# Just Deserts

*by Dominic Oughton*

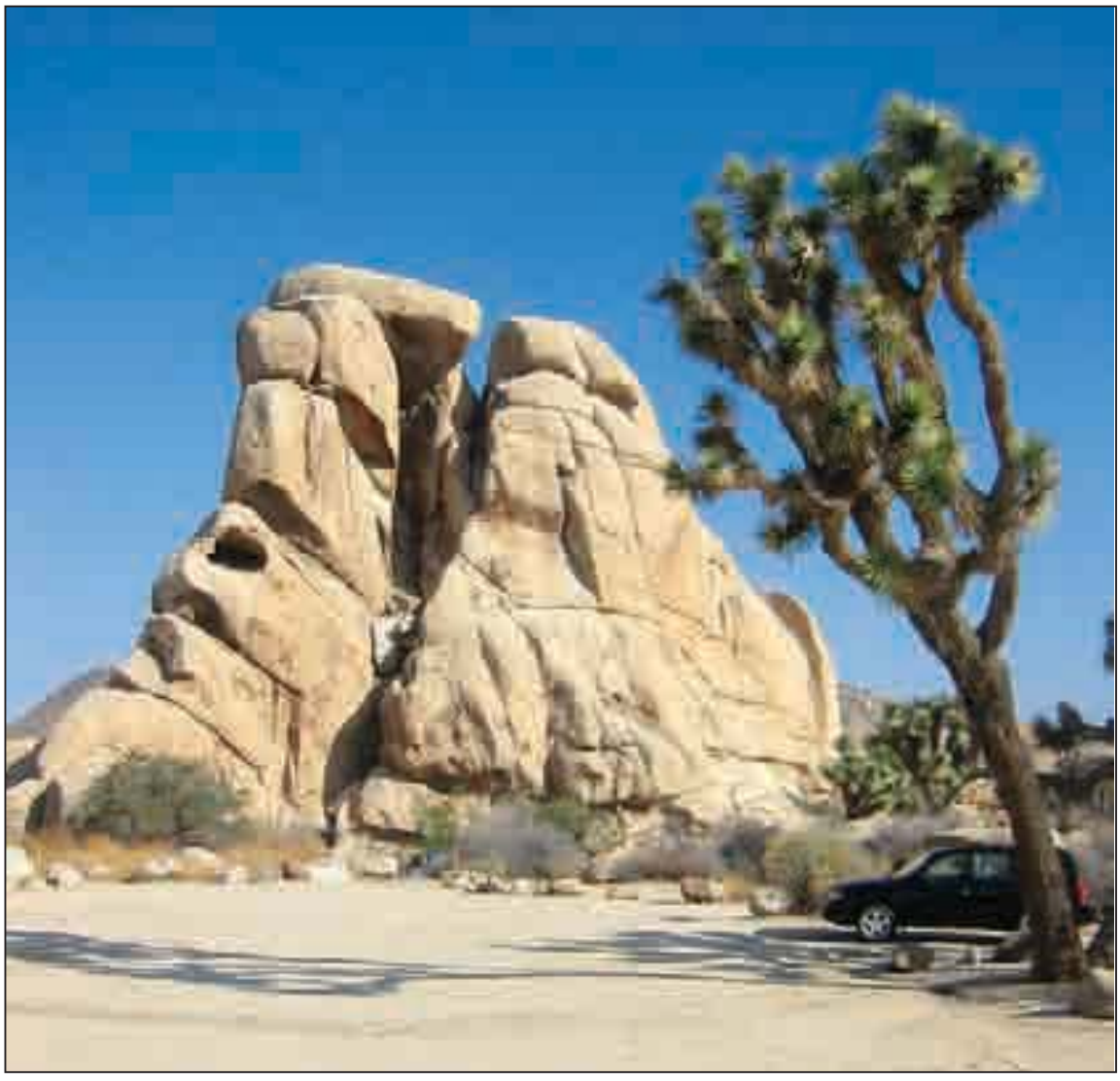
Cambridge Dictionary. Desert /dezzrt/ noun: an area, often covered with sand or rocks, where there is very little rain and not many plants. Derivation from the Latin desertum, which means ‘an unpopulated place’. This in turn is derived from the Egyptian word dSr.t, which literally means ‘red land’.

