The Guidebook Odyssey - Unearthing the epic task of writing a guidebook

By Michael Adamson

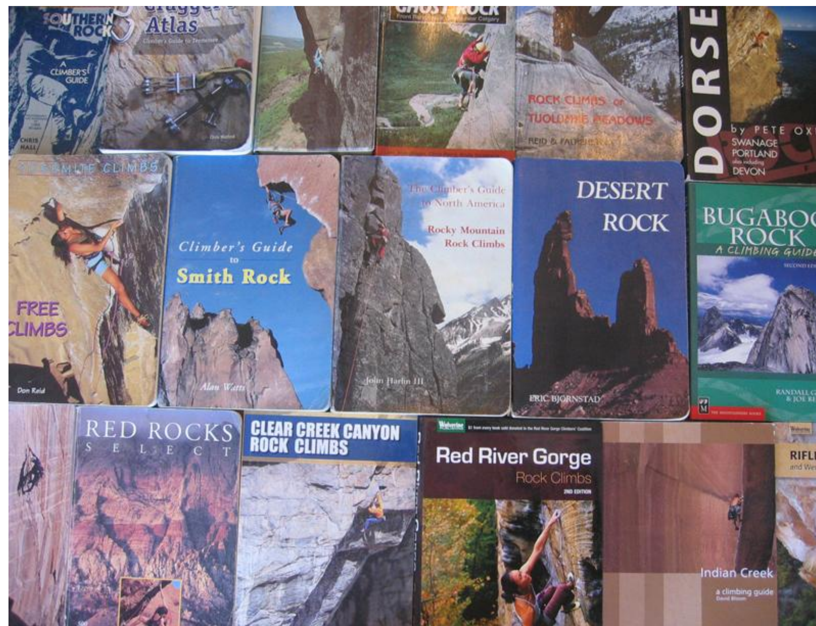

Photo by Luke Laeser

Never a fan of guidebooks, I've long had a "just pick a route that looks good and climb" mentality. "It's supposed to be an *adventure!*" I'd tell myself. This attitude carried me haphazardly (yet miraculously without incident) through many climbing trips. Until one fateful day at Colorado's Eldorado Canyon.

In early May of 2008, antsy from a snowy, frigid winter, My friend and I got a late start on the 6-pitch *Yellow Spur* (5.9 or 5.10b), opting not to bring the guidebook — we figured the line of least resistance would be obvious on this classic trade route. Six off-route pitches later, we collapsed onto a ridge, slightly below Tower One's summit. Benighted, we now faced what seemed like an impossibly treacherous slab descent. Even with headlamps, the ordeal took several hours. With the aid of a guidebook, we would have finished climbing while the sun still shone — or at least have known the best way down.

It was then that I realized with unfortunate clarity: of all the tools and tricks climbers have developed over the decades, the most important thing to bring on any vertical outing remains knowledge. Without knowledge of an area — its climate, formation, rock type, routes, and how to get from point A to point B — navigating even a straightforward "roadside" climbing area like Eldo can become an exercise in epic tenacity. As I peered down into the darkness from that ridge, no clear line of descent in sight, I began to revise my enthusiasm for adventure. Climbing, I decided, is adventurious enough *with* a guidebook.

After stumbling down from the East Slabs of the Redgarden Wall, shivering, exhausted, and adrenaline dosed, the first thing I did was fish the guidebook out of the back of my car — I wanted to know where the hell we'd gone astray. Sure enough, the topo showed clearly our mistake, namely bypassing the fourth pitch belay and veering right onto the 5.10b bolted variation. It also told of a bolted rappel route that could have spared us from our sketchy, multi-hour descent.

Although the knowledge was cold comfort, I could at least rest easier knowing that in the future, I wouldn't wing it. Our epic was merely the result of ignorance. Fortunately, with so many good guidebooks — written or online — ignorance is easily dispelled.

Armed with my newfound appreciation for the guidebook, I decided to do some research into the topic and see what goes in to making one. In the course of interviews with several prominent guidebook authors, I discovered that creating a guidebook is not only time consuming but also expensive, frustrating, and, often, thankless. Any aspiring author must face a series of hurdles. To wit, he must keep as up-to-date as possible while getting his book to print (which can take 2-3 years); he must gather accurate information regarding route names, grades, history, and even location — this involves both climbing many of the routes or problems listed and/or conferring with locals and developers, some of whom may not agree with each other; further, he must ensure that access issues are properly dealt with (i.e., noting closures or omitting areas with sensitivities)... And ultimatley, the author must weather the slings and arrows of opinionated climbers who see and critique mercilessly his finished product. The intrepid few that still choose to undertake the task do so out of pure love — for an area or climbing in general, paving the way with their books for the rest of us.

