



# We Climbed Utah's Skyscraper Rock

By HUNTLEY INGALLS

*Photographs by the author and  
BARRY C. BISHOP*  
National Geographic Staff

**C**LIMBERS LIKE to repeat George Leigh-Malory's famous reason for attempting to scale Mount Everest—"because it is there." In the surrealist moonscape of the high southwestern desert, we climb eroding sandstone towers because, rapidly worn by the forces of wind and water, they may not be there much longer.

When I first saw the Fisher Towers of Utah, I thought of climbing them, but quickly dismissed the idea as a madman's dream. No one had ever conquered them; no one had ever tried. A dozen of the towers rise in weird majesty from the Colorado Plateau, 17 miles northeast of Moab (map, page 711). The tallest, the Titan, rears about 900 feet—some 345 feet higher than the Washington Monument and just about as sheer.

## Team Takes up Titan's Challenge

In the Fisher Towers, named for an early rancher, nature has created a pink, red, and orange skyscraper city in nightmare Gothic. In few areas of the Southwest can one find more bizarre masterpieces of erosion.

Not only did the towers look appallingly sheer, but they seemed to be composed of hopelessly soft, rotten rock that could easily break and crumble under a climber's boot. On a second visit, however, I made an encouraging discovery: The surface was indeed rotten and sometimes even covered with dried mud, but under the rot and mud was surprisingly solid rock.

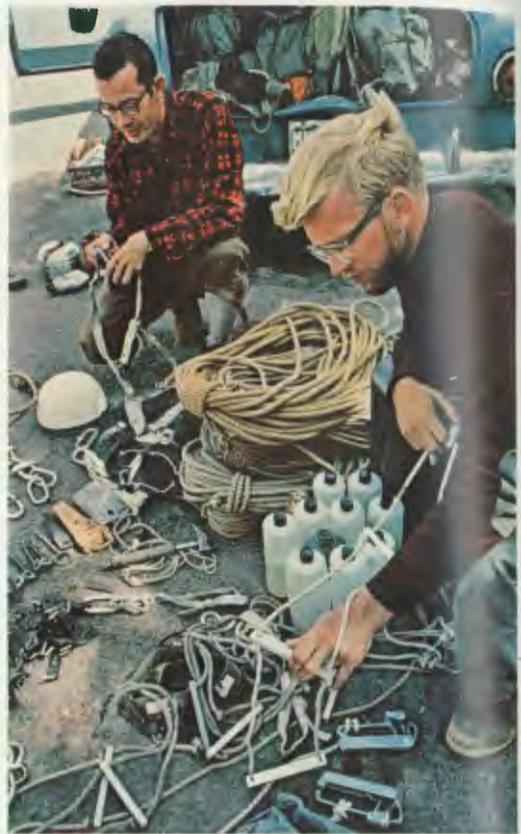
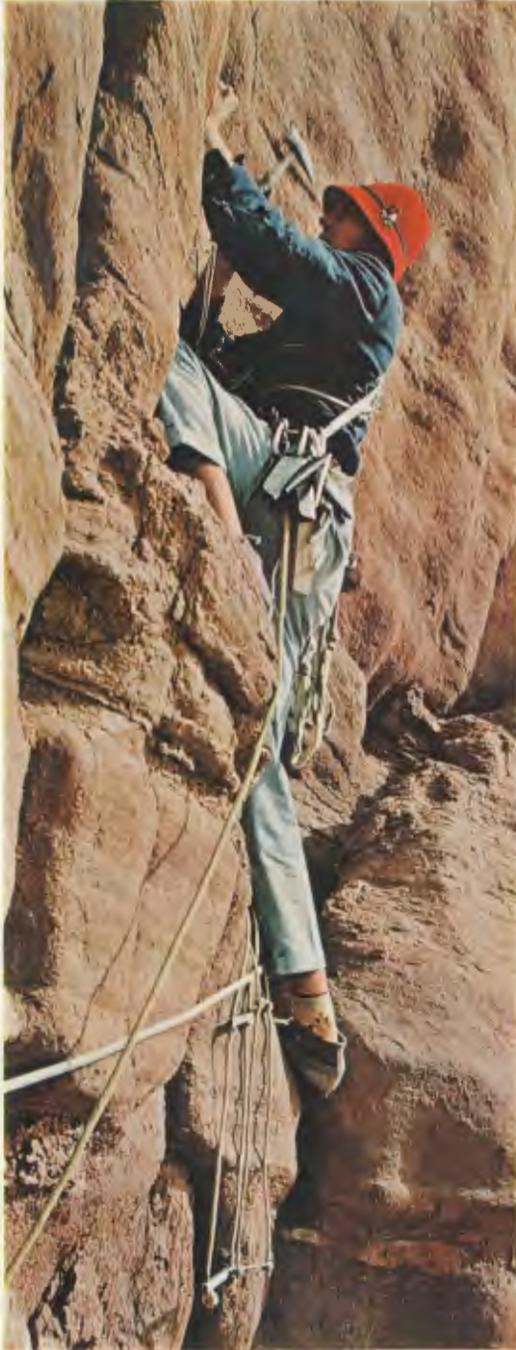
The Fisher Towers, I felt sure, *could* be climbed. I decided to tackle the champion—the Titan.

