



AAC Publications

El Toro, La Sombra Luminosa

Mexico, Nuevo León, El Potrero Chico

The north side of El Toro showing approximate lines of (1) El Sendero Luminoso and (2) La Sombra Luminosa. Photo by Drew Marshall

FOR ME, CLIMBING IS ALL ABOUT getting to the top, so when I arrived at El Potrero Chico, the mecca of bolted big walls, and learned that there were no bolted routes to the most prominent summit above the main canyon, all I could think was, “Someone should put a route up there!” As my second season in Potrero came to an end, I decided to be that somebody. My goal was to find the longest, straightest, and cleanest line to the top of El Toro on its massive north-facing wall, and to keep it 5.10 and under (at which I failed). The mountain mandated another criterion: The most striking feature on the Toro is a large gully running from the base to just below the summit. I was determined to stay out of this rockfall funnel at all costs.

I began work in the 2015–’16 season, developing pitches five through ten and 24 to 26. The lower pitches were accessed using the Paguvi Gully (Ruiz-Guzmán-Villanueva, 1984), one of two seldom-climbed traditional routes to the summit from the 1980s and ’90s, to reach a garden that spans pitches four through six. Pitch ten, a beautiful 5.10 corner, was done on trad gear and then retro-bolted. Pitches seven and nine are shared with Paguvi, which crosses my route at these two points (later, a more direct finish was added to nine), while pitches five, six, and eight were down on rappel.

Despite its name, the existing El Toro Trail up the south side does not, in fact, summit El Toro, but stops on a ridge a few hundred feet below, where the route to the true summit begins to get technical. The upper pitches were thus accessed by cutting an extension of this trail to a col, climbing a single pitch of 5.8 on trad gear, and fixing ropes for future access. This “pitch” is now the single rappel of the walk-off descent. Once on top, I explored and abandoned a few options before settling on the current line for the final pitches. Leaving the last pitch for later, I bolted pitches 24 to 26 in huge day trips. Each time the days got longer, and with the last trip taking over 20 exhausting hours, I knew I needed a new game plan.

In the off-season I collected donations of retired ropes, with the plan to fix the entire face. Thus, the 2016–’17 season began with hauling ropes and bolts to the summit. Rappels had been established from pitch ten downward, and I had estimated the route would be 24 to 25 pitches in all. To be conservative, we brought ten ropes to the summit and stashed a rope atop pitch ten. It was then that I met Zachary Dostaler and Matthieu Morin-Robertson, two Quebecois just crazy enough to think that working on this project sounded like a good idea.

Considering this route was huge, unexplored, and full of cactus and loose rock, things went pretty smoothly. As it turned out, the mountain was even bigger than expected, and as we descended from the summit we fixed nine of those ropes. Arriving at pitch ten and our previously stashed rope was quite a relief. If we hadn’t made it, it was a long jumars back to the top. With our two remaining ropes, we had just enough to fix Paguvi for future access. I had been fearful of an epic but, in fact, we were drinking margaritas as the sun set, having started at 3 a.m.

It was during this day that much of the route’s line was determined. Specifically, I had been unsure where pitches 11 to 15 would go. From the ground, I could see an intriguing corner leading to an obvious ledge, but the pitches leading up to it looked really hard. Alternatively, there appeared to be an easier corner leading up to the same ledge from climber’s left. When I arrived at this ledge, I was

unsure if I was going to go left or right. I walked out to the edge, took one look down the corner and, wow, a perfect dihedral! In the words of Jacob Cook, one of the first free ascensionists (see note below), it is a “perfect laser-cut stem-corner, tenuous and technical, with just enough dimples in the right wall to stop it from being truly desperate.” It didn’t matter how hard it went, this was the line!

In the end, pitch 15 was the crux of the route at 5.12c, but I put in a bolt ladder for the route to be climbable at 5.10 A0. The calcite traverse below on pitch 14 that I was worried would be unclimbable went at 5.11-, and the corner pitches 11 to 13, which I thought would be easy, are difficult, technical, and sustained at 5.11, 5.11+ and 5.11. As it turns out, photos taken from a mile away can be misleading.

With the face now fixed, development became routine and moved fast. Over the next few weeks, much of it with Zach’s help, pitches 12 to 23 were bolted in rapid order. Sometimes we rappelled from the top down; sometimes we jumared up from below. On one of these trips, fed up with the cactus and loose rock in the Paguvi approach/rappel, I decided to recover those ropes and explore for potential new pitches one through four. Again, I wasn’t really sure where I was going. I had hoped to start the climb from the vicinity of the Plutonia cave, as that would have made for the longest line. By now, however, it was clear that any line going that way would be forced to navigate a third-class cactus garden.

Instead, I headed straight down from my existing pitches and into the slot canyon known as the Ampitheatre, which I had never thought to explore from below. The first rope-length down (now pitches three and four) were nothing special, and I was starting to doubt this would be more than a temporary access line (though still an improvement over Paguvi). When I fixed the final rope and peered over that edge, it was another “eureka!” moment. Another beautiful and hard corner! Pitches one and two, both 5.11 with technical and sustained stemming, followed by a welcome hand crack, are three stars. I couldn’t have hoped for a better start to the climb.