A Brief History

To understand the guidebook, it's best to start at the beginning. The rough concept of a guidebook (i.e., mapping a crag or line) surely pre-dates formal documentation or mass distribution — it could have been as simple as a map of a ridgeline drawn on a napkin in a mountain café in the Alps. Here in America, the formal guidebook's history is easier to track.

Early on, climbers in two crucibles of American climbing, Yosemite and Colorado's Front Range, both relied on oral transmission to disseminate route info. According to Stewart Green, who started climbing in 1965 around Colorado Springs, "There weren't really any climbing guidebooks available at all...everything was passed on by word of mouth, even into the 1970s." And given that there were few climbers and FAs ripe for the picking, it makes sense that few recorded info on their lines.

Then, in 1967, Pat Ament and Cleveland McCarthy published the first guidebook for the Front Range: *High Over Boulder.* The book covered the Flatirons, Boulder Canyon, and Eldorado Canyon, using photographs of the crags and short descriptions of the routes. It

also included a brief discourse on ethics and the geology of the Front Range, information still standard in today's guidebooks. For Green, as well as other Colorado Springs climbers like Jimmy Dunn and Billy Westbay, when they went up to climb in Boulder, the book was their Bible — "We tried to climb all the routes in *High Over Boulder*," says Green of the 200+ route tome.

Yosemite followed a similar progression. Steve Roper wrote the first guidebook for the area in the early 1960s, using a model similar to *High Over Boulder*'s English route descriptions. However, as Jim Bridwell states in an introduction to a later Yosemite guide, "The format…was lengthy and inappropriate for the flocks of climbers arriving from non-English speaking countries." As Yosemite grew, a new format was needed.

In the 1970s, George Meyers created a system for mapping routes, using lines and symbols to represent roofs, corners, cracks, and other features. His hand-drawn topos more easily translated to the the realities of a climb and transcended language barriers. He published a collection of 350 select topos in his book *Yosemite Climbs* (circa 1977). Such topos have continued to change and evolve into the forms seen in most guidebooks today.

The Vision
With the immense amount of work required to produce a guidebook, and all the grumbling and outright criticism (from climbers who'll nonetheless use the book), it's a wondered anybody undertakes writing a guidebook at all.

For some, however, the prospect isn't one they seek so much as it falls in their lap. Consider Chris MacNamara, founder of Supertopo: "I got fired up on Yosemite, climbed El Cap as much as possible and realized I was probably one of the few people who was climbing all the routes. *Rock & Ice* asked me to write an article on the top lead routes on El Cap, and since that got a great response I decided to write a guidebook."

For MacNamara, the vision was the climbing, not the writing. "I never set out to write a guidebook—I was just in a position to do it and I got psyched…That's the cool thing about guidebooks: they come from people who are psyched to climb a lot in the area."

Aaron Huey, the author of the Tensleep Canyon, Wyoming's guidebook, described the genesis of his books similarly: "I never planned to write a proper guide, but since all the new routes were in a completely new area with completely different climbing, it seemed appropriate to have a small guide for it." For him, the guidebook concept wasn't one to take too seriously. He referred to his books as spiritual guides: "It was a little sloppy and irreverent, but we liked it that way. 'Climbing is our religion' was our slogan, and 'bolting is bliss.'"

Sometimes, though, the necessity for a guidebook is apparent to those who aren't resident experts. Stewart Green's first climbing guidebooks were comprehensive statewide surveys, covering the key climbing all over states such as Colorado, Utah, and Arizona. It's reasonable to assume that someone might be the authority on a single area, or maybe a region, but three states? That's an undertaking on a completely different level.

What makes someone like Green want to make such comprehensive books about areas to which he's not local? "Through the 1980s and early 1990s I had done a lot of traveling and climbing," he explains, "and for some of these places you'd need a [single] guidebook for just one or two days of climbing. I had written some other books for [the guidebook publisher] Falcon [*falcon.com*], so I said we should do a climbing guide to Colorado because there's a real need for those kind of books." But recognizing a need and actually meeting it are two very different things. ...

The Research
Any good guidebook contains a wealth of knowledge, and not just about the climbs. Supertopo's (*supertopo.com*) *Alaska Climbing*, for instance, contains extensive information on weather patterns and storm cycles in the Alaska Range. Owing to the unpredictability and severity of high-altitude storms, such information is critical for safety.