For my team I enlisted first a neighbor in Boulder, Colorado—Layton Kor, a six-foot-four-inch bricklayer who ranks as one of the country's most expert rock

**The author's party** assaults the treacherous summit of Titan tower, a 900-foot sandstone monolith near Moab, Utah. Broiling sun, crumbling rock, falling dust, gale winds, and thirst tortured three steel-nerved men who made the first ascent of the spire. Shadow veils all but the lead climber, a blue speck in this air view.

**Climbers inspect their equipment.** Bearded George Hurley examines stirrups, or rope ladders; author Ingalls checks a sling. Other gear includes expansion bolts, rope, hard hat, snap links, Prusik handles, and plastic water bottles.

**Lead man Layton Kor pounds a knife-shaped piton into Titan's face.** Rope around his waist, payed out by a companion below, runs through an anchored snap link as it would through a pulley.



KODACHROMES BY BARRY C. BISHOP (ABOVE) AND HUNTLEY INGALLS © N.R.S.

climbers. He and I had recently made the first ascent of Castle Rock, a beautiful 400-foot angular shaft some six miles southwest of Fisher Towers, on a ridge overlooking Castle Valley (page 721).

A third climber would strengthen the party and offer a greater safety margin. We picked George Hurley, a young instructor of English at the University of Colorado, who has had much experience on both rocks and mountains.

Reconnoitering the Titan for a possible route was sobering. Only on the lower section of the north face could we spy crack systems that would permit the use of pitons, the metal spikes with eye rings that climbers hammer into crevices in order to secure their climbing ropes. For most of the ascent, it seemed, we would have to set rows of expansion bolts, a slow and laborious task (page 710).

The north side offered the shortest route, but overhanging bulges broke the smooth line of its vertical ribs. The highest ridge on that side lay just above a prominent spire, part of the main tower, which we named the Finger of Fate (page 713).

From the ridge to the top there would

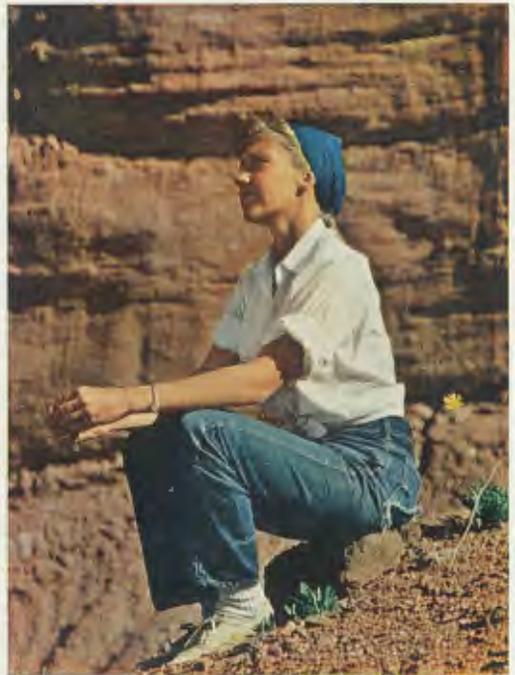


Our chosen path led straight up a vertical butte of smooth, rounded bulges. Kor began the serious climbing procedure: Drive a piton, clip to this a small three-rung ladder, called a stirrup, climb up on the stirrup, and repeat the process. Hurley, tied to a piton, fed out the rope as his companion progressed, and used his body as a belaying anchor to hold Kor in case of a fall.

