

Photo: Bill Hatcher

“Civilized” big walls on the north face of Angel’s Landing

Zion National Park, Utah

Legends of loose rock, tenuous protection, epic descents, hostile climate, poisonous flora and fauna, and wicked vertical bushwhacking keep most climbers from visiting Zion’s sandstone cliffs. If you ever hear any of these tales, believe them and pass the word. But if you’re interested in true adventure regardless of objective hazards, Zion is the New World.

Etched out of the landscape by the Virgin River in the southwest corner of Utah, the canyons of Zion National Park host numerous cliffs ranging from 600 to 2200 feet high. The rock is sandstone, each of its many layers generally recognizable by its color, and varies widely in terms of looseness, softness, and climbability. Angel’s Landing, the centerpiece of Zion wall climbing, consists largely of Navajo sandstone, one of the more solid mediums in the region, typified by dark rock and clean cracks and corners.

Fourteen-hundred feet high, the north face of Angel’s Landing offers nine excellent big-wall routes (including the all-free *Northeast Buttress*, not technically on the north face) on typically good rock, and in a spectrum of difficulty. For starters, there’s the well-bolted *Prodigal Sun*, which tips the scale at a sane 5.5 A2. Then you have the serious nailups like *Empty Pages*, *Ball and Chain*, and the *Swiss-American Route*, all of which are sandstone A4. For classics there’s the *Lowe Route* (5.8 A2), a moderate mixed route and a must for aspiring hardmen.

Angel’s Landing, located mere minutes from the road by foot, has an approach to make a sport climber envious. The descent from the summit is equally casual: a two-mile paved trail winds down the hill in a beautiful setting. The difficulties of Angel’s Landing routes are in the climbing itself, unlike many of Zion’s other impressive walls where the approach and descent are serious undertakings in their own right.

Peregrine falcons nested on the north face of Angel’s Landing in 1991, closing the wall to climbing during the fledgling season (January to mid-August). The peregrines traditionally make their yearly nests on either the Great White Throne, Cable Mountain, or Angel’s Landing (both north and south faces). A closure may be in effect for 1992, so check at the visitor’s center before climbing.

The Park Service requires a permit for climbs taking more than one day; request a backcountry permit and list the exact details of your intended route at the visitor’s center, where you can also scan the two volumes of information compiled on most of Zion’s established climbs.

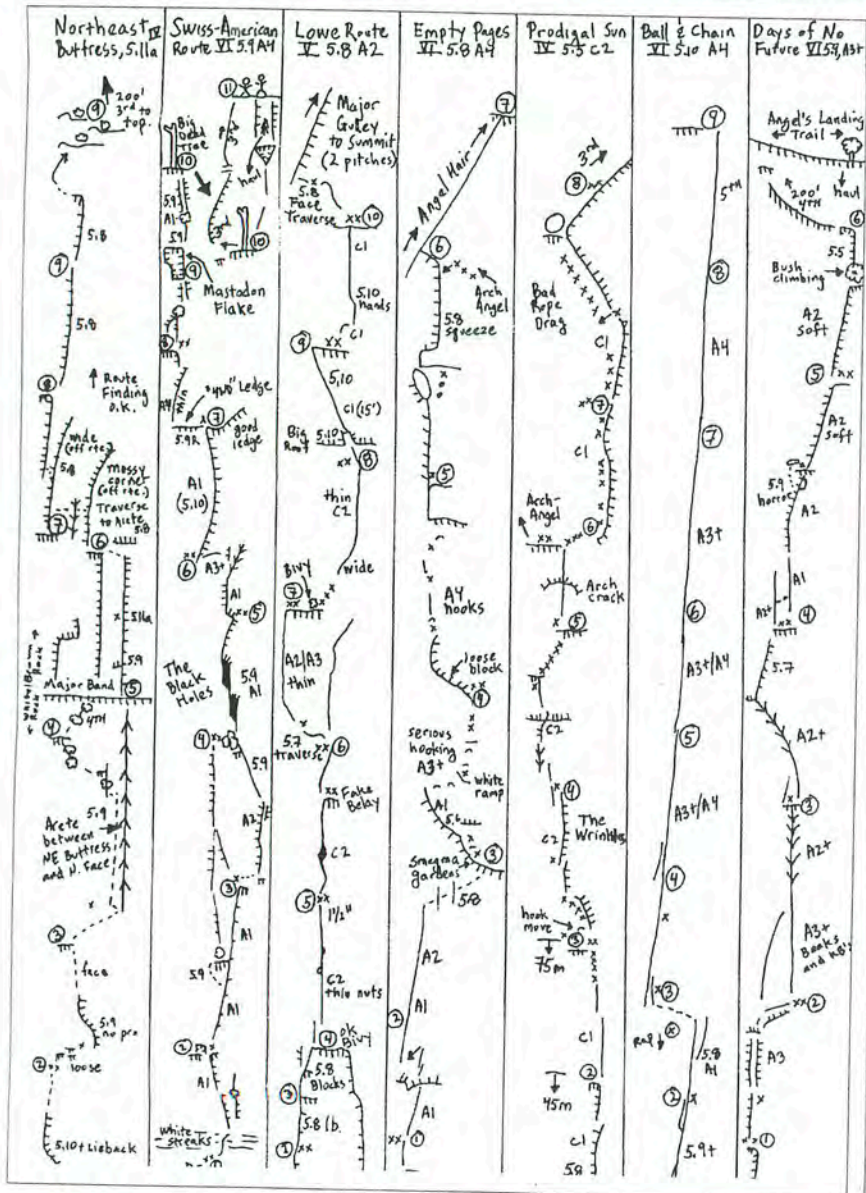
The campground, located just inside the south park entrance, makes a good base-camp, as do the private campgrounds in the adjacent town of Springdale, which often have showers (about \$2) available. Drinking water is available at the Zion Lodge, nestled deep inside Zion Canyon