Even for trips to tamer areas, such as Indian Creek, the greatest tactical dilemmas might not unfold on the rocks. Green was well aware of this when he wrote *Rock Climbing Utah*. For each area he included he also included info on camping, climbing seasons, nearby gyms and mountain shops, and access issues. When planning a trip to any of these locations, such information streamlines logistics, so you don't have to figure everything out when you drive up at 2 a.m., braindead and exhausted.

And info harvesting is a long, drawn-out process. In addition to collecting all the necessary background knowledge, there is still the not-so-simple matter of familiarizing yourself with the rocks themselves. "You do some climbing, yeah," says Green, "but you also have to do some research and factchecking, take photos and contact local climbers."

Bob Horan, who recently released *Bouldering Colorado*, a 608 page guide to over 1,000 boulders all over the state, said that his research came primarily from his lifelong pursuits of photography and journalism. "We were bouldering pretty much all over Colorado," says Horan. "Wherever I went I would take my camera, since I was 14 years old. I have a huge archive."

Green, on the other hand, when working on his statewide books, had less material to work with initially. For *Rock Climbing Utah*, he had to start from scratch. "I visit every climbing area and I climb there to familiarize myself with it," he says. "I never use another climbing guide as a reference for my book to factcheck."

Granted, whenever a guidebook is published, much of the Beta has already been published in one form or another, whether as a local pamphlet or online. It might seem more pragmatic simply to collect and reorganize already published material, but MacNamara would disagree. "The best guidebooks always start from scratch," he says. "If you're going to find stories, you go back and talk to the first ascensionists and you try to climb the route again yourself. By doing that you become very aware of all the current issues because you are actually involved."

Green says that, between the research, fact-checking, and writing, it takes him on average two to three years to create a press-ready book. Horan compared *Bouldering Colorado* to his honors thesis, calling the book, over 20 years in the making, his "PhD in bouldering." Says MacNamara, "[Guidebook-authoring] is extremely labor and time intensive, but I think that's the way to go forward."

The Assembly

If you've set out to write a guidebook, you hopefully have the vision to sustain the project. However, the rub lies within the confines of the project. There is a limitless back story of history, culture, and route beta contained in any given area. Naturally, neither the publishers nor the writers can realistically document everything about a climbing area, especially one as rich as Yosemite or Indian Creek. The writer needs to constantly ask the question "Does this need to be included?" or else the manuscript would be 2,000 pages long and begin with the history of mankind. You need to give your end user all the relevant info—and ideally cook up a good read—but not much more than that.

Green described the process for his *Climbing Europe* guide: "I came up with a list of about 30 areas that I liked to go climbing in but whittled it down to the top 21 areas in Europe that Americans would want to visit," he says. "I try to take into account this is a cool place, people like to go here, this is a classic climbing area, these are the best climbs there. If I was traveling from, say, Pennsylvania, what would I want to climb?"

This says nothing of keeping up with current information. With a sport that has nearly unlimited development potential, like bouldering, staying current is a tall task. "Bouldering, climbing, access—things are changing at such a rapid rate," says Horan. Trying to keep up with these things was a difficult task for him when he was writing *Bouldering Colorado*, which received criticism for what some say are major and avoidable errors. "One of the big changes made was that Estes Park changed their parking lot," says Horan. "McGregor Ranch closed down and moved it. The manuscript was handed in—here we are two years ago. By the time it's ready for print there's already changes that we need to make."

In addition to accurately documenting an area, Green feels the importance of capturing the spirit of the local climbing community. For each area that he documents in *Rock Climbing Utah*, he includes its vertical history. "With all these new people coming into our sport from climbing gyms and from places where there's not a tradition of climbing, there's no sense of what people have done in the past," says Green. "It's really important that we're able to use the historical context to appreciate these routes more."

He also includes information about the geology of the region, which, though seemingly a bit technical and irrelevant, has as much a place in the context of a climbing area as the history. "I studied a lot of geology," says Green, "so it's naturally one of the things that I'm interested in. I want other people to be interested in the medium that we're climbing on." Such information can help cultivate in readers a greater appreciation for the rocks themselves.

The Product
Finally, the research has been conducted and sifted, replete with history, trip-planning info, and accurate documentation of the climbing. Next, the manuscript goes to the publishers, who typically handle layout and formatting. Not every book has a separate publisher, such as Huey's guide, and in these cases the author's work continues up until the printing is done. Either way, once the writer's work is done, the book is entirely in the hands of public approval or condemnation.