Room on the butte was limited, so Jean Hurley and I went below to watch and take pictures. The rock was better than we had expected, and the two men made excellent progress all morning. One rotten layer of rock, about ten feet high, gave them concern, but it was soon passed.

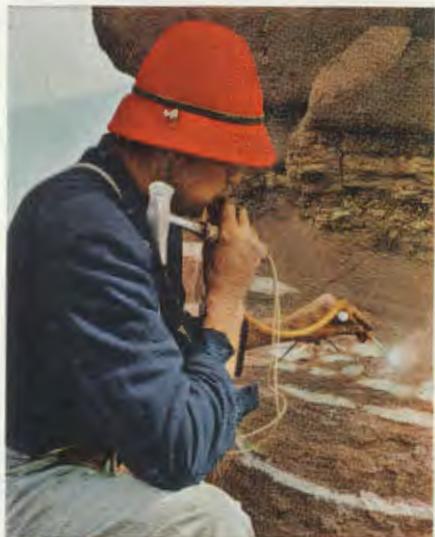
In the early afternoon the climbing became harder and the progress slower. Yet, to everyone's surprise, cracks and good rock could still be found under the dried mud. By mid-afternoon the two climbers, tired and out of

**Splinters of sandstone**, the Fisher Towers survive centuries of erosion that wore down surrounding tablelands of which they once were a part. Desert winds hone the razor edges of Titan (left) and its nameless, un-scaled neighbor. The climbers clawed up Titan's shaded north side in 3½ days of labor.



KODACHROMES BY BARRY C. BISHOP © N.S.S.

**Petite alpinist Jean Hurley** tracks the party's progress up the Titan. Jean met husband George when he rescued her from a dangerous shelf in the Rocky Mountains.



KODACHROMES BY HUNTLEY INGALLS © N.G.S.

**Drill bites into rock** for an expansion bolt. Using a rubber tube, Kor blows dust from the hole (center). Then he drives the bolt into a soft metal sleeve in the hole, fastening a hanger to the cliff. Climbers clip rope to hanger with a snap link.

water, returned to the ground and left the ropes hanging on the tower.

Next morning Kor and I climbed back up by "Prusiking," an ingenious system by which the climber can ascend a hanging rope. A Prusik knot tied in an auxiliary line and attached to the main climbing rope slides freely except when strain is applied; then it jams and holds (page 715). We climbed by standing in one while the other was moved ahead.

Reaching the first day's high point, Kor prepared a belay anchor—two bolts and a pair of stirrups—on the blank wall. After sending our rucksacks up on a hauling line, I joined him. Then we started climbing in earnest. I found myself, with each foot in a stirrup, hanging from the bolts like a picture on a wall.

### Mud Conceals Climbing Cracks

From here to the base of the Finger of Fate conditions became treacherous. A coating of baked mud covered the buttress. In some places it hung in curtains. Sometimes Kor had to probe the caked mud with a long piton or excavate with his hammer to find a crack, showering dust and small rocks down upon me. At times he had to drive a long piton directly into the mud and gingerly trust his weight to it.

After about two hours of this I was almost suffocated by dust, and cramped and chafed from standing in the stirrups. Kor kept on toward the top of the buttress, where he found a small sloping ledge at the base of the Finger of Fate. Here he chopped away a section of rotten rock and set two bolts for a belay anchor.

I sent up the packs and climbed from my painful position to begin the hot, exhausting job of removing pitons. Not only would we need them above; they cost as much as \$2 apiece.

Now we faced the problem of getting around the Finger of Fate. It overhung our route on all approaches. It appeared that our best chance was to traverse out under the west side, then try to climb a chimney, or narrow fissure, in the overhang to reach the ridge leading to the summit.

