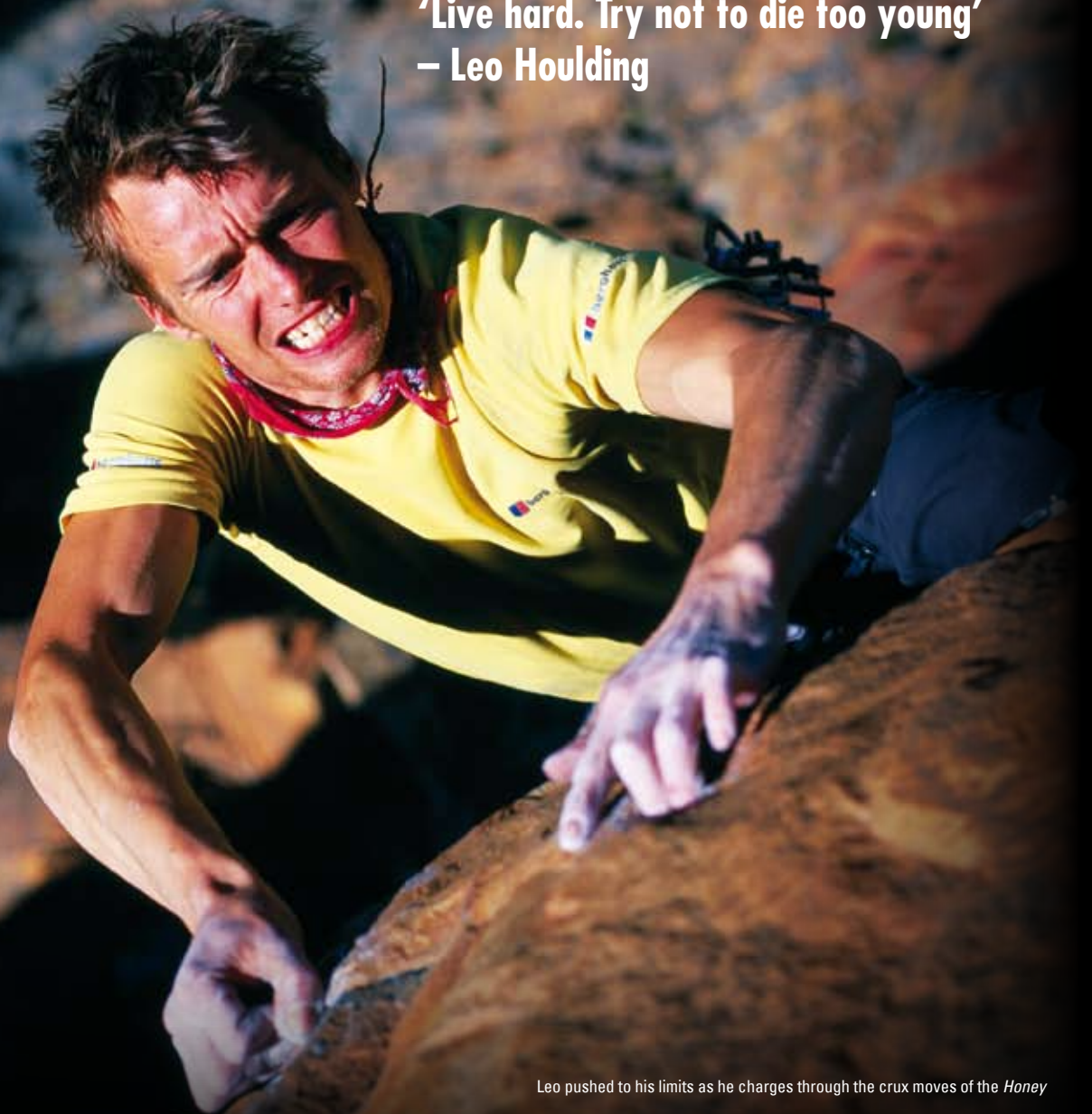


10 Oceans of Fear

by JOE MOHLE
images by ALISTAIR LEE

'Live hard. Try not to die too young'
— Leo Houlding



Leo pushed to his limits as he charges through the crux moves of the *Honey*

British big wall ace Leo Houlding came to South Africa last summer to make a free ascent and hopefully on-sight one of our country's most famous mountain routes.

Between rain squalls and falling through his hammock, he managed the first ever ground up ascent, narrowly missing the on-sight. His partner on the route, local climber Joe Mohle tells the tale. British climbing photographer Alistair Lee was also there to shoot the ascent for his new movie and took the pictures featured in this article.

