



## AAC Publications

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### **La Gloria, La Guerreras**

Mexico, Nuevo León, Sierra Madre Oriental

**It was that familiar feeling you get when you finish a big climb.** That immense wash of relief that climbers all know, when you finally touch down from that last rappel, and you are once again planted on solid ground. It's a bittersweet transition from the transcendental vertical realm to the horizon plane of the ordinary. Guerreras was finished at last, we were safe, and months of hard work had come to a close. After so many doubts and fears, the vision was complete and every bolt was tight. But most of all, deep fatigue was setting in because we could finally let our guard down.

It was midday, 28°C and sunny, with a strong desire to siesta. All we wanted after four days on the wall was to lie down under the shady old tree that signified the start of the original La Gloria route, Rezando.

After doing just that, I turned to Tony and asked in a moment of heat-induced confusion, "Do you smell smoke?" Without a word, Tony popped up from his comfortable napping position, looked around the corner, and came back wide-eyed to say, "We need to get out of here, NOW. There's a wildfire coming directly for us!"

Our new route, Guerreras, was a product of my ongoing love affair with the outrageously beautiful mountain named La Gloria in Northern Mexico's Sierra Madre Oriental. While exploring the north side of the mountain for potential lines, I met a family who had inhabited Canon De Alamo since 1610. La Gloria has been the backdrop to many generations of hardy farming folk and naturally, equally rugged mythology flourished around the massif. They told me that it was an ancient sanctuary, and that it's a place only for warriors and light seekers. The name Rezando means "to pray," and Guerreras is "warriors" in the feminine. They simply could not believe me that I had stood on the summit until I showed them pictures looking down on their farm. I was then met with a look of surprise that I have not seen since.

On January 28, 2020, Dave Henkel and I completed tireless months of bolting Rezando, the first route ground-up on this lofty pyramid, and stood on the summit for the first time (AAJ 2020). And on January 26, 2021, Michael Perry and I freed the climb. When I first laid eyes on La Gloria, it was very obvious that this high desert peak would one day be host to a multitude of hard lines. Rezando was a major challenge, but other hard lines were still there staring me in the face, and I knew I had more to give.

The next season, I got right to work on Guerreras and began bolting the route solo from the ground up. Before heading up to La Gloria one day, I got a text from Dave with a picture of some burly line in Canada that he had just punched up with crampons and ice axe, terrified and thinking that if anything went wrong, he would be no more. At that moment, he confessed that he wished he were still in Mexico, climbing in the sun with me. It was the very next time I returned to wifi that I was met with the news that Dave had been killed by an avalanche in Brandywine near Whistler, B.C. I was halfway through this new climb, with unfathomable amounts of gear cached, and hundreds of meters of static line rigged. But I was also in a pit of despair. I was all too familiar with the feeling of grief, but this time it was particularly intense. Instead of crumpling up into a little ball, the flood gates opened. And not just in the way you would expect. Through my tears, I found an unexpected feeling of powerful momentum. I thought so much about Dave, all of my other lost brothers and sisters, and how proud they would be of what I was creating up there. I felt like I had the legs of them all as I hauled loads up

that relentlessly steep mountain and made upward progress on the wall with the fire in my belly of 30 bright-burning human spirits. Nothing could stop me from finishing Guerreras, not even myself.

Unfortunately, time was not on my side. Warming temps meant constant encounters rattlesnakes, scorpions, and giant wolf spiders, and it had me rather spooked. I broke the news to my good friend Tony Pavlantos, who was en route to Mexico to help me finish the line. When he arrived, all he said was, "Why don't we just bring up the portaledge and sleep six feet off the ground?"

After two days on the wall together, we were finally ready to make a high camp and bolt the final pitches to the summit. Our bivy was as deluxe as it gets—you could take off your harness and sleep in a comforting torpedo tube of rock. From there, it was only another four pitches to the top. But unlike trad climbing, this took two more grueling days to bolt in the ripping wind.

The south face of La Gloria showing the route Rezando (1,500', 5.11+) on the left and the 14-pitch line of La Guerreras on the right. Photo by Zach Clanton.

