

Carlos and Roger's Big Day in the Flatirons

Saturday, October 12, 2002

From almost anywhere in Boulder, you can't miss the view of the Flatirons, rising up high to the west of town. Their long southeast faces look imposing from a distance. However, the angle of the rock is only 55°, much less steep than it appears from afar, and many easy to moderate technical climbing routes have been done there. These long, easy climbs, minutes from Boulder, with good rock and nice views, account for the popularity of the Flatirons for climbing.

There are five Flatirons, numbered from north to south. The first three are the most obvious, and are the ones familiar to most non-climbers. The Fourth and Fifth are large, but are set back against the upper hillside, making them less prominent from town.

The idea of climbing all five Flatirons in one day was first suggested to me by Rich McDonald. In hindsight, it seemed like an obvious goal. Early Fall is clearly the best time of year. Mid-winter is too cold (and usually too snowy), with short days. Mid-summer is too hot. From a pure climate point of view, April or May would be favored, with long days and mild temperatures. However, in recent years, the Third Flatiron has been closed from February 1 through the end of July, due to raptors nesting on or near the formation. Early Fall is the remaining option. It has the advantage of dry, mild weather, but the drawback of short days.

Carlos Jorquera agreed to try a Flatirons Big Day with me, and we set Saturday, October 12 as the date. Neither of us had a clear idea how long it would take for our climbs, whether sunset would find us celebrating or still short of our goal. We decided to only climb by natural light, and did not bring headlamps.

One week before our target date, Mike Reyes and I spent a day climbing on the Third Flatiron and on nearby formations (the two Ironing Boards). In the early afternoon, we saw two climbers running north along the Royal Arches trail, carrying one rope, a light rack of climbing hardware, and small packs. It certainly looked as though they were trying for a Flatirons Big Day. I now think that they started with the Fourth and Fifth Flatirons, and spent much more time doing the Fourth than they expected. This put them behind schedule, and they were running to try and make up some time.

In our planning for the Big Day, there were two components of the itinerary. The first was the choice of route for each formation, and the second was the order in which to do the climbs. Carlos and I had each only climbed the First and Third Flatirons, and we based our planning solely on information from the guidebook for the others.

The most classic route on the First Flatiron is Direct East Face (5.6), so this was an obvious choice. The Second Flatiron doesn't have any long, continuous faces, but the combination of Southeast Ridge (5.7) and Southside (5.6) looked like the most appealing way to the top. The most classic (and certainly most popular) route on the Third Flatiron is Standard East Face (5.2), so that route was added to our list. The Fourth Flatiron has only one long route: East Face (5.4). For the Fifth Flatiron, we chose Northeast Buttress (5.6), since Rossiter's guidebook describes it as "the best line" on the formation.

Our main consideration in picking the order of the climbs was what routes might be crowded. The First and Third Flatirons would be the only ones likely to have other climbers on them. It would be harder to pass people on Direct East Face (1st Flatiron) than on Standard East Face (3rd Flatiron). The route on the Third is open face climbing, so you could pass on the right or the left. Therefore, it seemed best to start on the First Flatiron at dawn, to ensure that we would be the first party on the route. We could then climb the Second, Fourth, and Fifth Flatirons (in that order), finishing on the Third. We did not want to be on top of the Third

Flatiron before the end of the day, because we might be delayed by slow parties doing the set of three rappels from the summit.

In preparation for our Big Day, we xeroxed the route descriptions for each climb. On each climb, we carried the relevant xeroxed page(s) in our pockets. This helped with route finding, and was particularly helpful for the Fourth Flatiron, although we still had some problems finding our way on that route.

We met in Chautauqua Park and hiked up to the base of the First Flatiron in the early morning light. We started climbing at about 7:10 A.M., shortly before sunrise, and did the Direct East Face. We used a 60 m long, 9 mm rope – adequate for safety on these low angle climbs, and light in weight.

We wanted to maximize our climbing speed, while maintaining safety. During the day, we used three different climbing styles, in roughly equal proportions. Our first style was the classic one: one person led a pitch, set up a belay anchor, and then belayed the other person. This was the slowest but the most secure style, and we used it on the more difficult pitches. The second style was simul-climbing. One person would start out leading. When he reached the end of the rope (or usually only 100', since we tied in more closely to facilitate communication and reduce rope drag), the second person would start up, and we then kept climbing simultaneously, separated by approximately 100 feet of rope. The first person placed occasional protection, and the second person removed it. In theory, we could double our climbing speed this way, while still having the safety of a belay. In practice, we found the ropework to be a nuisance (often too much loose rope), and we felt much less secure climbing this way than with a traditional belay. However, for moderate ground, we were able to climb quickly. The third style was unroped climbing. This was quick, and we used it on the easiest pitches.

Carlos led pitch 1 – I followed and we then started simul-climbing, with me in the lead. I stopped at the ridge to belay him up, and he then took over the lead for simul-climbing to the top. We rappled down, and were soon back at our packs.

It had been a cold night, but the sun warmed us up to where we were comfortable on the upper part of the route. As we moved to the Second Flatiron, fog moved up from below, and we were soon enveloped in cold clouds.