Clinging desperately to the sharpest fin of rock imaginable, he was on his way to on-sighting the Horror. 'Move Leo, move,' I whispered to myself trying not to give away any beta. He was nail-bitingly close to on-sighting it. *Just shove your knee in there and rest*, I thought. Leo had missed a crucial pinch hidden deep in the crack and the axe blade he was holding was about to claim all the fingers on his right hand. I couldn't watch; the suspense was killing me. One more move and he would be through. In a desperate attempt to gain the bigger holds above and salvage what was left of his fingers, he launched himself upwards. I held my breath.

'Foolishly, we forgot to bring tea so we picked some Buchu and boiled it up.'

Leo and Al landed at Cape Town Airport at 6 pm, picked me up in Newlands and, after a short introduction, we agreed that we should head to the pub to 'strategise'. So off we went and strategised for the next four hours, by which time we confidently declared ourselves a well-prepared, well-oiled climbing outfit, and made for the Winterhoek. We were greeted by Jannie, the local farmer, who had been doing some preparation of his own and graciously offered us a place to stay for the night. Needless to say, the mood was good and we settled down with some fine single malt, listening to Jannie's fascinating stories of agriculture, diesel bakkies and other local yarns. It was a perfect start to our adventure. Leo had come to free-climb *Oceans of Fear* (grade 28 with a fat sandbag attached) and Al was here to capture it all on camera. I was the all-important, ever-amazing, die-hard belay bitch.

The next day we got off to a slightly later start than planned, but spirits were high as we set off up the hill. My friend Yunis joined us to assist with the lugging of supplies to Base Camp. We waved goodbye to Jannie who was shouting something like 'It might rain but don't worry, it will only be a few drops and over by 6 pm!'. The weather looked a little ominous, but we figured if you're going to trust a weather forecast, you may just as well trust the local farmer.

Walk-ins are not my favourite thing about climbing. I tend to put my head down and gun it. I could hear Al and Leo bantering about everything, the way the Brits do. One

such topic was about hammocks.

Leo: 'Hey Joe! Did you bring a hammock?'

Joe: 'Ja, I got one of those flimsy garden hammocks!'

Leo: 'Ah man, I got this great hammock made by a Swiss company that I'm trying out. They make really good quality equipment.'

Joe: 'Cool, I'd like to check it out.'

Al: 'You guys never told me to bring a hammock.'

Leo: 'Don't worry Al, you have the prime spot on the ledge.'

About halfway into the walk, it started to rain. We descended into the last big



ravine just as the volume of rain became too much and forced us to seek shelter. There is no real shelter to speak of on the entire route but we all managed to cram in under an overhanging boulder to wait out the rain. Foolishly, we forgot to bring tea so we picked some Buchu and boiled it up. 'This is Mother Nature's detox,' I said as we tried to get cosy under our overhang. The tea was refreshing and warm, just what we needed. 'Well guys only twenty minutes of