My first exposure to a desert was in the aftermath of 9/11. I was stuck in LA after a business trip, with no prospect of a flight home for over a week. Making the best of a bad job, I decided on an impromptu road-trip, and set off for Joshua Tree as a first stop. On arrival, I was immediately struck by the big sky, blazing sun and shimmering sand. I parked under a truly impressive lump of rock (people think of Joshua Tree as a bouldering venue but some of these boulders are one hundred feet high!) and decided I had arrived in a climber’s heaven. Escaping the car’s air-con, I was

***Sossusvlei sand dunes, Namib Desert, Namibia.*** ***Photo Dominic Oughton***

immediately hit by a wall of intense heat and came to the conclusion that maybe a winter visit might be more conducive to serious cragging! As things turned out, my road-trip ended the next day with a two hundred mile, one hundred miles per hour dash into Mexico as my enterprising secretary had managed to find a last-minute seat on the last flight home across the 'Pond'. However, I took away a very vivid impression of space, sun and solitude which has stayed with me ever since. I was hooked.

Not surprisingly, when planning our 'big trip' a couple of years later, Joshua Tree was quickly inked-in as a must-do stop. It turned out to be every bit as magical as I remembered. The rest of the family were equally taken – we'd turned into desert rats. During the rest of the trip and the subsequent three years, we've managed to visit deserts on three continents: the Sonoran and Mojave in America; the Kalahari and Namib in Africa and the Simpson in Australia. In this article I will try to explain the attraction and to signpost a few 'must-do' routes along the way.



***Chimney Rock, Joshua Tree, California.*** ***Photo Dominic Oughton***

Close your eyes and think of a desert and there's a fair chance that the image you conjure up will be of a Lawrence of Arabia landscape, with palms, dunes and of course sand. Most of the deserts we have visited are indeed sandy and a couple have particularly remarkable dunes. The Namib Desert around Sossusvlei is home to the highest and oldest dunes in the world. Towering around one thousand feet high, these shifting mountains of sand offer spectacular scenery. They are a photographer's dream, especially at sunset and sunrise. I guess they're a Munroist's nightmare – imagine trying to bag a peak that moves tens of feet a year! They also cry out to be sledged down, but our plans were stymied by the lack of an appropriate board, until a bit of ingenuity identified the picnic table as an able substitute.

Ten thousand miles away in New Mexico, the White Sands National Monument protects the largest gypsum desert in the world. It delivers total sensory confusion, with a landscape that looks exactly like snow but behaves like sand. When we visited, it was also freezing, adding to the confusion. One happy consequence of being in America rather than Africa is that the Yanks are more organised – you can even rent snow-boards here.

Part of the clue to the attraction of the desert lies in the definition above – 'very little rain' and 'rocks' represent an important conjunction when selecting a cragging spot. The obvious problem of heat is simply overcome by avoiding the sun – either climbing early or late, seeking out the shade, or best of all by going in 'winter'. I've used the quotation marks as, whilst strictly accurate, these aren't winters in the Glossop sense of the word, as I was reminded on Christmas Eve when climbing in Arizona at 7,500 feet without a shirt. The combination of clear skies, low humidity and blazing sun makes for a very pleasant climbing temperature, usually in the 20s.

Even better, you can experience Southern Hemisphere winter during our summer holidays, which represents a great combination. If it's comfortable by day, inevitably it can get a little chilly at night. Frozen water pipes and ice on the inside of the windows of our RV in Arizona this Christmas, bear testament to that. However, this provides the perfect excuse for donning duvets and huddling around a crackling camp fire with a beer in hand and not a care in the world. Time passes watching shifting shapes in the flames, spotting shooting stars against heavens infinitely more richly populated than at home, or identifying familiar constellations. These simple pleasures appeal to something ancient and fundamental in the human psyche.

'An unpopulated place' – there's another clue. Driving on the trans-continental trunk roads through the Namib or Simpson Deserts you will encounter at most a handful of vehicles in an hour. There are only three settlements bigger than Broadbottom in the 1,500 miles between Darwin and Alice Springs. These are big places with big skies, straight roads and

hundred-mile views all around. Venture away from the main roads and you are truly on your own. There's no room for agoraphobics here. The space and solitude encountered in the desert allow for a wonderful tranquillity, with an accompanying edginess of 'I do hope nothing goes wrong'. There is certainly no queuing for routes – we didn't meet a single other climber on our travels in central Australia or Africa.