We soloed up a 5.0 pitch to a belay below the overhang on Southeast Ridge, and I led the crux pitch. It was more difficult than we expected, and we agreed that it was solid 5.8. Carlos got chilled while belaying, and struggled with cold fingers on the overhang. He was happy to continue upward via 4th class climbing for hundreds of feet, with me simul-climbing behind him. We stopped below the Pullman Car (the summit block) and set up a belay. He led the short crux of Southside, and told me that it was secure enough for me to simul-climb after him. I did, and we were soon on top of the rock. It took us a bit of time to figure out the short but steep 4th class descent. We were then able to scramble down along the south side of the rock, retrieve our packs, and make a beeline for the Fourth Flatiron.

Although our climbing on the Second Flatiron was unfamiliar, we had no trouble with routefinding. We had both viewed the formation many times, and the key features of the rock (the Pullman Car and the South Block) were very distinctive. In contrast, neither of us had much of an idea where the route on the Fourth Flatiron started, or where it went from there. We hiked along the Royal Arch trail, trying to pick out our route from below.

Once we reached what appeared to be the correct place on the trail, we hiked up a way, concluded that we were in the wrong place, and hiked back down. From a different spot, we started soloing up a formation that started a few feet from the trail. It was heavily covered with lichen, and we soon decided that our route (East Face) was 50' to the right. We downclimbed a bit, then traversed over. We could see a cave above us, mentioned in the guidebook, and that

gave us confidence. We soloed up for many hundreds of feet along the ridge. The amount of lichen on the rock was fairly light, but the quality of the rock wasn't great, and we had to be constantly on guard for the possibility of a foothold breaking. This was the most mentally draining part of the day for me. We saw almost no places for any anchors, which made us wonder how you could do this route with a rope. Even if the leader didn't want any protection, it might not be possible to place any belay anchors.

The Fourth Flatiron is really three large formations, which overlap in height (i.e. one starts well below where the previous one ends), but with gullies in between. From the very top of the first (lowest) formation, we scrambled off to the gully, hiked up a ways, and then set up a belay near the base of a very obvious large crack/gully in the middle formation. I led on, with Carlos simul-climbing behind. The rock was much better than it had been below, but the climbing wasn't much fun. There were trees to get past, and the rounded crack system was not very aesthetic. I passed an old fixed pin, which reassured me that we were on route, and then belayed a bit higher, near the top of the formation. When Carlos reached me, we unroped and scrambled off into the next gully, hiked down a bit, and set up a belay for the final formation. Carlos led, and I simul-climbed below him. This was probably the nicest of the three formations, with good rock and few trees or bushes. After 400'-500', we arrived at the top. We were moving so constantly that we did not get cold. We changed into tennis shoes for the short jump off the summit, and then did the very long, unpleasant, brushy descent along the south side of the formation. Neither of us were very thrilled by the climb, or eager to do it again. We got back to our packs, had some water and food (I ate three Power Bars during the day, but it was so cool that I drank much less than the six liters of water that I had brought), and then we did the short hike over to the Fifth Flatiron.

A short hike took us up to the base of our route. We did full belays for the five pitches of Northeast Buttress (5.6). It was just as Rossiter described in his guidebook – high quality, exposed, and runout. We loved it. The route followed the ridge all the way to the top, with an exciting but easy hand traverse near the top. An overhanging 70' rappel took us to the ground, and the hike down was fairly short and on a good trail. We decided that this was one of the very best routes we had done in the Flatirons. The formation was in shade by the time we did it. I brought a warm jacket for belaying, but Carlos did not (he did climb in a light sweatshirt). He got quite chilled while belaying at one stance, even though I tried to move quickly.

We stopped for a snack and some liquid at our packs, then hiked over to the Third Flatiron. We had originally planned to do Standard East Face (5.2). However, we had plenty of time, and we had done the longest route on each of the other four flatirons. Therefore, we decided to do East Face Left (5.5), since it was the longest route on the rock. I led pitch 1, and then followed Carlos up the crux 5.7 overhang variation on pitch 2. We belayed for three more pitches, and then unroped for the scramble to the top. Although the climb was in shade and it was fairly late, we felt warm. This was a bit baffling, since we expected it to be quite cold.

We reached the top at 5 P.M., rapped down, hiked back to our packs, and then out to Chautauqua Park. My knees were rather sore, but otherwise we both felt quite good. We did not feel exuberant, like we would have after a long, hard climb, but we were still happy with our day's efforts. At one point on the hike out, we turned around and looked up at a view of all five Flatirons. That made us feel good. As Carlos said, if you are a serious climber in Boulder, you have to do all five Flatirons in one day some time. I was glad to have done it now.

We estimated that we did 32 pitches of technical (5th class) climbing during the day.

Climbs on our Flatirons Big Day (in chronological order)

- First Flatiron: Direct East Face (5.6)
- Second Flatiron: Southeast Ridge (5.8) and Southside (5.6)
- Fourth Flatiron: East Face (5.4)
- Fifth Flatiron: Northeast Buttress (5.6)
- Third Flatiron: East Face Left, var (5.7)