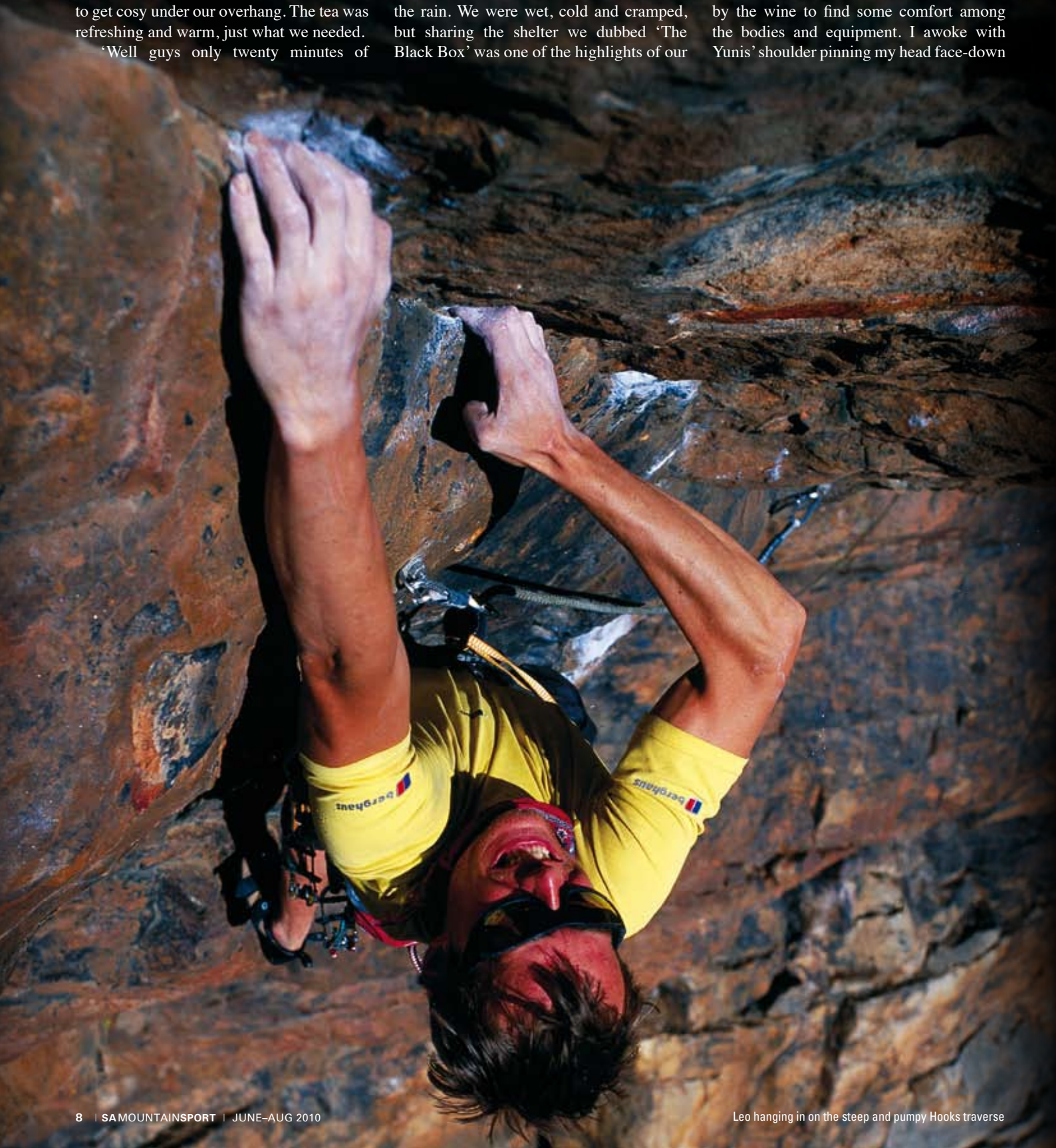
rain left,' said Al with a smirk at 5.40 pm, to which Leo responded, 'No way, we're gonna be here all night. Anyone care for some wine?' From his backpack came a five litre papsak called 'The Black Box'.

'Ja. I'm feeling far too healthy after that tea. It's time for a retox,' I said.

The night went by without a break in the rain. We were wet, cold and cramped, but sharing the shelter we dubbed 'The Black Box' was one of the highlights of our

adventure. Although I wouldn't volunteer to do it again, I was quite happy parking off in the rain and sipping on fine vino with my mates.

Leo spent the night cocooned in his fancy hammock, leaving just enough room for Al, Yunis and I to curl up in foetal position beneath him, sufficiently numbed by the wine to find some comfort among the bodies and equipment. I awoke with Yunis' shoulder pinning my head face-down



between the static rope and a rock. It took an hour for me to regain the full function of my jaw.

'Aaarh, I feel like a baboon crept up in the night and took a shit in my mouth,' groaned Leo as he emerged from his cocoon with a thick black ring of wine crusties around his mouth. 'Aaah! I believe a baboon *did* shit in your mouth, Leo!' I exclaimed in hysterics. It was a sight to behold; one that will always bring a smile to my face.

By this time we were almost two days behind schedule and determined to rectify it. It was business time. We had an objective to achieve and, since the wine had been taken care of (it was meant to last for four days), we had no further distractions. We marched up the rest of the approach to the base and began kitting up. I could sense Leo switching into the zone. *Oceans of Fear* is a committing route, and demands a high level of proficiency from any aspiring ascensionist. Once you are into the bulk of the climbing, retreat is extremely difficult, if not impossible. You need to be strong, confident and switched on to free climb this route, attributes that Leo possesses in bucketloads. We tied in and set off, Leo effortlessly leading the first four pitches. I remember following the infamously loose and poorly protected second pitch (Jenga Pitch) feeling as though I had a black box attached to the back of each knee. However, I found my rhythm and we made it to the Ledge of Forgotten Dreams in under two hours, affording Leo enough time for a shot at the Horror Crack.

