



riglos rendezvous

Sun and Steepness in the Cobblestone Kingdom

I'm 200 m above the ground and getting pumped. Deep down, I know this probably shouldn't be happening; my right hand is wrapped around what should be a "thank God" hold. Shaped like a protruding potato, it's comfortably incut and has space for two hands. But somehow I'm still getting pumped.

I look up at the rest of the route. A sea of cobblestones looms ahead, whitened from years of chalking, more chalking and protected from rain by virtue of the unrelenting angle of the wall. Just as I regain composure and being climbing towards the end of the pitch, I'm interrupted by a loud yell. I look to my left, and watch horrified as a body comes hurtling by me. Then, only 100 m from impact with the valley floor, the aerialist pulls the ripcord of his parachute and sails smoothly to a landing.

Nestled in the foothills of the Spanish Pyrenees Los Mallos de Riglos (The Towers of Riglos) have earned a reputation as a playground for climbers, base jumpers, paragliders, or anyone looking to have fun at gravity's expense. Above a sleepy Spanish town a series of imposing towers soar up to 300 m. The crown jewel of the area is La Visera, a wall so steep and continuous that its routes look beyond improbable. But that's the paradox: the rock, a kind of limestone conglomerate, is so amply spattered with large, rounded cobbles that the grades remain relatively moderate. Furthermore, since the rock is not well-suited for removable protection, most routes are fully bolted.

By now, most climbers have at least heard that when it comes to steep rock, Spain is nothing short of paradise. Thousands have come from all over the world to go a muerte at classic destinations like Siurana and El Chorro, as well as modern hotspots like Santa Linya and Margalef. As winter approached in Germany, I began to

dream about doing the same. Over our lunch breaks at adidas Headquarters in Herzogenaurach, Germany, my fellow intern Jakob Krauss and I began hatching plans for a winter getaway. That's when we met Carlos Suarez.

Around the cliffs, bars and refuges of northern Spain, Carlos is something of a local legend. From his origins as a rock climber and alpinist, Carlos quickly caught the base jumping bug, and before long was throwing himself off anything tall enough to give him a few seconds of airtime. Now, as an adidas Outdoor Sales Representative, he's holding down the closest thing he's ever had to a desk job while still finding plenty of time to play on cliffs around the world. Jakob and I met Carlos at the OutDoor Trade Show in Friedrichshafen, Germany and a few pictures and words of encouragement from him were all it took to get us interested in a week of long pitches and long days in Riglos.

Flash forwards two months. Jakob and I have touched down in Barcelona. We pick up our rental car and start the three-hour winding drive through the Catalan countryside. No more than ten minutes out of the city, we're both leaning out of the window trying to get a look at the unfathomable quantities of rock around. "This is unfair," says Jakob, who's from a part of Germany that's flat by comparison. As evening approaches, we see the towers of Riglos rise out of the horizon, both daunting and inviting. A golden light is just fading as we pull in. We're psyched.

Our first day of climbing we decide to get one of the most celebrated routes in the area, El Zulu Demente (7b). The air is cool and breezy as we simul-climb the first third of the route to "The Throne", a wide ledge that marks the last comfortable stance on the route. From here on, all of the belays are hanging.

TEXT ANDREW FREEMAN
PHOTOS CHRISTIAN WALDEGGER

Andrew Freeman, 22, USA,
Jakob Krauss, 24, Germany



Jakob leads the way to El Pisón, Riglos' tallest wall.



The final moves of El Zulu Demente pack a serious punch. The route isn't over 'til you're standing on top!





Finally, we blast off into a world of unbroken steepness. Each hold seems bigger than the last, but after a few 50-m pitches, we've both built up considerable cumulative fatigue. Even Alex Huber - who freesoloed El Zulu in the late 1990s - admitted to feeling a slight pump at the top. After several hours on the wall, we arrive at the last pitch, the heartbreaker. The climbing up to this point has not been very difficult, but the crux of the whole 300-m route is the final few moves over "The Visor". At this point all the large holds run out, replaced by slopy edges. I envy the base jumper we just saw. His job was easy.

