

ICMC Mexico Expedition 2001 Report

# Crag Climbing in Potrero Chico

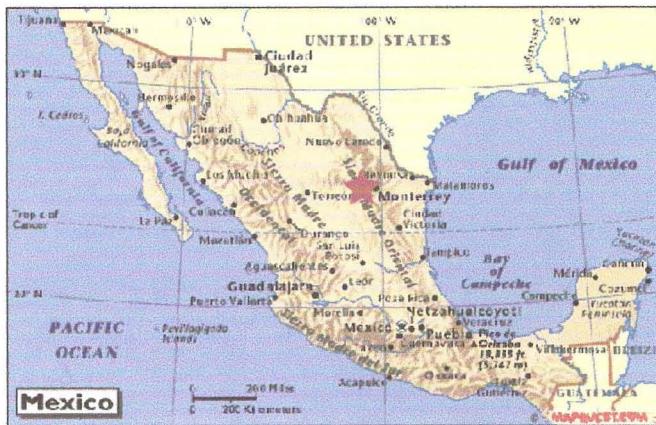
Mexico 2001

Expedition Report

## Introduction

We started out with two main aims for our expedition. Firstly, to climb existing routes in and around the Potrero Chico region in Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Once familiar with the climate and terrain we wanted to explore the area with particular emphasis on finding unclimbed routes to develop.

The groups consisted of nine members with a variety of climbing experience, mostly with the ICMC.



## Diary

1-4	Arrival in Mexico city and transfer to Potrero chico
5-11	Climbing the routes of the Potrero Chico
12-14	1 <sup>st</sup> expedition for New routes
15	Monterrey
16-18	2 <sup>nd</sup> Expedition
19-21	More climbing in the Potrero
21-24	Party split for excursions to other parts of Mexico, or to stay for more climbing.
25-26	Return to Mexico city for flight home.

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# Expedition Report

## Initial Impressions – Arrival in Mexico

Settling down for the night in a hotel in Mexcio city we knew we had arrived. We had decided to stay in Mexico city, and then travel by bus to Monterrey to save money, but once there it became clear there was a lot for us to see anyway and to come to Mexico without seeing this immense city would have been a grave error. The next couple of days were spent seeing the sights of the city, in particular the Anthropology Museum and the amazing artwork of Diego Rivera.



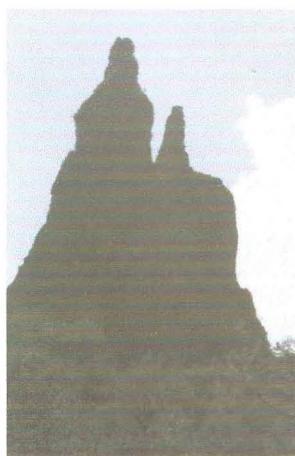
After two days in Mexico City we took bus to Monterrey, 600 miles North of the capital. A connecting bus and taxi ride took us to El Potrero Chico (the Little Coral). Our main base for the duration of the stay was the Rancho Cerro Gordo where we were provided with clean water and basic washing facilities.

The first impressions we got of the Potrero were of immense heat and immense size. Looming up just a few hundred metres from the ranch we had made our base were giant 1000 metre rock faces, in some places close to vertical.

## The first climbing

Initially the weather was stifling with temperatures in excess of 35 degrees. Climbing in this temperature was difficult and we had to restrict ourselves to short shady routes. Water was also a problem due to the large amounts that had to be carried on the routes. There was some concern that when we did set out into the park we would have a problem finding enough water.

Fortunately, cloudier and more overcast weather was to come at the end of the first week. This provided us with a comfortable climbing atmosphere and the opportunity to

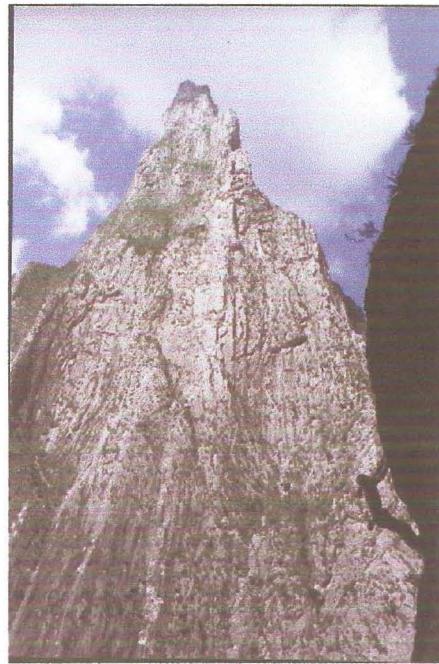


climb some of the "monster routes" that had been tempting us for so long. Rock faces previously in the sun were now accessible.

