



AAC Publications

La Popa, Northeast Face, Los Naguales

Mexico, Nuevo León

Jacob Cook on the crux pitch (5.13b) of Los Naguales. Photo by Andrew Keating

ONLY AN HOUR from the hustle of El Potrero Chico, La Popa has a very different feel. Way out in the desert, there's nobody home except the wild horses and endless, endless cactus. Whether or not you believe the local stories about evil spirits and shape-shifting horse-people, it's undeniable the place has a unique energy.

Despite having a great time climbing Super Blood Wolf with Tony McLane and Savannah Cummins in 2019 (see AAJ 2019), I decided afterward that I never wanted to go on another ground-up climbing adventure on La Popa. I did, however, miss the time out in the desert, with no distractions and the most spectacular night sky. When Drew Marshall and I returned to La Popa in December 2021, the plan was to camp on the summit and go fully top-down in order to create a good route through the steepest part of the wall.

We spent several days fruitlessly prospecting. We would fix our ropes from the top and then just hang next to each other out in space, slowly spinning. We found lots of amazing features, but nothing quite connected. Then one night I bivied at the base of the wall, and at sunrise I looked straight up from my sleeping bag and traced a line all the way through the lower wall on tufas and cracks. The only big question was some overhanging and blank-looking rock right at the top. The next morning we rapped in and were overjoyed to find a line of perfect pockets and jugs.

The line lies about 100m to the left of El Gavilan, the other steep sport route on the wall, put up by Kevin Gallagher and Jeff Jackson in 1997. Over the next month we worked like maniacs to develop it. We began with wild swinging to place bolts or cams all the way down—this was necessary to keep our fixed lines close to the overhanging wall. A tense couple of days followed, as we checked to make sure each section was actually climbable. We were thrilled to find it all went. Many days, around 150 bolts, and endless trundles later, we stood on the ground at sunset with a bolted and cleaned route above us. The only problem was I had a flight to Patagonia the next morning.

The whole time I was in South America, I couldn't stop thinking about the project back in Mexico. I was aware that hiking around the mountains and eating ice cream was terrible training for overhanging 5.13 pitches. By mid-February, I couldn't take it anymore. I messaged Drew and the next day booked my flight back to Mexico.

The crux of our line (pitch five) is around 5.13b, but the real difficulty lies in the route's extremely sustained nature, with five out of ten pitches being 12c or harder. We were both fairly certain we could free the route over multiple days, but decided to attempt the less certain goal of sending in a day. We fixed our ropes again and spent the next two weeks practicing on the route, each on self-belay.

In the past, especially on some of our hard multi-pitch routes around Squamish, B.C., Drew and I have developed what we like to call "send power." Something clicks in our partnership, allowing us to climb at our absolute best while maintaining a very relaxed approach. On March 1, Drew blasted "Genie in a Bottle" from his phone as I set off to redpoint pitch eight, the "Christina Nagualera Pitch" (12d). Send power was clearly in full effect. High on the next pitch, the last 5.13 of the route, the doom-pump made it an all-out race to the belay. Fingers uncurling, I skipped the last bolt and slapped to the anchor with 300m of air sucking at my heels.

We decided to name our line Los Naguales (10 pitches, 5.13b) after those shape-shifting horse-people. We wondered if at some point in our time camped on the summit, we had in fact become the naguales ourselves?

— **Jacob Cook, Canada**

El Gavilan Rebolting and Redpoint: In late December, Bronwyn Hodgins and Kelsey Watts completed a team free ascent of El Gavilan (9 pitches, 5.13a), the first female free climb of the route, swinging leads with no falls. In 2019 and 2021, the two women and other climbers had rebolted the 24-year-old route and established an easier top-down approach to La Popa's climbs.

Images

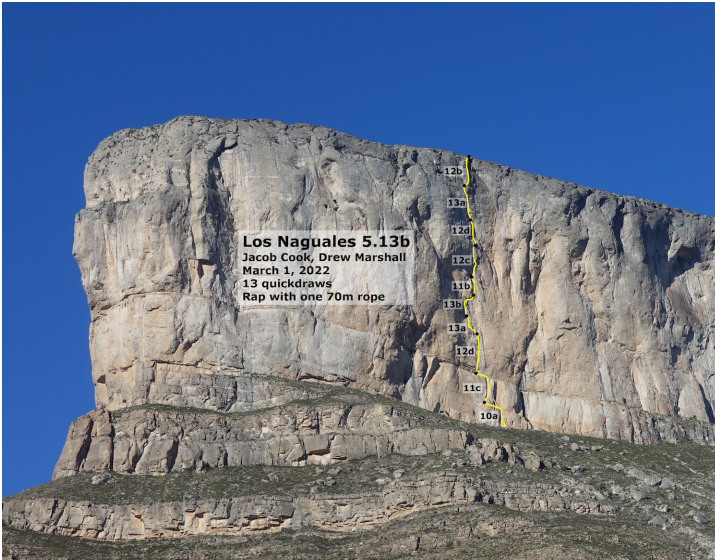


Photo-topo of Los Nagueles on the northeast face of La Popa.



Jacob Cook on the crux pitch (5.13b) of Los Nagueles, which starts with full-body chimneying against a giant tufa and then breaks right across the big overhang just above.



Jacob Cook on the crux pitch (5.13b) of Los Nagueles.



The northeast face of La Popa, with the arrow pointing to the general line of Los Nagueles (Cook-Marshall, 2022) between (1) Super Blood Moon (Cook-Cummins-McLane, 2019) and (2) El Gavilan (Gallagher-Jackson, 1997).

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