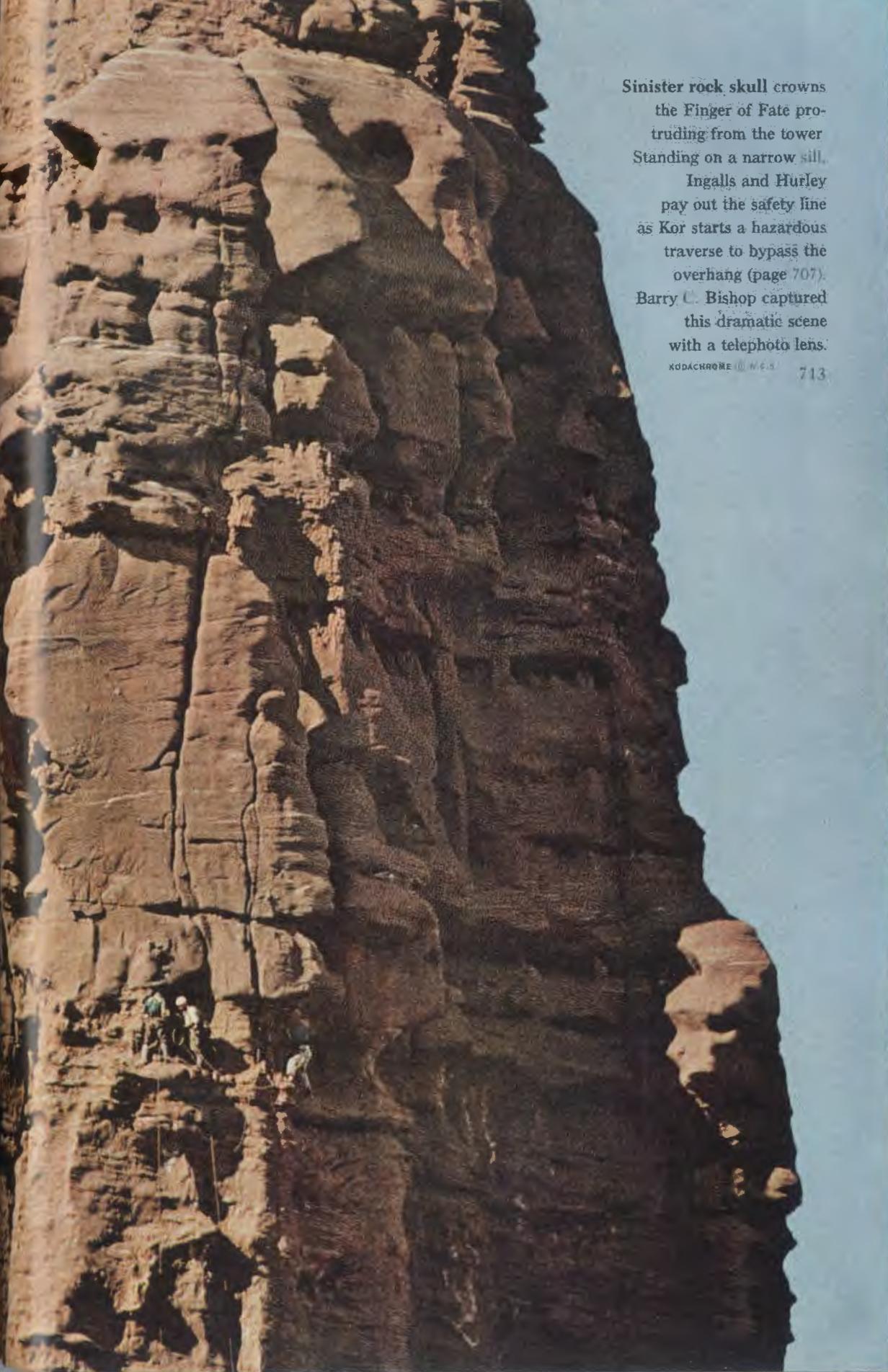
A rotten, undercut ledge, three inches wide, led around a corner beneath an overhang. Kor held on to a stirrup with one hand and stepped gingerly out on the ledge. Now he was delicately balanced under a smooth wall that slanted outward.

Below him the spire plunged straight down into the converging red depths. He worked around the corner and managed to set a small bolt.

"Watch me," he called. "This bolt is no good, but I can't do anything about it."

"I have you."

"Slack," he said, and I let out a few inches  
(Continued on page 715)



Sinister rock skull crowns  
the Finger of Fate pro-  
truding from the tower  
Standing on a narrow sill,  
Ingalls and Hurley  
pay out the safety line  
as Kor starts a hazardous  
traverse to bypass the  
overhang (page 707).  
Barry C. Bishop captured  
this dramatic scene  
with a telephoto lens.