The nine members of the party spent most of the time climbing in groups of two or three. We covered a huge variety of climbing, from short difficult single pitch routes to epic 15 pitch expeditions. Twice Phil and Kev had to turn back from "Yankee Clipper" only to be triumphant in the last week.

Experience of multi-pitch climbing in the group was limited, but with the help of the more experienced members and through practice, everyone became adept in the art of "Big Wall" climbing. This experience will have definite benefit to all members on any future trips.

The variety of route style and length in the area allowed people to climb slabs, overhangs, corners , cracks and aretes, either single or multi pitch all within the space of a few days. Just a five-minute walk from huge 15 and 12 pitch routes were 10 metre strenuous overhangs.



The multi pitch climbing highlights where the immense routes of Space boys, attempted by Simon, Lydia, Phil, James and Gareth during the time in Mexico, and Yankee clipper eventually completed by Phil and Kevin. There was also the spires, a pair of pinnacles that provided fun and rewarding climbing for all members of the team. There were also the excellent harder routes of Joe's Garage, a climb out of a cave onto a fantastic smooth face, Central scrutinizer up the same blank face and the fantastic corner of Don Quixote which provided challenging climbing at a high grade for Mathieu, Russel and James.

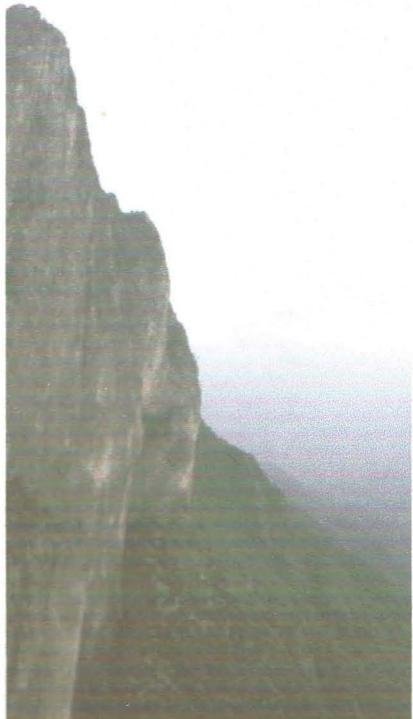
Mathieu on "Don Quixote"

## 1<sup>st</sup> Expedition

At the start of the third week, having become used to the heat, altitude and rock we decided to make our first foray into the park. Russell and Mathieu decided that they would stay where they were and investigate the areas just beyond the existing climbs while the rest of us set off farther afield.

We hired a 4x4, a guide and several 40-litre water barrels. Our guide took us deep into the park and we found an excellent campsite near a natural spring. With most of the day still to come we split into two groups to gather information about the local geography.

One group climbed a small peak near the camp and although they found nothing noteworthy, spotted some promising areas to investigate later. The second group had a more successful time and managed to pick out a striking crack line on a distant crag. We estimated it to be around 600 metres long and over two miles away.



The next morning Phil had come down with mild sun stroke, so we left him and Steve at the camp. We formed two groups again and set off to get a closer look at the interesting areas we had picked out the day before. Both groups returned with very similar stories (and scars). Initial progress was good, although there were no paths except for the odd cattle track. As we got closer to the crags the ground became steeper and the vegetation more dense. Eventually we were scrambling up vertical rock through a forest of aggressive plants.

We found progress very slow and painful. Killing (uprooting, kicking, slashing etc..) cactus is illegal in Mexico. The cactus finally got the better of us and we retired to camp licking our wounds. The trips had been a partial success as we had managed to get close enough to the rock to determine it was in poor condition and not sound enough to climb on. As we approached the previously promising crack we



discovered it to be disjointed and not the major fault line we had been hoping for.