As it's my lead, take the quickdraws and get psyched. From our airy belay stance, I negotiate 20 m of steep rock and try to stay relaxed. Then, breathing hard, I make a big move to the last hold of the whole route, but feel my fingers narrowly miss the incut section. After falling, I shake out briefly and take a minute to look down at the valley. Though I've just been fighting hard for an onsight, it's hard not to feel the calm that hangs in the air. Far below me a dog barks, and though it's past noon I feel as if Riglos is still waking up. Tranquilo. Back in town we return to our temporary home, Refugio de Riglos, and join a small band of climbers sipping beer. Carlos has driven over from the adidas Spain office and joins our table. "This is Alex Txikon," he says, beckoning to the man behind him. "He made his 7th base jump today." Alex smiles, and we recognise the man who flew past us in the morning. "Conditions were not so good," he says with a heavy accent. "Windy." I look at Carlos and laugh awkwardly. In between our first meeting and our trip to Riglos, Carlos survived an almost disastrous base jumping accident when a backdraft caused a crash landing into a pile of stones. Undeterred, he's here in Riglos to hang out and get back on rock for his first time after breaking multiple ribs and losing two teeth.

After a few days we've gotten a little more adjusted to the local climb style, which can best be described as potato-pulling. We jump on El Pisón which hosts the longest routes at Riglos and are pleased to find solid stone and intricate movement. Riglos rock is generally good, but at first glance it looks like a cake of dried mud. Most of the cobblestones are only partially embedded in the wall and look like they might pull out at any time. My past experience climbing alpine routes tells me to check carefully for loose holds, and Jakob and I spend any excess

Riglos' iconic cigar-like formation offers surprisingly solid rock. Just don't expect much room to sit at the top!

energy we have knocking on anything that looks suspect. However, after a few days without an incident we give up: yank away.

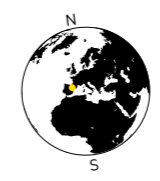
The highlight of the trip is Fiesta de los Biceps (8/7a/5.11d), a soaring line up the left side of La Visera. Though its crux is easier than that of El Zulu Demente, its sustained nature makes it tougher overall. After the polished and technical third pitch, we hold on for the ride and savour nearly 200 m of absurdly steep climbing before topping out and mutually agreeing that we've earned a good dinner.

For such a remote area, Riglos has a number of solid dining options. Most restaurants offer a cheap fixed price menu that includes bread, water, several courses and, naturally, wine. Each evening Jakob and I drop our ropes and rack in the car and land at the bar. Between the two of us we have hardly any Spanish, but it's never a problem. "Dos cervezas, por favor. Grande." Our favourite hangout quickly becomes Bar El Puro, the cigar, named for Riglos' most distinctive feature. As the sun sets, the seats quickly fill up with other members of the outdoor tribe. It's easy to recognise a climber from a distance; swollen knuckles, overdeveloped forearms and a belay jacket are dead giveaways. In a few short days we meet Germans, Austrians, Americans, Spaniards, Basques, Ukrainians and an alpinist from Kyrgyzstan. Everyone has come for a little fun in the vertical, and since Riglos has its own microclimate, the area is an ideal hideout when the rain is falling elsewhere in Catalonia. However, one day the forecasts reverse and Jakob and I decide to say goodbye to Riglos and check out other nearby areas. We decide on Rodellar, only two hours' drive away.

To describe Rodellar as a side trip is nothing short of sacrilegious. For decades it has been one of Europe's premier sport climbing areas. On the drive there, we again have the opportunity to drool over the quantity of undeveloped rock that lays untapped around Spain. "Next time we're coming back with a drill," Jakob says with a laugh. Soon, we find ourselves grappling with a number of tufa-laden classics on what was supposed to be our rest day. No matter. The three-dimensional climbing style is a welcome change of pace from the more straight forward routes we've been climbing in Riglos.



Finding reliable internet can be a challenge in Spain. Take it when you can@



Jakob gets techy on El Pisón.

Carlos prepares for his first base jump following his accident.

Jugs, jugs and more jugs. Just don't let go!



Beers and sunshine; Spanish winters sure look a lot like German summers.



“this is what it's all about”

That night we get a call from Carlos, who invites us to join him and a crew of climbers and base jumpers in Val d'Aran, a quaint ski town on the French border, for a local climbing festival that he's helped organise. When we finally rendezvous with him the next day he looks excited and a bit nervous. We soon find out why: he's preparing to make his first base jump since his accident. He'll be jumping from a helicopter — a relatively safe undertaking for a base jumper as there's no way to hit an obstacle on the way down — but it's still a big moment for him.

"Wish me luck," he says with a raised eyebrow and a smile. Jakob and I watch from below and cheer along with a crowd of onlookers when we see small dots leap from the chopper and accelerate towards the ground. Safely landed, Carlos is noticeably relieved. "This is what it's all about," he says. It's cheesy, but he's probably right. Those moments spent with your tribe, those moments where you brush up against your limits, on rock, on water or in air, those are the moments that make a winter getaway worth looking forward to all year.