Equipping a 14-pitch sport route ground-up means months of toil. Hiking, leading, rappelling, jugging, and generally being an overloaded human yoyo. With all of that alone time up on the wall before Tony arrived, seeds of doubt were planted, and I thought I would never finish. He was an absolute savior in those final days, and that glorious summit experience wouldn't have been possible or nearly as joyous without him. It was truly one of the finest moments of our lives. The route is not free yet, but it already makes Rezando look like a casual day out sport cragging. There are pitches far easier and far harder than anything on Rezando, yet unlike its neighbor, with straightforward 35m rappels the whole way, you cannot get off Guerreras with one rope unless you reascend the traverse and reverse the downclimb over a 70m cave. Descending Rezando is the best way off, which gives the new route a very definitive feel of commitment. It is surely a fine adventure with some of the hardest pitches up high!

After spending four days at our high camp, situated 360m up Guerreras, we rappelled the route with equally heavy winds and packs. Tony looked like he was paragliding on the final 70m free-hanging abseil as he swung dramatic pendulums, loose ends of the rope snaking wildly in the opposite direction of gravity. It had been increasingly windy for days, and we were just happy that it had kept us cool in the hot Mexican sun. But when Tony saw the fire, I knew he had just hit the panic button. I looked around the corner myself and was met with a blast of wind in the face and the view of a massive forest fire about 10 kilometers away.

Although I agreed with Tony about needing to leave immediately, I clearly had no idea how fast fire could move. He took off down the hill ahead of me, and I just stood there looking at a pile of \$6,000 dollars of my finest climbing and camping equipment. I asked myself what I wanted to run for my life with. Seconds matter in a situation like this, so at the last moment, I grabbed my custom Canadian Alpine Tools hammer, TC Pros, drill, and little else. Ten minutes had passed, I looked back at the fire, and it had quadrupled in size.

We turned a two-hour hike into a 50-minute dash. Mind you, this is a very steep, cactus-riddled mountainside, with places where you can fall and die if you lose your footing. There are lengthy slabs and 5.5 downclimbs. It stays technical to the last footfall. Still high on the mountain, Tony made sure to stop, let me know which pocket his keys were in, and told me that if he fell and hurt himself, that I should take the keys and make a run for it. I looked my trusted expedition partner in the eye with a quick fist bump and said, "Not going happen buddy. We are getting down this together."

I knew the "trail" like the back of my hand after countless laps over the years, often in the dark with a podcast playing in my ears. Subsequent parties had taken up to seven hours to navigate this complex mountainside. Tony did not have this supreme confidence, and I could read it all over his face, as if to say, "Don't you dare leave me, Zach."

As we ran, my mind slowly relaxed with elevation loss, because no matter how out of control the

situation felt, I was doing the only thing I could do to survive. It didn't matter what toll it took on our bodies. Every five minutes I would stop and turn my gaze from feet to flames, waiting for Tony to catch up, with impending doom on the horizon. About halfway down the mountain, I looked back, and the smoke had already enveloped both of our high camps and was beginning to wash directly over us in thick orange waves. In a brief clearing, I swear I witnessed a 60m flame blasting vertically off the tip of a ridge as the wind rushed it forward. In the blistering sun, we did our best to avoid heat stroke, and Tony explained to me the protocol of what to do when you are about to be enveloped in a forest fire, as he forced me to drink water periodically. Within this, he noted an open apple orchard that would make a fine sheltered zone to be burned over. Aghast, I asked, "What do you mean burned over?"

Another wave of adrenaline hit me like a freight train as it dawned on me that we would already be dead from smoke inhalation if we were still at base camp. The brutal realization crept in that we were not out of the woods yet. This rush kept us sharp and guided us downward with an extra burst of speed. Once we were within view of Tony's Jeep, I just kept thinking to myself that as long as the rig started, we were going to live. And sure enough, it did. As we drove away, I filmed the disaster scene out the sunroof and was once again met with that incredible wave of relief.

