

City of Rocks

A dinosaur like me had never heard of City of Rocks. American sports climbers claim it is one of the best granite face climbing areas in the USA. I was there in 2007 and City of Rocks is a unique place in south central Idaho close to the Utah state line.

Originally called Silent City of Rocks because of the numerous granite spires (like high-rise buildings), the area was set-aside in a national reserve in 1988. There are dozens of outcrops and spires jutting out of a high desert floor, ranging in height from 20 metres to over 200 metres, with in excess of 500 climbs at all grades. What really stands out (to a trad climber) is the prolific use of bolts for protection, belays, lower offs and abseil points. Although the area was first visited by modern rock climbers in the 1950's, before excessive use of bolts, these days just leave all that trad hardware behind. With 20 quick draws you can protect most routes.



Typical terrain at City of Rocks (Photo: W Williams)

Apart from the climbing there are other points of interests. The California Trail passed through the area and over a 25-year period, before the transcontinental railway (completed in 1869) put an end to the great wagon trains, tens of thousands of people saw City of Rocks. There are grooves in some of the rocks from the wagon wheels and the first graffiti was signatures written in axle grease on some of the rock spires. The area also boasts numerous buried gold stories. One of the rock spires is called Treasure Rock but no gold has ever been found buried at its base. Apparently, at the turn of the last century, someone spent a whole year at City of Rocks looking for buried gold. Another story is the Almo massacre where it is claimed only five people survived an Indian attack that killed three hundred. Modern historians doubt the massacre ever took place; if it did it would be bigger than the massacre at Custer's

last stand, but the locals are not prepared to let go of the story, which surfaced in the 1920's and is now thought to be an attempt to create tourist interest.

The geology and topography at City of Rocks are world class. Some of the rocks are the oldest in the USA and the weathering process, particularly case hardening, exfoliation and honeycomb (alveolar) weathering, has given some of the best finger jugs, flakes and pockets you could wish for.

Almo, a few kilometres away, is the closest town with a population of about 100. It's now a backwater compared to its heyday in the 1850's. There is bitumen through the town but dirt roads everywhere else. I think locals are counting on a climbing lead economic recovery. Even the ranger station sells climbing gear. Well they sell quick draws, slings and ATC's, the sort of gear that is easily dropped – also a guidebook. The rangers actually support climbing and one has been instrumental in some of the overbolting (from a trad climbers perspective) evident on the routes. I bought a T-shirt from the ranger station that had a list of classic climbs and their grades screen printed on the back. While standing in a que in Australia I was asked what's the difference between 5.10a and 5.10c. Obviously (I thought), one's a hard climb and the other is too hard to climb.

Almo has a diner, gas station and store (I've got the language down pat), an historic school and a few houses. The store is the oldest continuously operating store in Idaho. There is camping within the park but not a central camping ground like the Pines at Arapahoe or Camp 4. Instead the camping sites are spread throughout the park so it's hard to judge just how many climbers are around. It's primitive camping and the only facility is a bar-b-que plate, sometimes a table and bench seats and a nearby pit toilet, but each toilet had a waterless hand cleaner dispenser – a nice touch. Next to the diner at Almo there are three cabins, where we stayed, and more are slowly being built. The diner menu was limited to five types of burger and fries. Ok for a while and it was certainly better than doing our own cooking. Internet and mobile phones have not reached Almo.

We were there in August and it was hot with temperatures in the mid to high 30's. If it was a day for short climbs we took a break between 11am and 4pm then headed out again until about 8pm. The climbs we did seemed technically straightforward but were steep and strenuous and generally not typical of Booroomba climbing. Consulting my T-shirt I realised that we climbed some of the classics. Below are short descriptions of some ticks at Bumble Rock at Inner City, which has a concentration of single pitch sport routes:

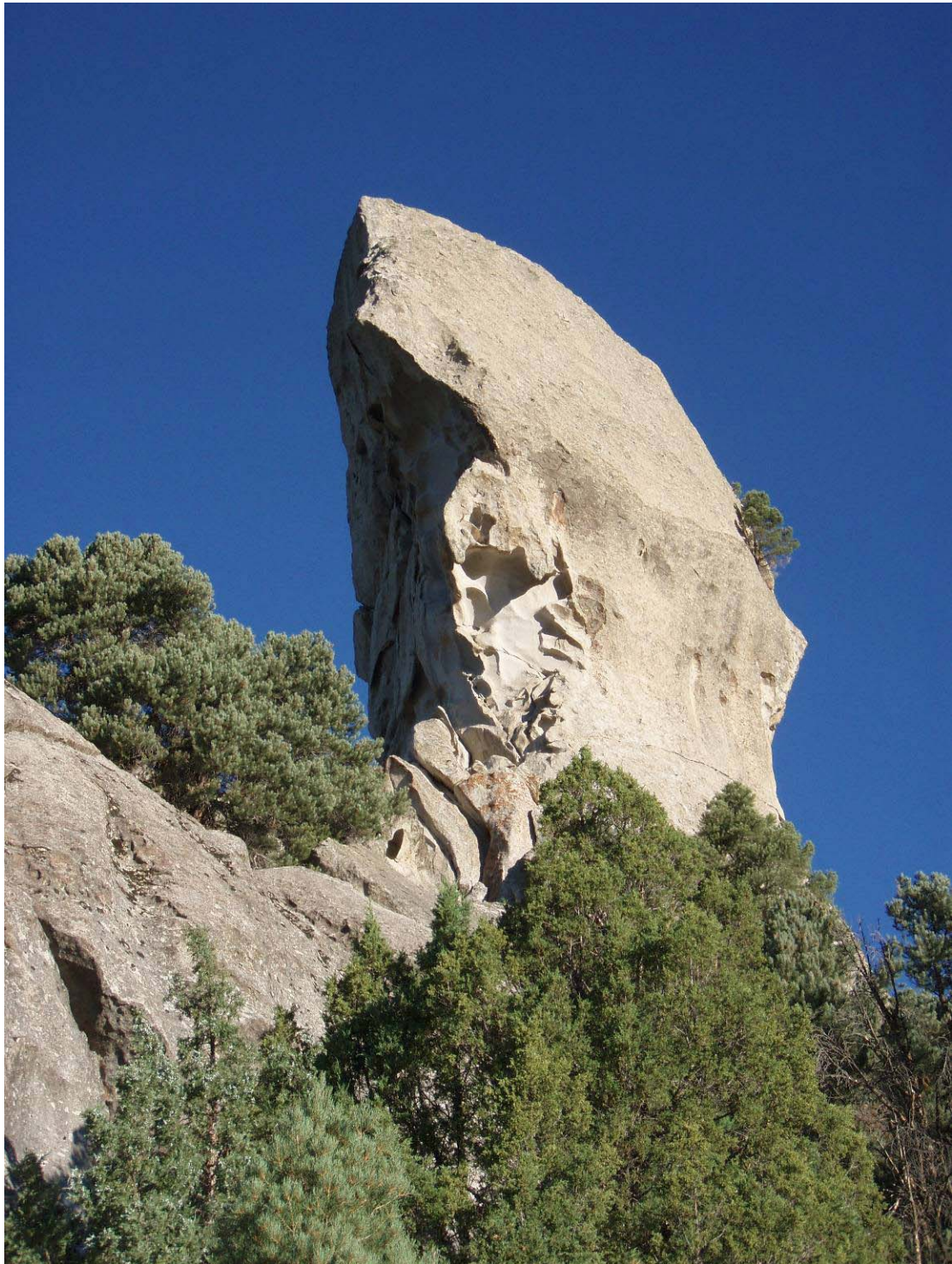
- Too Much Fun (5.8) has a tricky start for short people and is fabulous for its grade. A long climb with 15-18 bolt runners (I lost count after 10). The name says it all.
- NY's not the City (5.10a) is one of the classics. A single-pitch climb boasting wonderful finger jugs on a steep wall. There are 4 or 5 bolts but the first bolt is half way up the wall, which puts many climbers off a bit.
- An unusual climb was Mystery Bolter (5.9). Unusual because it was a friction climb requiring a cool head rather than strength. It's described as a scary lead and tough mental problem but I thought it was well and truly tamed with 9 bolts.



NY's not the City (I think)

A longer climb was Sinocranium (5.8) on Steinfeld's Dome. Well protected, six pitches straight up the biggest face at City of Rocks. Most of the climb is 5.6 slabbing in a sea of granite – a great sensation. The crux (5th pitch) is steep, awkward and short and surprisingly the bolts runners are a metre apart. If you were out of your depth at the crux it could easily be aided.

The last climb we did was lost arrow spite, which looks like its namesake in Yosemite and is two pitches long. The original climb is now some 40 years old and is a slightly awkward 5.7. There are a few fixed pins and a couple of nuts are useful but the memorable part is the heart stopping 45 metre abseil back to the deck from a flat summit less than half the size of a squash court. With 44.5 metres free it's an interesting abseil to start.



Lost Arrow (Photo: W Williams)

At City of Rocks its possible to get a lot of climbing done because clipping bolts is faster than placing trad gear. Not clipping bolts is even faster and we often skipped bolt runners on easier pitches. In the 60's there were reports of the US park service issuing fines to climbers for walking unroped on a glacier or climbed the Diamond (on Longs Peak) without a climbing permit or other similar misdemeanours. I wondered if failing to clip all available bolts would incur a similar punishment. Maybe this is the parks way of managing legal liability. Luckily no one caught us.

Lunch at the diner was where we had our most memorable experience. I'll try and paint the picture. The diner has nice wooden tables with red and white checked tablecloths and chairs with a wooden back rest that curved around the side for an armrest. The walls of the diner had examples of ranch gear such as harnesses, saddles, branding irons, a cowhide and photos. The décor was western – this is cowboy country. The sheriff and deputy dropped in for coffee. They roared up in separate vehicles and stopped in a cloud of dust; the sheriff in a large two-tone blue and white Chevy sedan with soft suspension and the deputy in a jerky pickup. Both vehicles had lights on the roof and the compulsory long aerial. These guys were huge, probably close to 200 kg each and we guessed one vehicle would not be enough for their bulk. Their uniform included the wide leather belt on the hips with handcuffs, holster with side arm, pocketknife pouch and a few other things that jangled as they strutted in. The problem was the chairs, which were only suitable for the regular size American male. We had visions of the chairs collapsing under their weight but thankfully they survived although both men had to perch on the very front. There was no way they could fit between the armrests. After a lifetime of watching B grade American westerns and road movies these guys were caricatures off a movie set. We could barely suppress a laugh; it was an unforgettable image.

You will never hear or read the words run out, or committing or a serous lead at City of Rocks. You are more likely to hear the word fun and they are right. Take time to visit City of Rocks for a truly unique climbing experience. It's worth it.

Brian Mattick

PS

Use your Internet search engine and type in "City of Rocks USA" for photos and more information.

PPS

In the next valley is another climbing area called Castle Rock. This site is a state reserve, which means a daily entry fee. It has similar climbing to City of Rocks and a similar bolting policy. Castle Rock is an attractive but smaller climbing area meaning fewer routes although some are multi pitch efforts. The noticeable difference on the few routes we climbed was the overgrading. A surprise considering the two areas are so close.