



El Gigante

The first ascent of Mexico's biggest wall

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translated by Robyn Fulwiler and Margaret Thompson

In 1996, geologist Carlos Lazcano, together with the Caving and Exploration Group of Cuauhtemoc City (GEECC), rappelled the enormous northwest face of El Gigante ("The Giant"). Known up until then as El Cerro Del Coronel ("the Colonel's Mountain"), it became classified as the biggest wall in Mexico.

Two years later, Lazcano headed up a project (in which the government of Chihuahua participated) to find climbers to attempt El Gigante's first ascent. Carlos García and I had climbed together the previous year in Yosemite. We had money that La Peña Guara, my climbing club in Huesca, Spain, had donated toward a new route on a big wall in Baja California. The information we had about the Baja wall was very distorted, and suddenly we found ourselves in a strange situation. With everything ready, we found that we lacked the most important thing: the wall.

In search of a wall to climb, we spoke to Lazcano. He put us in contact with the many people who would come to assist us in the first ascent of El Gigante. D. Fernando Dominguez welcomed us at the San Lorenzo Ranch, where we stayed in a cabin while in Basaseachic Waterfall National Park, location of El Gigante. Anibal and his nephew work at the ranch, maintaining the camping area and cabins. Anibal became the chauffeur of the 4x4 that would transport us during our efforts. He planned to call us via radio every three days from the overlook on the other side of the canyon. D. Santiago, together with another four local guides, transported 300 kilos of food and equipment for us down into the canyon. The GEECC, among whom were Victor, Salvador, and Mario, would rappel the last meters of the wall to supply us with food or water in an emergency. All of Chihuahua followed the event with great interest, informed by nosy journalists, who, in their eagerness for sensationalism, caused a misunderstanding that provoked the strange outcome of this story.

The closer we got to the edge, the more we realized how deep the Candamena Canyon was. El Gigante showed its head at first, then little by little began to reveal its body. Then, before our astonished eyes, an impressive wall with an enormous waterfall rose on the left. A river at the base of the wall squeezed itself between reddish rocks that marked the boundary between the sparsely inhabited area up above and the one at the bottom of the canyon. Our nervousness grew as we contemplated the wall. Should we climb to the left? Were there any cracks? What if the binoculars were useless? We studied the northwest face (few features; no ledges), envisioning a direct line that passed through a roof about two-thirds of the way up. The next day, as we went down the trail the porters had recently cleared with machetes, we discussed whether the wall in front of us was indeed El Gigante.



Carlos García cleans one of the lower-angled pitches of Simuchi. CECILIA BUIL

Just before we reached the river, we began to see El Gigante's profile, vertical, imposing, and even bigger than the one we had seen while descending. There was rock everywhere, enormous and virgin.

We found a small level area between some poplars and huge-leafed plants to set up our tents. The river was very close. It grew wider downstream where we had to cross it to reach the wall. Over the next few days, we worked to build a make-shift bridge, clear the trail and transport gear, water, and food to the base of the climb, all the while observing the wall up close.

At night, one could hear rocks bouncing off the boulders in the riverbed. The plants that dared grow too close to the wall looked as if they had been chopped by machetes. We passed along the base as little as possible.

We carried a lot of equipment—among other things, 45 liters of water, food for two weeks, two static and two 11-millimeter dynamic ropes. Carlos climbed the first pitch, a dirty and disagreeable ramp, casually, without roping up, then left it fixed. The next day we climbed to the first belay stance, a sloping dirt shelf. Carlos moved up above dubious protection toward enormous blocks above the belay. I gave myself slack so I could belay a few meters to the right. As I did, I lost Carlos from sight. Suddenly, he was flying. He stopped, suspended above me.

"The block moved and I fell!" he said. "I'm going back to try it again."

Following the blocks, a well-defined crack rose until it met a smooth rock face. It was getting late; we returned to camp. The ambience of the surrounding night was awesome.

The sudden crash of rocks falling from El Gigante into the enormous riverbed boulders broke the monotonous rhythm of the river. The porters kept a fire burning all night, which

served as protection against the cold and the small creatures that inhabit the canyon. The next day we went back to finish the pitch.

