphotos@gmail.com](mailto:laytonkorphotos@gmail.com). Help us help a climbing legend.

*Brendan Leonard lives in Denver's Capitol Hill neighborhood and has checked out the Denver Public Library's only copy of Layton Kor's out-of-print biography, *Beyond the Vertical*, five times. Thanks to Stewart Green for interviewing Kor.*