KODACHROME 100 M.F.S. 713

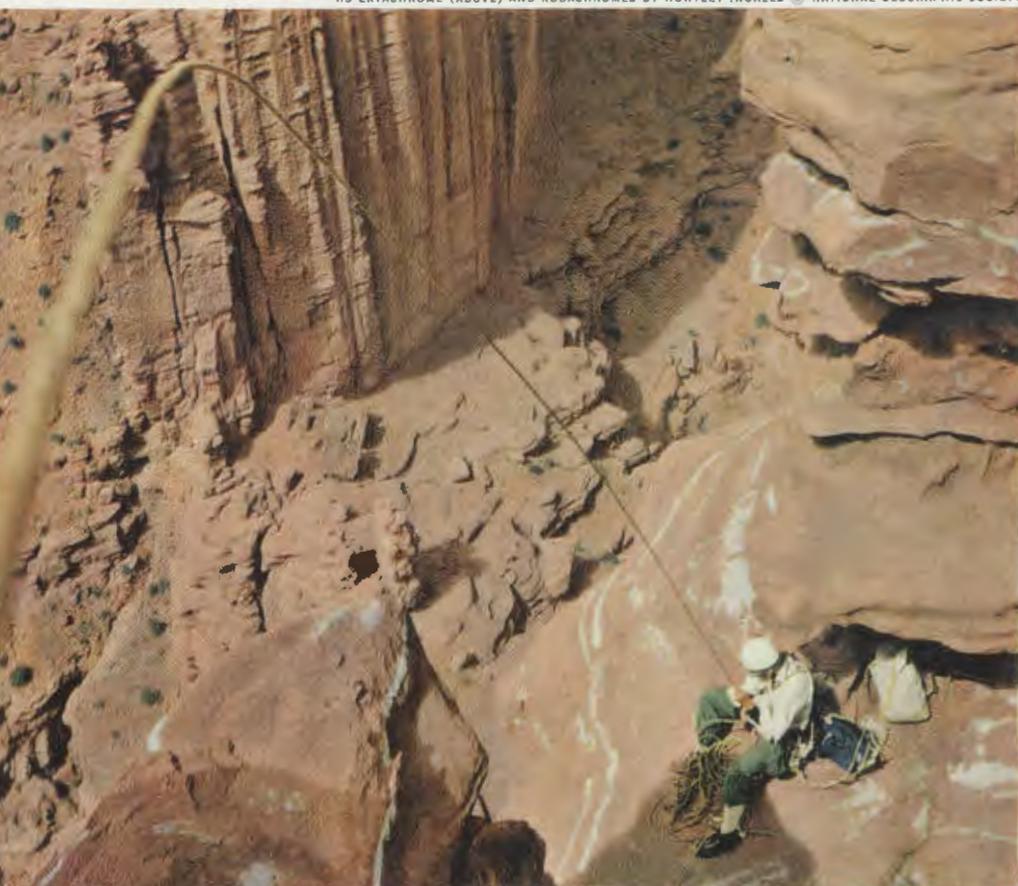


**Moored to expansion bolts on the eve of the last day's climb, Hurley (in hard hat) and Kor bivouac on a sloping ledge 600 feet aloft. Ingalls, who shared their meager perch, took the picture. Ferocious winds, bitter cold, and cramped positions robbed the men of sleep. For rest on other evenings, they rappelled down the rock.**

**Lashed by violent winds, the climbing rope arcs over a rocky rim as George Hurley prepares to join his partners on the bivouac ledge. Gusts blasted the mud-caked buttress below, churning clouds of dust that choked the climbers and impaired vision.**

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HS EKTACHROME (ABOVE) AND KODACHROMES BY HUNTLEY INGALLS © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY



of rope so he could advance. Although I could hear him, he was now out of sight.

"Hold me there."

He set another bolt.

"This one is no good either, but I've got to trust it. Watch me now—if this bolt comes out, I'll go flying."

Flying, indeed! Headfirst into space, then a violent swing into the buttress! I would be able to hold him and he would probably not be hurt, but it would be an unnerving experience, to say the least.

"Slack," he called, and I payed out line.

Kor traversed to a point beneath the chimney and set a third bolt. This one was good. He hung a stirrup and climbed up on it.

"Tension."

I pulled in the rope and leaned hard against it. This allowed Kor to stand in the stirrup, freeing his hands.

"I see a small crack. I think I can use a small knife-blade piton."

He drove it, attached his stirrup and rope, and again called to me for tension.

"You've got to hold me tightly or I won't be able to work. Be prepared for a fall. I have my whole weight on this little piton."

"I can hold you."

But it was a strain. The rope was cutting into me, and my hands were getting tired.

"This is a miserable place!" Kor called, still out of sight.