During the planning of the expedition we were hoping to be able to gain access to the base of the crags and walk along their length looking for promising routes. This would enable us to cover a large section of rock very quickly. We soon discovered this was not going to be possible due to the nature of the terrain.

After two completely unsuccessful and disappointing days we decided to return to the Ranch to rethink our strategy, hopeful thinking also led us to believe that Russell and Mathieu had had more luck. Our hopes were unfortunately not confirmed, Russell and Mathieu had spent the two days in very similar conditions to us. They had also had problems with undergrowth but had seen more of the rock. They had decided that the search was fruitless as the rock they had discovered was loose and in no condition to be climbed.

## **2<sup>nd</sup> Expedition**

After a days climbing and a belated celebration of Mexican Independence day, which we had missed whilst away, we were ready for another search, albeit in reduced numbers. Four of us set off on foot, as we now knew the location of a spring, to the same campsite as before. Our new goal was the valley leading out of the ring made by the Potrero Chico, beyond the spring.

We set off early the next morning up a miners' trail and then along the valley floor. Along the way we investigated several crags on the hillside only to come up with the same problem of loose poor rock. As we came to the end of the valley we did come across two small crags. The first about 10 metres high had several vertical crack lines. In England this would be a crag worth mentioning but in this area of large routes and accessible climbs it was sadly too small and too far away to be worthwhile. The second was higher and looked considerably more promising. Sadly on closer inspection the rock was of poorer quality than the smaller crag and finished with an unclimbable four foot wide roof.

We returned to the ranch the next morning as it began to rain and were very glad to have done so as the rain grew heavier and heavier through out the day. The storm during the night created a flood in the ranch that washed away the road and anything else not securely bolted down.

## The End

During the remaining days people concentrated on climbing the excellent existing routes, many of them at gradually harder and harder grades. There were a few more trips beyond the existing climbing to check for some routes but none with any result.

As our time in Mexico came to an end a some people set off for a day or two on the coast while some stayed to climb right to the end, meeting up finally in Mexico City for the flight home.

## The Verdict

The nature of the rock in Mexico was largely unsuited to traditional climbing. The best routes were those up pocketed rock faces, completely unprotected but for the permanent bolts drilled into the rock. The limestone around any cracks or fault lines was mostly loose. The existing routes had been heavily and very visibly cleaned of loose rock and yet on some routes loose rock was still a problem. The area is thus ideal for bolted routes and not for traditional climbing. On any crag there are areas of good and bad rock but the virtually impenetrable nature of the undergrowth meant that it was impossible to walk until we found some. In an area with such large proportion of bolted routes any traditional routes would get very little ascents and any good climbs would eventually be bolted anyway, even if first climbed without.

Although no new routes were climbed the expedition was extremely valuable experience to all who took part. The climbing in the Potrero Chico is first class, easily equaling and exceeding the standards set by limestone bolted crags in Europe, and also providing longer routes.

## Recommendations for the future

The Potrero Chico is an excellent venue for bolted climbing. It has been carefully and professionally developed so far and with the standard set should continue to be so. The roots are in general bolted very well and the guide book warns of any hidden dangers. As a bolted climbing resort the Potrero is fantastic and I would recommend it to anyone looking for a sports climbing holiday. The best climbs are in the 5.10c to 5.12d range. This is about 6a to 7a to those used to the French grading system. At the same time the climbing in the Potrero is serious and certainly not the place to learn to climb. The problems of loose rock are still

apparent and care needs to be taken at all times with consideration given to other climbers. It would also be advisory to build up climbing experience before attempting long multi pitch routes, even on bolts.

Unfortunately the nature of the rock and of the area makes the Potrero unsuitable for traditional climbing and for exploration.

The journey we took was I believe the most economic, although if a cheap connecting flight could be found to Monterrey this may be better than the coach journey which for both ways came to £106. The coach to Monterrey goes from the Terminal del Norte in Mexico City and arrives at the Monterrey Bus station from where a local bus to Hidalgo, Nuevo Leon can be taken. This journey takes about 40 minutes. From here it is best to take a taxi to one of the ranches or campsites just out side the national park of the Potrero Chico. This journey takes about 20 minutes and should cost about 60-80 Pesos per vehicle. As an alternative option from the road out of Hidalgo towards the Potrero, a lift from a friendly local is always on the cards for some of the way and the walk is only about 45 minutes in total.