What does the author get for their hardwork? Very little. Green said that if he were to total up the hours spent working and compared it with the money he makes from a book, it would amount to less than minimum wage. However, according to Green, "The rewards of writing guides are huge—I go to great climbing areas, I make new friends…great rewards beyond the monetary."

Once a guidebook is out in the public, the problem arises as to how all the information will affect human impact on the areas covered. MacNamara expressed concern over this, saying that "If you come up with an area you want to keep it to yourself, but to a certain extent you want other people to climb there and tell you how good it is."

Green has come up with several solutions to this problem. "I don't do any kind of quality ratings for climbs," he says. "I tend to feel that climbing areas that have quality ratings for climbs get all the traffic on the five-star routes when there are just as many three-star routes worth doing. I think we need to make up our own minds when we go to a climbing area." Green also includes sections on local ethics to avert impact problems. He feels that if guidebooks can promote environmental ethics, they can actually help avoid the imposition of rules dictated by land managers.

In a recent letter sent to *Climbing* [No. 272] illustrates how a guide mindful of access can help the community. Glenn McDonald described how he and his brother, Evan, used a guide to help reverse the closure of their local crag (Blue Lake, Ontario): "Having a well-written climbing guide describing the routes, anchors, and marked trails helped officials understand our desire for a clean and well-maintained crag." On the flip side, a haphazard guidebook with poor research will often be poorly received by the local community.

Horan's *Bouldering Colorado* was admirable in its scope, but got caught up in the difficulty of documenting an entire state's bouldering. The controversey ensuing from its publication shows pitfalls of guidebook authordom. Jamie Emerson, a Colorado climber active in protest of the guide (both on his blog, *B3bouldering.com*, and Falcon's website), has cited both numerous errors — incorrect boulder names, for example, and inclusion of boulders on private land without any mention of access issues. Such a problematic guidebook, argues Emerson and others, like Cameron Cross, of the Northern Colorado Climbers Coalition, can lead users into conflict with land owners and jeopardize climber access.

"It's up to the author to give [the publisher] a manuscript that has been approved by local land-management agencies and has been properly researched and the local climbing community," says Green. According to him, the burden rests squarely on the shoulders of the writer.

The Debate
Perhaps there is too much weight placed on an individual author for any one book. If a guidebook is sloppy, the writer is maligned and condemned until the book is exiled or becomes outdated. Maybe, though, it was just the first attempt at a longer process. Says Horan, "I always say that if you think you can do a better book, then that's what you should do. Anybody can do a book."

With the advent of the online "wiki"-style encyclopedia, anyone who has something to say can say it. Sites like *mountainproject.com* or *summitpost.org* allow users to post whatever information they have on their local crags. According to Green, there is a danger with online route/area info. "Anyone can write about any route and say anything, so it becomes a reader's burden to to ask, 'Is this accurate?'"

Perhaps online guides weren't intended to replace the written guide, but only to supplement it. Green says that "info on a website is not a guidebook, rather it should be viewed as an addendum of up-dated routes and info." Certain Boulder climbers disagree, however. Some climbing areas, like Boulder Canyon, have accurate, updated information posted online (such as where to cross the creek, what gear to bring, difficulty ratings) to the point where no guidebook is needed.

The future of guidebooks in a digital world is unsure, but in it Green sees harmony. "Many people like to hold the actual book and carry it to the crags, he says. "Still, there is a future in Internet publishing. I see a future where information, which is vetted by an author, is going to be published and sold in other ways besides traditional books." Digital avenues are becoming more and more popular with guidebook authors, such as sites like *drtopo.com* that offers free, downloadable pdf guides. Recently, guidebooks have been made available for download onto iPods and other devices.

In the end, perhaps we shouldn't take the idea behind a guidebook too seriously. Huey, regarding the atmosphere surrounding the creation of his "spiritual handbooks" says, "We partied every summer, and since it was the thing that bonded us, we put pictures in the guide…sometimes the route descriptions can be a little cryptic but that's the fun of Tensleep. To see someone pile all their ego into such an abstract thing as climbing is sad. Life is big. Bigger than climbing."

Maybe we can all learn a lesson in levity from Huey, and accept the good and the bad in the guidebook world as merely different attempts to give the gift of knowledge. We can take our collective knowledge of the rocks and to it append the knowledge passed on in guidebooks and create a more educated result. After all, a guidebook is just the written immortalization of our love for the cliffs. Says Horan: "It's a wonderland. The guidebook will get you there, but once you're there, put it down and go check it out."