**"The Ridge Looks Friendly"**

He drove a piton, again called for slack, and climbed up on a stirrup. This got him above the overhang and into a chimney between the Finger of Fate and the main tower.

"I'm free-climbing now in the chimney."

I payed out rope. A few minutes passed.

"I'm on a ledge. Off belay."

"Belay off," I replied, freeing the rope. Far below, the Hurleys were cheering.

"The rock up here is clean and hard," Kor reported. "The ridge looks friendly."

An encouraging day's work! We still did not know much about the tower's summit, but our chance of success now seemed excellent. We would go back to Boulder, leaving our ropes hanging there, and return for the final effort in four days.

The only way down the buttress was by three consecutive rappels, or controlled slides down a rope. With both hands on the rope, the climber can control his rate of descent and at the same time keep his body in balance.

In this alarming-looking procedure, the climber actually can stop and rest in the rope. But here there were no ledges where one



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**Dangling in space** amid straps and lifelines, Hurley secures a Prusik knot to the climbing rope. Such knots support slings and serve the same purpose as Prusik handles (page 711). They slide up but cannot slip down. Climbers used ropes to haul up gear too heavy to carry on their backs.

could stop at the end of the rope. We had to rappel down to a belay anchor, stand in the stirrup, and then transfer into the next rope and stirrup to continue rappelling.

Four days later in Grand Junction, Colorado, we met NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC photographer Barry Bishop, who had arranged for a reconnaissance flight over the Fisher Towers. Soon we were looking down at the Titan from a small plane.

The summit overhangs looked even more difficult than they had from the ground. The tower's north ridge was an incredibly thin knife-edge of rock. Both Kor and I felt queasy and blamed it on air sickness.

The next day we hauled supplies up to the Finger of Fate, climbing swiftly by using Swiss Prusik handles Bishop had brought along (page 711). Then, the following morning, Kor, Hurley, and I launched the final effort, despite threatening weather.

The wind was a real nuisance, but it kept us cool, and we didn't need to drink much

of our precious water. Beyond the Finger of Fate traverse we climbed a vertical step, about 75 feet high, and found ourselves on a narrow, level ridge of pink-red sandstone on the main tower.

Another traverse took us around the ledge. Here we got our first close view of the Titan's topmost reaches. It seemed to present quite a problem, but the rock looked good.

#### Climbers Spend Cold Night Aloft

About 30 feet of relatively easy climbing brought us to a second narrow ledge where we would bivouac for the night. Kor traversed out about 15 feet on the west face of the summit tower and found a crack.

Soon he found himself on a ledge with nothing but vertical blank walls about him. There were no cracks, so he resorted to bolts. After bolting for about 60 feet, he set up a belay anchor on a vertical knife-edge and returned to the bivouac site at sunset.

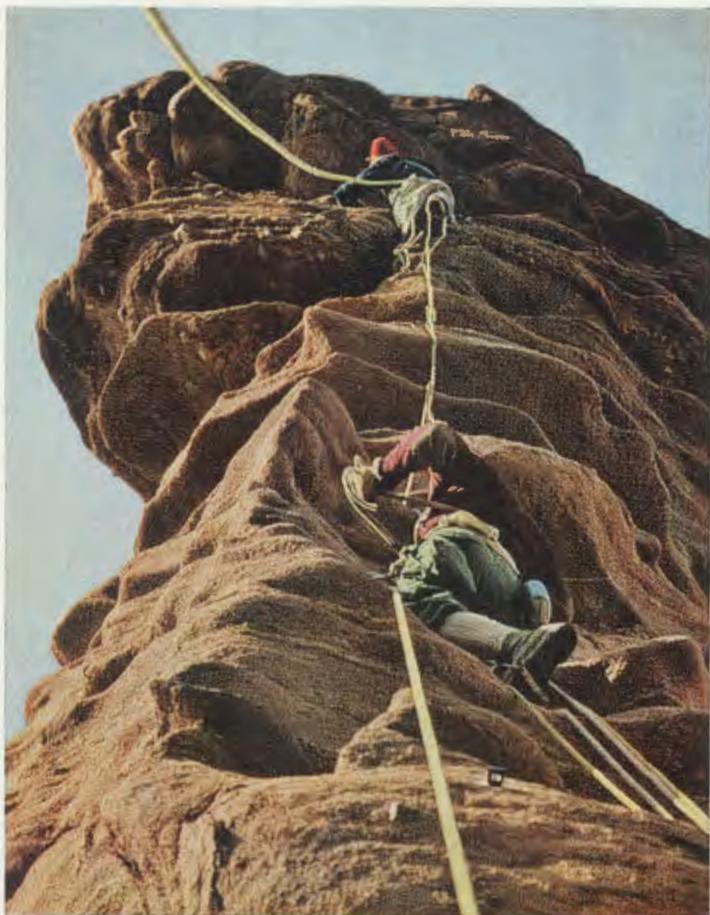
After dining on cheese, nuts, and fruit, we tied into bolts for the night (page 714). Wind rose; temperature dropped. The night became a miserable endurance contest.