As far as I can tell, we made it down with about 20 minutes to spare. Any slower and we would have ended up just like that portaledge: no trace but a pile of bones in windswept ash. The gales persisted and the sky island transformed into an island of fire for over two weeks. The Mexican military, National Guard, police, and countless volunteers worked round the clock to dig trenches to defend nearby properties, but La Gloria was on her own. She is just too wild to access in a situation like that. In an instant, the beautiful rural village of Los Boquillas transformed from a serene orchard setting with old guys in cowboy hats picking apples on donkeys, to an apocalyptic disaster scene where military cargo trucks carried humans and chickens alike to safety. If it weren't for the tireless work of those heroes, things would have been immensely worse off in the end.

I cannot express how grateful I am for Tony showing up in Mexico right when he did. I would never have finished Guerreras alone that year. The only thing that may have been finished at all was me. He saved the route and almost certainly my life when the wildfire broke out.

The next season, in 2022, I drove from Alaska to Mexico for the fourth time. And together, we went to see what remained of all my burnt gear. It was so much worse than I could have expected. The fire burned so hot that anything that wasn't metal didn't just melt—there was no trace of it. Large items like ropes, backpacks, and sleeping bags simply vanished. I had hauled some plastic bins up there to keep food and gear safe from the conniving coatimundi, and those melted into heaps of carabiners, belay devices, and bolts, making for some cool artsy-looking pieces. I also thought it pretty interesting that I could bend carabiners with my hand. But for the most part, it was really sad. And luckily, we had the right help to haul all the trash off the mountain.

After weeks of making attempts at freeing Guerreras, it just wasn't happening for us. The approach was considerably harder after the fire, and general living conditions were very harsh with the ash and lack of shade. And dammit, that route is just hard! As is tradition, I couldn't stay away, so I decided to make a final solo trip for the season to install a lovely tribute plaque of stainless steel for Dave. It was designed by his girlfriend, Natasha, and created by a very kind and appreciative local, Boby Drum, who climbed Rezando and was overwhelmed with gratitude.

In a ceremonious act of grief and closure, I rolled up a gigantic doobie, drilled two holes, and tapped in Dave's plaque below the first lead bolt as golden sunset light washed over the scene. A different, and much more pleasant, kind of smoke cloud enveloped our bivvy that night. As ash fell to my feet, I spread Dave's ashes across his bed, that is now nothing but ash. It seemed very fitting. And at that moment, a barrage of rockfall descended from high on the mountain and exploded 20 meters away

from me. I simply looked up and hollered, "Quit messing around up there, Danger Dave!"

Guerreras is still yet to be free, and it is my great pleasure to open it up to the world. It's not that I will never go back; I certainly will. It's just that I realized something that last day on La Gloria. I had to say goodbye to not only Dave, but also to that era of my life. I realized that I needed to loosen my vice grip on that mountain and be more like my hermano, who was overjoyed to create a beautiful and challenging experience that will enrich the lives of others. That was enough. So this is a call to arms for anyone who thinks that they are ready for a wild adventure into the unknown. There is a first free ascent of world-class proportions waiting in Mexico. All you need is some quickdraws, a rope, and that warrior spirit.

– **Zach Clanton, Alaska**

## Images



Looking out from La Gloria over a sea of clouds covering El Salto (left) and Santiago (on the horizon).



Zach Clanton sleeping at sunrise in the 'Torpedo Tube Bivy' atop pitch nine of Guerreras.



Zach Clanton bolting pitch eight of Guerreras on La Gloria.



Tony Pavlantis jugging the La Gloria cave. Setting a fixed line on this massive roof allowed the team to jumar directly to pitch six, avoiding a traverse and downclimb to descend directly along the route.



The south face of La Gloria showing the route Rezando (1,500', 5.11+) on the left and La Guerreras on the right.



The south face of La Gloria showing the route Rezando (1,500', 5.11+) on the left and the 14-pitch line of La Guerreras on the right.



Clouds of wildfire smoke enveloping La Gloria.



Tony Pavlantos climbing pitch three of La Guerreras a year after the wildfire.



Tony Pavlantos following pitch eight of La Guerreras on La Gloria, with El Salto under the clouds in the background and Los Boquillas in the bottom right frame.



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