on the way to Angel’s Landing. Springdale has some food services, but for major shopping it’s cheaper to go to a supermarket in St. George or Cedar City, both about an hour outside the park. The Bit and Spur in Springdale, known nationally for its fine Mexican food, is the recommended place to drink and feast.

The weather in Zion is extreme. Summer temperatures are often searing and winters can be bitter cold. Winter ascents are possible, but beware: snow-covered sandstone causes serious immobility. The best climbing seasons are the spring and fall. In late fall the north face of Angel’s Landing sees little sun, so prepare accordingly. After a thunderstorm it’s good policy to stay off the rock for a few days — wet sandstone is very fragile.

Zion is a well-preserved wilderness area and climbers need to be aware of their impact on the high desert landscape. Pack all trash up routes and climb carefully, as the sandstone scars easily from careless piton and nut placements. The easier routes do not require either pitons or a bolt kit, and the nailing routes generally do not need any additional drilling, except perhaps at an occasional belay (some older bolts may need replacing also). A small bolt kit with 3/8-inch drills and a few 3/8-inch-by-3 1/2-inch Rawl bolts and baby angles will suffice for most Zion routes.

The north face of Angel’s Landing.



Finally, be prepared for very high nailing standards on the harder routes — ratings are subjective and are generally modest compared to granite routes of equivalent difficulty.

— John Middendorf

Angel's Landing Route Information

1. Northeast Buttress (IV 5.11a). This excellent all-free alpine-type route starts on the east side of the ridge between Angel's Landing and the Organ.

Rack: 1/2 sets of Friends, stoppers, hexes, slings.
FA: Mark Austin, Randy Aton, and Phil Haney, 1981.

2. The Swiss-American Route (VI 5.9 A4). An excellent route up the continuous crack systems leading directly to the summit. 14 holes drilled on the first ascent (all belay bolts).

Rack: 10 Knifeblades, 12 Lost Arrows, 4 each 1/2" and 5/8" pitons, 2 each 3/4", 1 each 1" pitons, 2 1/2 sets of Friends, nuts, hooks, beaks.
FA: Xavier Bongard and John Middendorf, 10/19 to 10/22, 1991.

3. Original (Low) Route (V 5.8 A2). A popular introduction to Zion big-wall climbing. A spectacular route with several good bivouac sites.

Rack: Standard desert rack (2 sets TCUs and Friends to #4, nuts and slings), plus 10 to 15 pitons, mostly KBs and LAs. Only pitch 7 requires nailing, otherwise all clean.

FA: Jeff Lowe and Cactus Bryan, 9/70.

4. Angel Hair (V 5.9 A3). No bolts used on the first ascent. Dunn believes this route may go all free. Many difficult chimneys.

Rack: Knifeblades to 6" bongs, nuts.

FA: Dean Tschappat and James Dunn, 1974.

5. Empty Pages (VI 5.8 A4). Serious hooking (occasional drilled bat hook holes) and some loose rock. No anchors on top. Bolt kit may be required for blown-out drilled copperhead holes.

Rack: 6 KBs, 8 LAs, 6 each 1/2" pitons, 3 each 5/8", 2 each 3/4", 1 each 1", 1 each 1 1/4", rurs, hooks, 2 to 3 sets of Friends and TCUs, nuts, #3 copperheads for shallow drilled holes.

FA: Dave Jones and Mark Pey, 5/29 to 5/31, 1982.

6. Archangel (VI 5.8 A3). Many bolts and fixed pitons.

Rack: Pitons and nuts to 3", keyhole hangers.

FA: Ron Olevsky, solo, 10/1 to 10/8, 1978.

7. Prodigal Sun (IV 5.5 A2). This is a clean aid route and is an excellent introduction to multi-pitch aid routes. Many bolts, fixed pitons, and manufactured placements keep the difficulty to a minimum, and make for fast climbing.

Rack: 1 set of Friends, many small nuts, one hook, keyhole hangers.

FA: Ron Olevsky, solo, 9/81.