I hooked to the right a few meters. The face didn't have any cracks, but there were some tiny pockets in the rock covered with yellow and gray lichen. I hadn't found any gear after a couple of hook moves, so I decided to place a bolt. The rock was so hard that although I worked diligently, after 15 minutes I had only managed to drill a centimeter-deep hole and decided to use it to bathook.

The climbing was fickle, obliging me to advance with caution. The last piece of protection was many meters diagonally below, and my moves became very careful. An hour later I found myself hanging from a RP, 15 meters of hooking behind me, putting in a rivet out of desperation. We had graduated from the most dangerous pitch (A4) of the route.

Carlos led the third pitch (A3+) with RURPs, blades and hooks, and I took over on the fourth (A3), which, although it had a section of loose rock, was followed by a right-arching roof. At least I could get in some cams for gear. The following day, we juggled the 100-meter fixed ropes, bringing up the haulbags and organizing everything so that we could live on the wall for the next two weeks.

The sky clouded over, and it began to rain. We had nothing to eat, so we decided to travel back down the canyon toward the Basaseachic Waterfall. As we arrived at Base Camp, the rain turned to snow.

We walked up to San Lorenzo Ranch, where we recuperated by gorging and not raising a finger.

Five days later, we descended, accompanied by a guide and his two sons, who carried our tent and other equipment. We said good-bye to them and to the river.

"Buen viaje!" they said.

As they retreated a hummingbird appeared, making us smile.

Carlos completed the fifth pitch, a face with small, hidden cracks. While I was breaking down the belay, a rock fell, hitting me on the arm. The haulbag had knocked off a good one. From here on in, we started climbing only when the second reached the belay. We were learning. Our respect for El Gigante increased, and our fear of the deadly rocks kept us alert.

On our second night on the wall, El Gigante's salutation was emphatic: we awoke from our bivy to the creaking of what we imagined was a huge block falling from the roofs to our left. The clamor of it crashing down the lower slabs was followed by the impact of many rocks crashing against the talus at the base. We were speechless. We understood it to be both a greeting and a warning: we needed to find overhangs in order to sleep protected.

The days flew by. The climbing was difficult. Every three days we spoke by radio to Anibal or Santiago, who remained on the overlook across the canyon from El Gigante. The entire city of Chihuahua was following our climb with much interest.

Anibal watched over us like a guardian angel, and we awaited his words impatiently. A series of fortuitous signs came every day, compelling us to continue. We were gradually advancing with the days of the month. Whenever our psych ebbed, we would continually find various natural belays. Perfect timing. . . . But El Gigante wouldn't let us see very high, hiding its summit with roofs until pitch 16. It kept working us over, keeping us scared each and every day.

Sections of compact rock that we could only climb with peckers, RURPs and natural hooking were followed by sections of overhanging exfoliated rock that we had to bathook. The features

creaked as we moved over them. When I was forced to drill holes for bathooking on the lower pitches, I drilled them too small. On pitch 7, the hole sheared out as I was moving from one hook to another. Fortunately, I didn't fall, but I did learn how to make proper holes.

After eight days, we were at the point of no return. We had to pass the roofs above us to the right via a disappearing crack. The rock was very sharp. At this point, it would have been very difficult to go down.

On pitch 13, during the night, we counted the holes we had drilled. We thought that after the roof we would have to carry the drill as dead weight, since we didn't expect to have to use it any further.

As we lay in our sleeping bags, we talked about our chances. It was Tuesday, April 13, and the climb was turning out to be very difficult.

The hummingbird returned to see us. "This hummingbird has brought us good luck," said Carlos. "Did you know that the hummingbird was the sacred bird of the Aztecs—the messenger of the gods?"

We decided to call the route Simuchi—"Hummingbird" in Tarahumara, the local language—out of gratitude to the original inhabitants of the region, who had shared their treasure with us and who allowed us to live in its midst for awhile.

On pitch 14, as I was putting in a rivet, I fell, penduluming to the right ten meters upside-down with the drill still in my hand. Suddenly, I could see a dihedral to my left. Half-stunned, I yelled, "I've seen it! We have to go to the left! But I've hit my knee and my head. Can you continue?"

"Of course," replied Carlos. "Come on down." He corrected our direction, advancing toward the left.