'The Horror Crack is the most striking feature on the wall and marks the transition from easier face climbing to the seriously steep pitches that the Klein Winterhoek is famous for.'

Leo had come to free climb *Oceans* and this pitch would be his first major challenge. The Horror Crack is the most striking feature on the wall and marks the transition from easier face climbing to the seriously steep pitches that the Klein Winterhoek is famous for. He cruised the super-awkward bottom section and through the roof. He was nail-bitingly close to on-sighting it. I couldn't watch – the suspense was killing me. One more move and he would be through. In a desperate attempt to gain the bigger holds above and salvage what was left of his fingers, he launched himself upwards. I held my breath. He was off. The Horror Crack had proved itself a worthy adversary. Leo lowered off and took a quick rest. Using the hidden pinch on his second attempt, he fought his way to the anchors with an inspiring display of determination, despite missing out on the on-sight.

We had done well that day and managed to make up for much of the time lost to rain. Leo sent a rope down for Al to jug up while I cooked dinner. The conversation and focus turned towards the Hooks Pitch, the crux of *Oceans*.

After dinner, Al and I sat chatting on the ledge while

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Leo climbed up to his hammock, the one manufactured by the Swiss. By this time, he had grown accustomed to the thought of it being attached to the mountain by questionable gear and I watched him make a quick and relaxed entry. A split second later he came tearing through the middle of the 'indestructible' hammock as if it had given birth to him, a fully grown man. Al and I were stunned to see him come bouncing down the rock face towards us. With outstretched arms, we prepared to catch him . . . or something. At least I did. I could swear I saw Al reach for his camera, or maybe it was the leftovers from dinner he was looking out for. In one of those futile gestures, designed only to afford the ill-fated a false sense of security in dire situations, we braced ourselves for impact and pulled our funny faces. Leo came to halt just before Al and I were going to 'save his life', stopped by a single cam that he had plugged as a back up. We stood there for a second in shock while Leo clenched his buttocks and groaned in pain. 'What the fuck happened there?' I said, 'Leo are you ok?'

Leo enjoying a peaceful lie-in at first light, with Al's shadow above. Later that day he pulled the unique escape-the-hammock action when his nifty Swiss-made hammock split at the seams.

Taking it all in on the summit of the mighty Klein Winterhoek



Leo rolled over, grinned and said 'Well, my opinion of that Swiss manufacturer has certainly gone down.' And with that we all erupted in laughter, amazed that the hammock gave way before the gear that was holding it up. We dubbed that hammock stance The Ejector Seat.

Leo was firing on day two and his experience in the big wall environment really began to show. The Hooks was dispatched in only three attempts! He then linked two traverse pitches which took us to the base of the Honey pitch. Two of the three crux pitches were done. Freeing the Honey would make this ascent of *Oceans* the fastest ever by a long way. Nobody before had done it on their first trip out here, let alone in just two days. However, we were all tiring and needed to push for the top as it was getting late and our supplies were low. He needed to get it done fast. The crux is at the very end of the pitch, providing a spectacular finish to the hard climbing. Leo was showing signs of fatigue when he reached it. 'Slow your breathing, relax,' I called to him, trying to offer some encouragement. He simply refused to let go, summoning every bit of energy that he had left. I could tell that freeing *Oceans* meant a lot to him. It was done. We combined the last four pitches into two, risking some big run-outs and topping out in the dark. We paused to have a cigarette and reflect on the enormity of what we had accomplished that day. With only one headlamp between us, we traversed and simul-climbed the last two pitches of the frontal under a bright full moon. It was a superb climax to an unforgettable adventure in the Winterhoek. On top, we sat reliving the tales of the last few days, signed the summit book, shared about 200 ml of water before beginning the long descent.

We had achieved our goal and AI captured it all on film. Climbing is a very goal-orientated activity. Achieving those goals is all-important and the memories last a lifetime, but there's more to it than that. The mates you share those memories with, the people you meet along the way, the beauty of the wilderness, the mishaps and the triumphs; these experiences complete the adventure. They solidify the friendships and keep us psyched for the next adventure into the unknown. Beyond the grasp of the real world, we learn what matters most to us. This is the spirit of climbing to me and what I tried to capture in our tale of adventure. ☺

Leo kicks off the Hooks pitch with a disconcerting run-out.



JOE MOHLE
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