8. Ball and Chain (VI 5.10 A4). Very direct line ascending the major cleft between Angel's Landing and Scout's Landing.

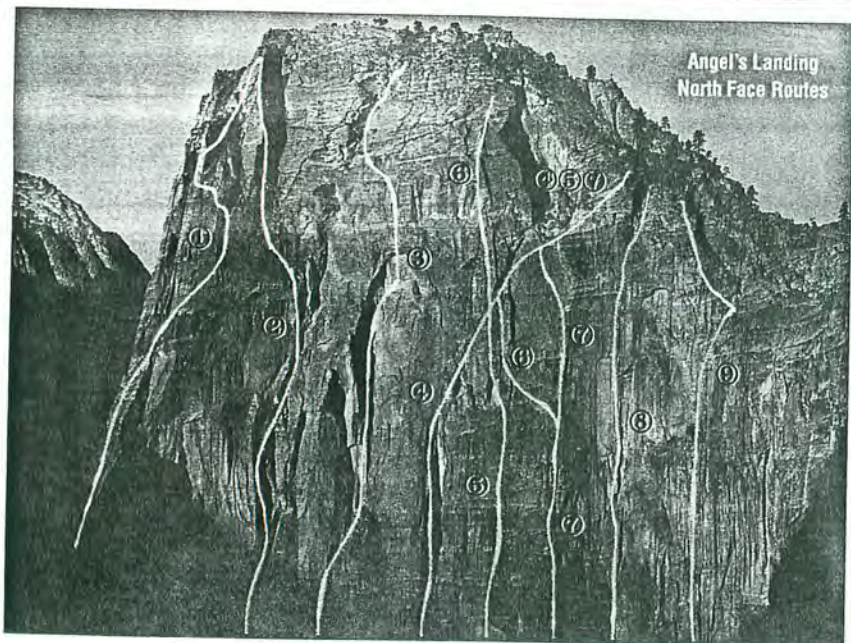
Rack: 20 KBs, 20 LAs, 3 each angle, 2" to 5" bongs, nuts to 8" tubes.

FA: Glenn Randall, solo, 1978.

9. Days of no Future (VI 5.9 A3+). Excellent route up the center of Scout's Landing. Overhangs most of the way. 10 bolts placed on the first ascent.

Rack: 15 KBs (mostly long), 12 LAs (mostly long), 4 each 1/2" and 5/8" pitons, 3 each 3/4" pitons, 2 to 3 each 1", 1 1/4", and 1 1/2" pitons, hooks, Stoppers, and Friends to #7.

FA: Barry Ward and John Middendorf, 5/23 to 5/25, 1991.





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H Adams Carter
Editor, American Alpine Journal
361 Center St.
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January 15, 1991

Dear Mr. Carter;

I would like to report the following climbs for 1991 to your fine journal:

ZION NATIONAL PARK, UTAH

Two new routes were put up on the north face of Angel's Landing. The Swiss-American Route VI, 5.10, A4, first ascent by Xaver Bongard and John Middendorf (10/91), climbs the major crack line to the left of the Lowe (original) Route and ascends directly to the summit of Angel's Landing. No bolts were drilled on pitches (14 holes for belays only). A very clean route with several very serious leads.

On the far right side of the north face of Angel's Landing (technically the center route on Scout's Landing), Days of No Future VI, 5.9, A3+, first ascent by John Middendorf and Barry Ward, climbs a overhanging loose and soft natural crack system--also no bolts or holes placed on pitches (10 holes for belays only).

Elsewhere in Zion, Conrad Anker and I climbed a new pitch at the base of the Watchman (5.9+ hands), and did the first link-up of two Zion walls in a day: Touchstone Wall and the Northeast Buttress of Angel's Landing.

COLORADO PLATEAU, ARIZONA-UTAH

In early 1991, Bill Hatcher, Barry Ward and myself climbed The Teapot, III, 5.8, an interesting 350 foot formation near Jacob's Ladder on the Navajo Reservation. In June, I made the first solo of Standing Rock by the original Kor route in 8 hours of climbing time (12 hours car to car). In October, Karen Lysett and I found a short spire to first ascend, Mr. Potato Head, I, 5.9, located on a dirt road 6.6 miles southwest of Natural Bridges National Monument on route 276. Also in October, Xaver Bongard, Melissa Wruck and I climbed the Setting Hen, II, 5.8 in the Valley of the Gods.

In November, jimmy Dunn, Betsy McKirkick, and John Middendorf climbed the first ascent of The Bear, IV, 5.10, A2, in Monument Valley. This spectacular 650 foot tower route climbs through "The Window", a large hole near the top of the formation 70 feet high and 50 feet wide, to the other side of the formation, and then to the summit. The route involves pitches of both loose and solid free-climbing and pitches of moderate aid on relatively good rock, and had previously been attempted at least three times by other parties.

Thanks for your consideration. I have some spectacular photos of the Zion routes and of the Bear (climbing through the Window) if you are interested.

Very sincerely yours,

John Middendorf