The next day we saw that the sheath and some of the rope's core had been cut during the fall. Once again we had to stop and think. The section we were crossing had sections of decomposing rock that formed sharp, inverted flakes, and cracks had become scarce. The climb continued to be difficult. Twelve days on, and we still couldn't see the summit.

Carlos led the rotten dihedral. I couldn't see him. All I could see were flakes of all sizes as they exploded below to the right. Everything sounded hollow. Hanging from this anchor so many meters from the ground was no fun, and it was even less so to haul the bags from one anchor to the next. They got caught in the flakes, but came free with a yank. Pessimism invaded us, and we felt like slitting each other's throats. But we had no options: we could only proceed, blindly. There was no possibility of descent.

In the afternoon we arrived at the Hope Bivouac. It had a tiny shelf on which we could cook. At last we saw the shoulder where the route exited just below the summit, as well as an easier way to it.

On Saturday morning we spoke with Anibal.

"Hi, how is it going? Over?"

"Well. How much more do we have? Is this the summit? Over?"

"You have 400 meters left. Over."

"That can't be. We've already climbed 750 meters. We're going to try to finish it without assistance. In any case, warn Search and Rescue to stay alert. We have water and food for at least two days. Over."

"Listen, Cecilia, there are some reporters here who would like to ask you something."

I grudgingly explained the situation one finds oneself in after having spent 13 days on a wall. That day we put up three more pitches.



Carlos García on steep ground on Simuchi. CECILIA BUIL

The next day we were front-page news in the *Chihuahua Daily*. "TRAPPED ON THE GIANT: They've gone two days without food or water. They cannot go up or down and they're 500 meters from the summit after two weeks." Our families were anxious. Meanwhile, we climbed quickly between wide cracks and free sections, though we knew only small amounts of water and food remained for the meters to come.

We came to the only large ledge on the route, which we called the San Lorenzo Ranch. It was steeply angled, but we could walk around on it and didn't need to clip in our gear. On the morning of April 21, as we were observing an offwidth that turned into a funnel higher up, rocks began to fall. We immediately turned on the radio.

"Hello. Is anyone there? Who is above us? Over."

"Victor and Mario are there," said Anibal. "They're coming down. Over and out."

We couldn't understand what was going on above us. Victor, a caver and doctor, appeared from above, with a concerned look on his face.

"How are you? Better than we had thought, I see—they told us that you had gone two days without water, but obviously that is not the case. I brought two Cokes. Do you want them before you come up?"

"Thanks for coming, Victor, but we don't want to leave. Did you bring food and water?" we asked.

"Sorry, no, but I thought I was going to have to take you off the wall in a bad state. I haven't brought anything," he responded.

"It's just that we're tired and we've now been here for 15 days. How much do we have left?"

"You still have quite a bit to go. It would be better for you to come up. Your families are about to have heart attacks. It would be best if you spoke with them. Everyone is

alarmed—it would amaze you,” he answered.

I didn't know whether to laugh or to cry. If we did have much more to go, I would abandon the climb, even though after so much effort I didn't want to leave the route uncompleted.

We didn't have an alternative. I began to jumar. After 50 meters I saw the shoulder. We had only three pitches left. On the one hand I was content, but on the other I was infuriated with the gutless journalist who had created such a mess.

“Get psyched,” I yelled to Carlos. “There's nothing left.”

There were many people on the shoulder. It was incredible, this organized display. The following day we went to recuperate at the village of Basaseachic. We spoke with our families, then returned to spend the night on the shoulder. It took us one day plus the next morning to finish the route. On the last day, the hummingbird was nowhere to be seen.

While climbing the last short and easy pitch, the wind blew in gusts, forcing me to pause. Gray clouds appeared to the northwest while mountain-dwelling parrots flew over the top. We climbed to the summit and contemplated the canyon one last time as nature made us feel her force. We understood. Thank you, Gigante.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Basaseachic Waterfall National Park, Chihuahua, Mexico

FIRST ASCENT: *Simuchi* (VI 6c A4, 1000m) on the northwest face of El Gigante, April 5-25, 1998, Carlos García Ayala (Mexico) and Cecilia Buil (Spain)