However, don't confuse 'unpopulated' with 'lifeless'. As we've learned from numerous self-guided trails and visitor centres, the desert is full of very well adapted life – sometimes you just need to look for it. Not that you need binoculars to spot the fifty-foot tall saguaro cacti of the Sonoran desert. These giant green spiky monsters look every bit as extraordinary as their cartoon caricatures, and a close encounter is likely to leave you in worse shape than Wyl E. Coyote. This ability to inflict pain (and worse) is a characteristic common to much desert flora and fauna. Australia is infamous as home to more deadly critters than the rest of the planet put together, but actual encounters are relatively rare. We soon fell into the local fashion of walking around with just thongs on. You will be relieved to learn that 'thong' is Aussie slang for flip-flop, not minimalist underwear. It's all put into context by the statistic that all the deaths from the combined efforts of snakes, spiders and crocs don't stack up to those caused by vending machines! This didn't prevent us being a little alarmed when returning to the campground after a few nearby routes to find that the kids had decided to use a slightly more distant toilet, as a rattlesnake had barred the way to the nearest.

Talking of toilets (a theme developed at length in recent journals...) there is much to marvel at in the variety and ingenuity applied to tackling the twin desert problems of remoteness and lack of water. The resulting 'pits', 'dunnies', and 'long-drops' are often surprisingly clean, fragrant and altogether tranquil places. Perhaps the ultimate in ventilation and viewpoint was provided by the pit toilet we encountered this summer in the Spitzkoppe, Namibia. Offering nothing but a two-foot high wall to hide the blushes, this marvellous construction left the keen, multi-tasking guide-book scholar with uninterrupted views of the fourteen-pitch 'Beyond Suntan Lotion' 24 (or E5) on the SW Wall.

Talking of route-sussing, now I've convinced you of the merits of desert rock, here are a few suggestions for some choice spots to visit. There's a real contrast between what's on offer in America compared with the fare in Africa and Australia. On our travels I've become increasingly aware that good climbing depends not just on rock and weather, but also on development by a community of active climbers and the ability to access the crags. Both Africa (at least Namibia and Botswana, though with the notable

***Dominic on Lizard Marmalade 5.10d, Mount Lemmon, Arizona. Photo Helen Oughton***

exception of South Africa) and Central Australia suffer from a relatively undeve-loped climbing scene and in fact a real dearth of people generally. There's a fair amount of rock in both but not much in the way of roads to access them. Most frustratingly, there are some stupendous crags in Australia's Northern Terri-tory which are off-limits due to their importance to the ancestral owners or aboriginal people. Principal amongst these are Uluru (Ayers Rock to you), Katherine Gorge and Kings Canyon, each of which would otherwise be major climbing destinations. Nonetheless, if you can withstand the temptation, they're all still essential stop-offs for the walking, wildlife and breathtaking scenery, not to mention the remarkable ancient rock-art (one of the principal reasons for the ban).

Having discussed where you can't climb in Central Australia, let's turn to where you can. We made a trip from Darwin on the north coast, down to Adelaide on the south,

travelling via Alice Springs and Ayers Rock. The first 1,500 miles offer the wetlands of Kakadu, the waterfalls of Litchfield and thrilling kayaking in the Katherine Gorge. Unfortunately there are only twenty-five recorded routes along the entire journey, down a thirty-mile dirt-road in Umbrawarra Gorge. Things start to look up when you get to Alice Springs which is situated at a breach in the MacDonnell Ranges. These mountains stretch hundreds of miles east to west, marking Australia's waist-line. They are broken by a small number of fantastic gorges where watercourses have carved their way through, leaving small but abundant oases within the barren surroundings. These also provide a focus for the limited amount of climbing on offer.

