



AAC Publications

San Isidro Canyon, Alas de Ángel

Mexico, Nuevo León, El Salto

THE STATE of Nuevo León in Mexico is most famous among climbers for El Potrero Chico, north of Monterrey. But there are limestone walls all around Monterrey, some more adventurous than others.

In November I paid a visit to the nonprofit youth development organization Escalando Fronteras in Monterrey, and in addition to the days I spent observing and collaborating in their activities—integrating and educating disfavored youth through climbing—I often took some time to explore the known and lesser-known climbing areas around the city. Originally I was hoped to find some interesting multipitch trad climbs, but when I saw the huge potential for high-end multipitch sport climbs in the area, I shifted my focus. In the up and coming sport climbing paradise of El Salto, south of Monterrey, I met with local route developers Joel Guadarrama, Carlos Mac, and half-local Mark Grundon.

When I said I was psyched to jump on a multipitch ground-up bolting adventure, Mark was keen to show me some walls he had in mind.

In one short day we visited two walls, and after some required hours of debate, we chose the tallest and most solid-looking wall to attempt. This was in San Isidro Canyon, just a little west of El Salto. Although the Mexican sun can burn a Belgian's skin in less than 15 minutes, we didn't even look at the orientation of the wall and attacked the first pitch on a cloudy afternoon on November 28, 2018. On our second day we climbed up to the anchor of pitch three, and thankfully, although the wall faces southeast, our line was protected from the sun by a ridge on the left. The base of the climb is in the shade from 10 a.m., perfect for lazy morning climbers.

Mark's open mind, eager to learn new ways of bolting, made him a great partner for this task. While I respected his way of making upward progress, he respected my vision as well. I enjoy free climbing in the unknown, following the natural movements of the rock and placing a protection bolt where I feel it is needed to prevent a dangerous fall. While free climbing I like to flow as much as possible, not having to interrupt my moves by an extra move to be able to clip a bolt. This is why I am convinced that when you ascend a route ground-up, free climbing helps you to find the most natural line and moves right away: You climb until you think the fall will be too big or dangerous to continue, then try to place one or two skyhooks on the handholds in front of you and shift your weight into them. You take your time to observe from where you would like to clip a bolt, considering the itinerary ahead of you. Then you decide and place the bolt hanging off the skyhooks. This way I feel less likely to make mistakes placing bolts in awkward places.

Starting from pitch three, we continued in capsule-style with the portaledge, reaching the summit in two days. Because of the heat and time limit, we continued to the top of pitch six during the night. This might be the crux of the route, along with a boulder move at the start of pitch eight. Pitch six is short and technical, with long moves on small crimps and smeary footholds and a boulder section at the end. Topping out the crux, I had the pleasure to meet the Mexican classic *Opuntia microdasys*, a cactus also called Alas de Ángel. Pulling onto the ledge system, I was obliged to crawl through the cactus field. In order to clean the cactuses out of my way, I intended hitting them with the hammer. Apparently, those smart, flexible bastards just flexed with every hit of the hammer, and they catapulted a million itchy hairs in my face and all over my body. Itching everywhere, I arrived at a good

stance and drilled the anchor. But it wasn't over, I still had to haul two bags and a portaledge through the hairy cactus field while Mark jumared behind it, ready to get a load of itchy hairs all over him too. It was an itchy night. I can assure you, even washing your clothes in the laundromat doesn't work!

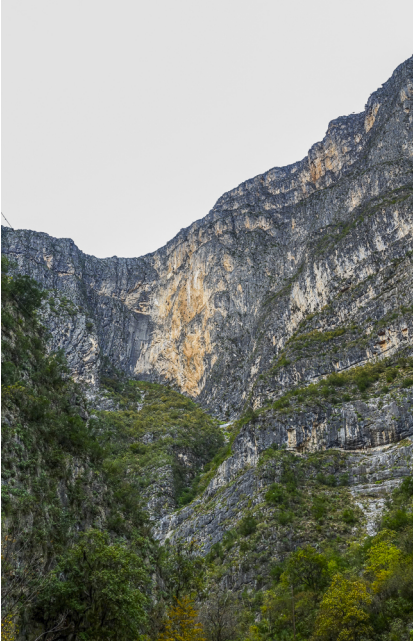
Pitch seven, the amazing first pitch on the upper headwall, is mainly on open crimps, slightly steep and pumpy. Pitch eight is the real beauty of the climb: perfect crimps on a dark brown headwall, sustained and exposed. Sadly, there is a single boulder move at the start that might raise the grade from 7b/+ to 8a. "Alas de Ángel" has eight pitches (260m) and is sustained in the mid-seven grade range (5.12). We didn't try to freeclimb the route because of a lack of time, but I will definitely come back to try and free climb the entire route. Until then, the route needs some more cleaning—right now it still is a deadly Super Mario game, and we would feel awful if someone got hurt because of some loose rock.

As a side note, I repeated Logical Progression on El Gigante in Chihuahua right after opening Alas de Ángel. Although I did finish the route, I do not agree with the top-down method used by the first ascensionists. In addition to the fact that many bolts are placed out of the logical free climbing path, the route goes against the traditional spirit carried by the locals in the end of the '90s. Many routes here use few or no bolts and were climbed ground up and artificially, with many skyhook sections, using pitons and copperheads for protection. Free climbing on this beautiful wall is a logical progression, but it can be done while respecting local traditions.

For the ascent of Alas de Ángel, I would also like to thank a few people. First of all Mark for using all his bolting gear and showing me many of the walls in the nearby valleys. Thanks to Carlos Flores for trusting us with his precious big wall gear. Thanks to Joel and Mac for their kindness and support! It was nice to add a multipitch route to this upcoming Mexican climbing spot.

– Siebe Vanhee, Belgium

Images



The wall in San Isidro Canyon taken by Alas de Ángel.



The line of Alas de Ángel in San Isidro Canyon.



Marc Grundon (left) and Siebe Vanhee in San Isidro Canyon.



Working on Alas de Ángel.



Working on the first ascent of Alas de Ángel.



Siebe Vanhee ground-up bolting on Alas de Ángel.

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