As season two came to an end, most of the climb was bolted. I returned the next season (2017–’18), finished pitch 11 on rappel, recovered most of the fixed lines, and then bolted the final 5.7 pitch, pleased to find a surprisingly clean line of rock that finished just a few feet from the otherwise chossy summit.

It was now time to make the first ascent. I made an attempt shortly thereafter with two friends, but we moved slowly and bailed after pitch 12. I made plans to try again, with another guy, but the weather didn’t cooperate and he went home before we could stage an attempt. Finally, toward the end of the season, I met Seth Williams.

We climbed the first six pitches in the evening of March 22, 2018, making camp on top of pitch six. Leaving behind our sleeping bags and excess water (as well as Yahtzee and backgammon) for future parties, we started the next day at 6 a.m. There were still fixed ropes on pitches 11 to 15, and holding no illusions about making a free ascent, I pulled on them a few times. As a result, we moved smoothly up until pitch 20, which I had seriously underestimated while bolting on rappel. Thinking it looked easy (and running low on battery), I had spread those bolts a little far. On lead, it felt quite different, especially considering the ledge below, and we both backed down twice before fashioning a makeshift stick-clip and finally making the key moves: a slabby face with paper-thin crimps that turns out to be the final crux, at 5.11+. With that behind us, the rest of the climb proceeded pretty smoothly and we topped out a little after dark.

I held off on publicizing the route until I came back in the 2018–’19 season and added a few bolts, as well as some cairns to better mark the descent. Not long after making the route public, Jacob Cook and Drew Marshall made the first free ascent in February 2019.

The route is named La Sombra Luminosa (“The Shining Shade”), a play on words with the route’s famous neighbor, Sendero Luminoso, whose physical shade and metaphorical shadow my route will

always sit in. It also carries a mystical undertone that felt appropriate to this otherworldly adventure.

– Eric Werfel, USA

La Sombra Luminosa, First Free Ascent

“What’s the absolute latest you think we could start tomorrow?”

I did some mental math, working backward from midnight. It was supposed to be hot, so it wouldn’t be so bad to do a bit of night climbing. “I think I would want to be out of camp by 9 a.m.” This was the answer Jacob wanted to hear. We were on.

Just before 10 a.m., we began the hike to the north face of El Toro, intent on a free ascent of La Sombra Luminosa. Bolted over many seasons by Eric Werfel, the Sombra takes an ambitious line up the wall, navigating gullies, arêtes, corner systems and faces right up to the summit, totaling 27 pitches. Sombra stands in stark contrast to its neighbor Paguvi (700m, 5.10d), which was the first route to reach Toro’s summit. Established ground-up in the 1980s, Paguvi is a stout traditional line that has now been partially retro-bolted. Sombra was fully sport-bolted and climbed the previous winter, but the crux pitch, estimated at 5.12, had yet to go free. Jacob and I were intrigued by the length of the climb and unknown aspects of the route.

At 10:30 we each coiled ten meters of rope and started simul-climbing. We quickly learned that we wouldn’t be covering ground as quickly as we wanted to. The first corner was weird, insecure, and a bit loose. I was running low on draws after pitch two and stopped, which made for a very short simul block. Jacob took us up to a 5.4 pitch marked “chossy!” on the topo. He scrambled up and offered a belay but whenever the rope moved, it sent a shower of golf ball-size rocks funneling down the crack. I asked Jacob to keep the rope still instead and met him at the anchor.

A few good pitches later, we arrived at the base of an epic-looking 100m corner system. The rock was more solid and the climbing became engaging and technical. We briefly wondered whether we had accidentally simuled the crux pitch until we arrived at its base: a perfectly square corner with a mostly sealed crack. The left wall was smooth and steep, the right dimpled and slabby. Jacob stemmed, palmed and crimped his way up the pitch. I followed it, using an insecure sequence of calf-pumping stems. We both agreed this was one of the best pitches we had climbed in Potrero and graded it 5.12c.

The last 12 pitches wandered through alpine-like terrain. Simul-climbing over loose rock left us tired from over-gripping. We shared the summit with a small rattlesnake, took a few goofy photos, and then hiked down to Checo’s to meet some friends for tacos and a cold beer—the perfect finish to our day.

– Drew Marshall, Canada

Images



Route overlay of Sombra Luminosa on the north face of El Toro. The first six pitches are not shown.



Pitch 15, the crux (5.12c) and money pitch of La Sombra Luminosa.



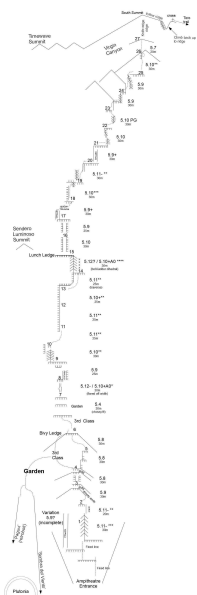
Jacob Cook following pitch 13 during the first free ascent of Sombra Luminosa.



Drew Marshall following the crux stemming corner (5.12c) of La Sombra Luminosa.



Composite photo of most of La Sombra Luminosa. The first red dot marks the start of pitch four.



Topo for La Sombra Luiminosa on El Toro.



The north side of El Toro showing approximate lines of (1) El Sendero Luminoso and (2) La Sombra Luminosa.

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