Working from west to east, the first climbing you come to is Ormiston Bluff. Here, a seventy-five foot crag, handily situated near a great National Park campground, offers thirty or so routes on steep,

***Jake Oughton on Trailing Edge 5.9+, Mount Lemmon, Arizona. Photo Jim Scott***

juggy quartzite, seamed with positive holds. The scare factor of the routes (on spaced natural gear with the occasional 'carrot' or hangerless bolt) was enhanced on our visit by the presence of unidentified white spiders occupying every hold. Carrying a branch to sweep these off as I climbed seemed an advisable precaution, but they still managed to dampen our enthusiasm for more than a day's climbing. Next stop is Glen Helen Gorge, where the climbing is situated either side of a beautiful swimming hole. Accessible routes around the pool contrast with Gogarth-like adventures on the main wall. It's a paradise for birdlife too and you are more likely to be watched, as we were, by a couple of wallabies than any fellow climbers. Better still, there's a very welcoming bar at the adjacent Glen Helen Lodge, where a few stubbies can be washed down at the end of a long day's climbing. Which might even leave you in sufficiently mellow mood to appreciate the outback sing-song (including the obligatory rendition of Waltzing Matilda). Finally, at the eastern extremity lie the very conveniently situated slabby routes of Emily Gap, and the attractive (though banned) Trephina Gorge. For those more inclined to walking, the 220km Larapinta Trail threads its way along the whole range, offering a reportedly world-class wilderness adventure.

Climbing in Namibia is pretty limited in extent and concentrated around the Spitzkoppe and Pontok mountain ranges. These truly impressive granite giants (the Spitzkoppe is known as Africa's Matterhorn) rise up improbably for over 1,200m from the surrounding pro-Namib plains of southern Damaraland, only a couple of hours drive north-west of the capital Windhoek. There are a dozen or so wilderness camping spots around the mountains, where you can enjoy splendid isolation camped beneath some truly awesome rock architecture. Whilst the Spitzkoppe itself is home to a dozen or so thirteen-pitch mega-routes, we limited ourselves to the more amenable sports-climbing available on scattered crags and boulders around its base. The Rhino, Elephant, Lion and Dinosaur rocks (bearing tenuous resemblances to their eponymous animals) offer about thirty routes from 5 to 7b and beyond, on crimpy granite slabs and walls which reward good footwork and tough finger tips. A bigger outing saw the whole family ascend 'Winds of Despair' – a 250 foot route on the aptly named Sugar Loaf. Other climbing options in the area include Ameib Ranch, where a number of scattered routes are to be found amongst impressive granite canyons, either by acquiring a copy of the (out of print) topo map or spotting the odd bolt and 'going for it'. Further fun can be had by finding and following the 'Klettersteige' around and over the, for once clearly identifiable, 'Elephant's Head' rock. Giraffe and zebra roam wild beneath the rocks, making for a real 'Out of Africa' experience.

In contrast, desert climbing in America offers extensive, well documented and developed climbing. There's still plenty of wilderness, but there's a chance you might have to share some of it with at least a few fellow climbers. It should also be borne in mind that these will typically be American climbers and the noise pollution potential is therefore high. One day of a recent trip to Red Rocks was marred by resounding echoes of 'nice move dude' and 'way to go, man' as a party of three commentated on every move on a nearby 5.9. However, such 'crowding' needs to be seen in perspective – the campgrounds at both Red Rocks and Joshua Tree each hold only around forty parties, to access areas comparable to a decent chunk of the Peak District. We're not talking Stanage on a Sunday, more mid-week on Shelf Benches.

There's so much to choose from, I've had to restrict myself to three favourite areas. Joshua Tree was where it all started for me and remains a firm favourite. You stay in the Hidden Valley campground amongst some of the most impressive granite boulders you've ever seen, just yards away from the nearest routes. There's a friendly, climber-centric feel to the place, with none of the cliquey elitism you sometimes experience at world-famous venues. Strumming guitars and a hippy piping away on a flute in a cave halfway up a cliff face lent a slightly '70s atmosphere to proceedings, as we smeared, crimped and cranked our way up a bunch of classic 5.10s: Papa & Mama Woolsey, Pinched Rib and Dandelion being more in keeping with the 'casual' scene than Pumping Ego and Chalk Up Another One. At night, the temperature drops but the camp fire compensates. A full moon lights up the rock towers, boulders and of course Joshua trees with a shimmering glow and the fading guitar strains accompany the shooting stars overhead.