Kor's hard efforts during the day took their toll in leg cramps. By stretching out full length, he got

**Forbidding flange** atop the tower looms as the most strenuous part of the ascent. Kor (leading) pauses to plan new strategy; Hurley (below) awaits the decision.

**Crack in the cap** enables the team to complete the climb. Kor inches toward the fissure for the final assault as Hurley (center) and Ingalls cling to the face of the sheer rock.

To record this action, the photographer's plane slowed almost to stall-out speed. Hearing the engine misfire, the climbers worried more about Bishop's safety than their own.



KODACHROMES BY HUNTLEY INGALLS (ABOVE) AND BARRY C. BISHOP © N.G.S.





KODACHROMES BY LAYTON KOR

relief, but this crowded Hurley into such an awkward position that he got no sleep at all. I slept fitfully on the hard shelf.

Dawn finally broke, and we soon started into action to get warm.

Hurley and Kor climbed up to the belay anchor, and Kor began the final drive for the summit. Hurley stood in two stirrups hung from the anchor placed by Kor. A few feet above the anchor another crack system developed. This meant we would reach the

summit sooner than expected. I Prusiked up to a point just below Hurley.

Along the vertical ridge, hardly more than a yard wide, we clung like three beetles climbing the corner of a building (page 717). Just then Bishop flew by in a Piper Cub to take pictures. Pilot George Huber circled so closely that we could see the expressions on their faces.

This stretch was the most strenuous of the entire climb, and the most exposed. With



PHOTO BY INGALLS © NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

### Weary Conquerors Relax Atop Titan's Summit

Skinned knuckles and scuffed shoes reflect the rigors of the ascent. A water flask lies empty. Snow-streaked La Sal Mountains peek over the rimrock behind Ingalls and Hurley.

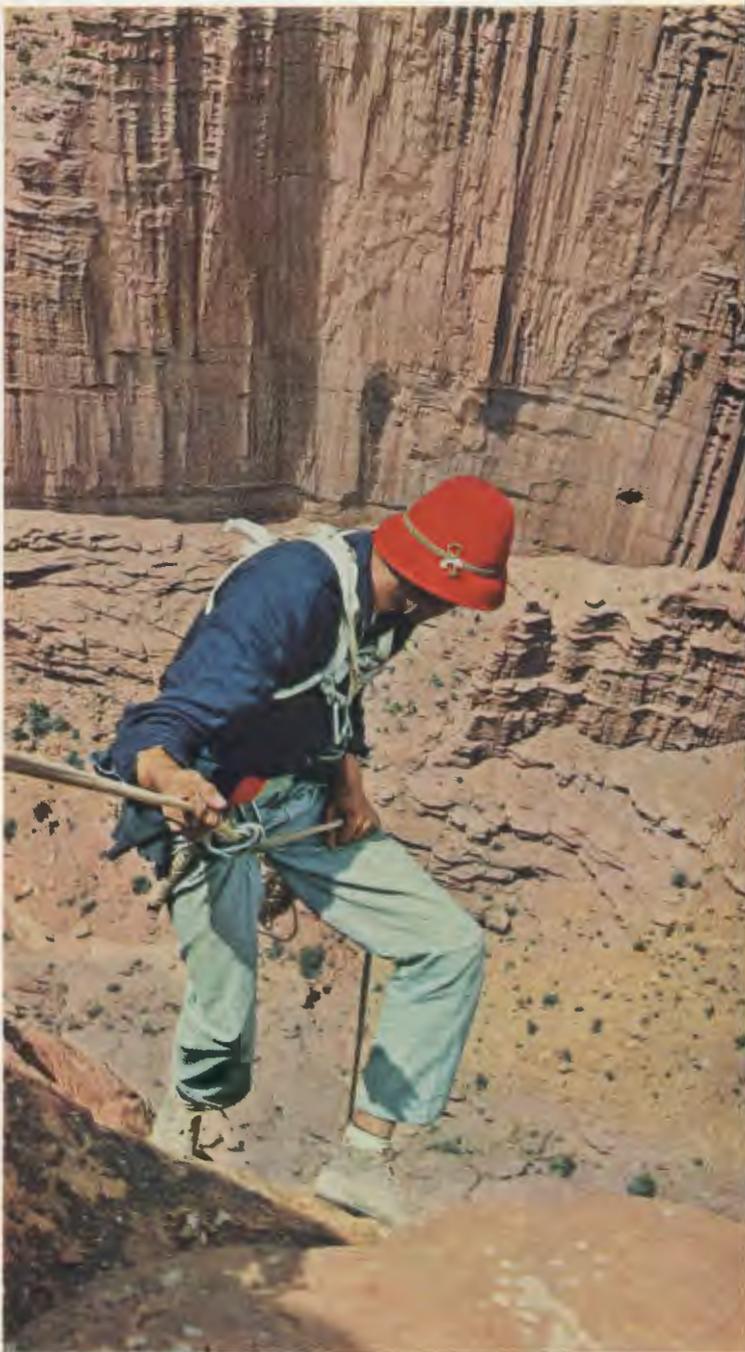
**Kor eases off** the 900-foot summit. The team's skillful descent took only six hours.