We brushed through Red Rocks for a couple of days on our big trip. It's an extraordinary place of contrasts, lying only fifteen miles from the bright lights and bawdy sights of downtown Las Vegas, yet offering hundreds of thousand-foot routes in tight, atmospheric canyons, many in remote settings. On that trip we only managed a few sports climbs on the incredibly featured rock – magnificent crimpy fingerholds etched out of the black 'desert varnish' covering over the deep-red sandstone, before the weather bombed out. However, our appetites were whetted before the rock was wetted (it's recommended to allow at least a couple of days after rain, before climbing here, as the rock softens when wet) and I made a keenly-awaited return trip for a week with Jim in October of this year. A week of full-on sunshine and temperatures in the high 20s saw us ironically spending most of our time seeking shade on the north-facing canyon walls, with the occasional shivery belay when the wind picked up. Nonetheless, we managed a thousand feet of climbing each day, scorching through the mega-

classics like Prince of Darkness 5.10c, Dream of Wild Turkeys 5.10b, Triassic Sands 5.10c, and Only the Good Die Young 5.11c. The highlight of the trip was an ascent of Levitation 29, a nine-pitch 5.11c first climbed by Lynne Hill and selected by her as her all-time favourite climb. It's got everything: long and challenging approach; crack, roof and wall climbing, with a hundred-foot 'enduro crux' of steady 5.11c (English 6a) climbing, followed by another hundred-foot of 'burley 5.11b crack'; finished off with views all the way to the 'Eifel Tower' and Luxor Pyramid on The Strip. I didn't know exactly what they meant by 'burley', but it's now joined my climbing lexicon as an invaluable supplement where 'pumpy' just isn't enough.

Finally, I've picked Southern Arizona, the venue for our most recent rock-around-the-world trip. There really is nowhere more reliable in the 'States' at Christmas in terms of climbing weather, with generally clear skies and high pressure (though see earlier regarding the freezing nights). The most developed reliable winter climbing is on Mount Lemmon, a 'sky island' of granite rising around 9,500 feet from the surrounding Sonoran

***The Oughtons in front of The Pontoks, Namibia.*** ***Photo Dominic Oughton***

desert, near Tucson. The Mount Lemmon Highway winds it's way to the summit for over twenty miles or so, enabling the climber to dial in the required temperature for the day's sports plan and head up to a crag at the appropriate altitude. Most of the climbing is single pitch (though there are areas with seriously long and remote backcountry climbs elsewhere in the state) and on granite. However, it is far from monotonous, with a wide selection of slabs, cracks and faces, with generally positive holds and a mix of trad and bolted protection.

We were fortunate enough to be staying with Jim Scott, one of the local new-routing activists, and we had the grand tour of the must-do routes on the Lemmon. We were also in the company of an old Black & Tan known to many of you – Mike Warwick. Christmas Eve saw us warming up at 7,500 feet on Gumby Rock, before dropping down to Windy Point for the uber-classic Steve's Arête (5.11a) which features on the cover of the Arizona select climbing guide. Later in the week we were introduced to The Ruins, Forgotten Walls and Sunspots areas. All developed in the last couple of years by Jim and friends. With a hundred routes of all grades, these provide great sport on magnificent rock. Check out www.mountainproject.com for details and pictures, including one of the roof on Sky Box, improbably climbed at 5.10d, but only after you've overcome the 5.11c leaning groove at the base. The other classic area in Southern AZ is Cochise Stronghold, where (the clue's in the name) Cochise and his Apache band held out against the might of the US army for a number of years. There is a strong trad ethic here, with some very run-out routes on jutting spires and domes. However, happily for the family cragging team, there's a great collection of sports routes at the trinity of Trad, Rad and Glad rocks in the Isle of You. For more contrast there's The Mustang, a two hundred-foot high, mile-wide limestone crag, plastered with remarkable chert holds. This would be world famous if it were in France, with a thousand routes on it. As it is, there are around thirty and they're not in any guidebook.

If it's sunshine, solitude, scenery, sand and stars that you are after, then I would warmly encourage you to seek out the deserts of the world. Take in Australia and Africa if you want to mix in the occasional route, or pick the USA if you want a full-blown climbing road-trip. Either way, you are guaranteed a truly unforgettable experience and some great memories to see you through the occasional dull day at home.