pitons and bolts Kor inched over the last obstacle—the summit overhang.

“One more move and I’ll be up!” Kor shouted.

He drove a final bolt, climbed over the upper lip of the overhang, and yelled, “I’m on top!” Actually he was on a ledge below the summit, but it would be an easy scramble from there.

Kor anchored the hauling line and flipped it over to me, so I could climb up while Hurley was removing pitons. When I unclipped from the bolt and put my weight on the rope, I swung out over 800 feet of thin air.



## Ageless Sentinels Stand Watch on a Ridge of Castle Valley

Kor and Ingalls, first to scale 400-foot Castle Rock at right, developed teamwork there that helped them climb Titan tower, some six miles to the northeast. Castle Rock's flat-topped neighbor on the ridge is known as the Priest and Nuns.

Like a Yo-yo, rangy Layton Kor drops down Titan's side. He rappels without running the line across his shoulders, a technique that only experts dare attempt. Later the climbers jettisoned several packs. They paused six times during the descent to retrieve and reset the ropes.

KODACHROMES BY BARRY C. BISHOP © N.G.S.



"I don't like this!" I called to Hurley, somewhat weakly.

"I don't blame you," he said, shaking his head sympathetically.

There was no point in lingering. I braced my feet against the rock wall and climbed to the ledge with the Prusik handles. Hurley quickly joined us. We congratulated each other and climbed up a rough, broken slope to the actual summit (page 718).

It was a strange, awesomely isolated place, a flat, rough area of bare orange sandstone about 70 feet long and 40 feet wide. Its boundary was the free air. It overhung the body of the tower below it, which plunged in rippling bulges and converging fluted ribs to the distant desert floor. About 20 feet beneath us, a lone hardy bush with a single



white flower grew incongruously on a shelf of the summit rock.

Around us spread the La Sal Mountains, Fisher Valley, the Fisher Towers, Castle Rock, and the winding, muddy snake track of the Colorado River.

Now came one of the riskiest jobs of all—the descent. Hurley went first. He backed over the overhang and rappelled down the sheer wall with 900 feet of unobstructed air beneath him. Near the end of his rope he made a pendulum swing over to the belay anchor on the vertical ridge. There he hung two stirrups, tied in his rope, transferred to the next rope hanging below the anchor, and continued rappelling until he reached the bivouac ledge. Then Kor rappelled to the anchor, stepped into the stirrups, and called

for me to join him to help retrieve the ropes.

A dreaded task, once started, often is not as bad as thinking about it. I was glad to be on my way.

With repeated rappels and other maneuvers that took all the skill, alertness, and judgment we could muster, we steadily approached the desert floor. Finally, to speed our progress, we packed all our dispensable gear into our oldest rucksacks and threw them over the side where they fell more than 600 feet and crashed on a sandy slope.

From then on we moved swiftly but carefully until we reached the ground, where Bishop and Jean welcomed us.

Looking back at the awesome loom of the Titan, it was hard to believe we had actually climbed it.

THE END