## Financial report

### Preliminary budget

Budget as suggested in initial application to exploration board

Return flights	London to Monterrey	$6 \times 640$	3840
Bus (return)	Monterrey to Potrero	$6 \times 20$	120
4x4	Two days	$2 \times 150$	300
Food		$6 \times 100$	600
Camping	23 nights	$6 \times 23 \times 2$	276
Stove fuel			30
Insurance	BMC	$6 \times 75$	450
<b>Total</b>			<b>£5616</b>

This was updated to 9 members during the planning stages, hence the preliminary budget would read:

Return flights	London to Monterrey	$9 \times 640$	5760
Bus (return)	Monterrey to Potrero	$9 \times 20$	180
4x4	Two days	$2 \times 150$	300
Food		$9 \times 100$	900
Camping	23 nights	$9 \times 23 \times 2$	414
Stove fuel			45
Insurance	BMC	$9 \times 75$	675
<b>Total</b>			<b>£8274</b>

## Contributions

After the increase in size of our expedition the Exploration Board kindly increased our grant from £1500 to £2000. We also received a Dunsheath Award from the University of London Convocation Trust.

Personal contributions	9x500	4500
Exploration Board Grant		2000
Dunsheath Award		600
Exploration Board Insurance		675
<b>Total</b>		<b>£7765</b>

This left us short by some margin so we would have to cut corners somewhere or put up more personal contribution. The way we intended to do this was through the flights. We had planned to take a connecting flight from either the southern USA or Mexico city, whichever was cheaper at the time of booking, but instead decided to make the transfer journey by bus. This was coupled with a very good deal on British Airways flights into Mexico City. The breakdown of our expenditure was thus:

<b>Transport</b>	Air fares	9 x 411	3699
	Around mexico city(tube & taxis)	70	70
	Bus to Monterrey(out & rtn)	9 x 53 x 2	954
	Local Travel (Bus, out & rtn & taxi)	46	46
	Shopping trips	6 x 8	48
	Monterrey trip	52	52
	Trip into park	20	20
<b>Food</b>	Shopping – main trips	6 x 80	480
	Shopping – small trips	4 x 20	80
	Meals – Breakfasts	2 x 35	70
	Meals – Dinners	5 x 80	400
<b>Accommodation</b>	Hotel	2 x 8 x 9	144
	Casita	7 x 35	245
	Camping	6 x 3 x 9	162

<b>Others</b>	Fuel	10	10
	Guidebooks	5 x 15	75
<b>Insurance</b>	BMC Worldwide	675	675
<b>Total</b>		<b>7230</b>	

## Transport

We made a good saving on the air fare and thought that the saving on the connecting flight would also save us money. We had considered that it would take longer to get to the Potrero Chico and that we would almost certainly have to spend at least one night in a hotel in Mexico city but considered this worth the saving and it also gave us a chance to look around the fantastic metropolis of Mexico City.

We did not fully predict the money we would spend on taxis and on other local travel. It was essential to do a shopping trip every three or four days in order to get fresh produce and also during part of the trip to buy purified water when the spring did not work. Whilst it was quite possible to walk the 40 minute journey there we felt it worthwhile to find a taxi for the return journey. Similarly in Mexico City the money spent on taxis from the airport and bus stations soon added up. The underground system was however remarkably cheap at about 13p per journey.

We had expected Mexico to be remarkably cheap but we discovered that this was not so. The bus journey to Monterrey whilst good value was certainly not the bargain we had hoped. Despite the time spent and the insignificance of the saving we finally made I have no regrets about traveling over land in order to experience more of the Mexican culture, more of an excursion and also to see Mexico City

Our expedition into the park proved much cheaper than we imagined as the area was not as large as we had originally assumed and once we had discovered a water source we could walk in and out as we pleased.

## Food

As said above we had expected Mexico to be remarkably cheap but found it only a little cheaper than in England with the exception obviously of the "Mexican" food we buy in England, tortillas, tacos etc. The stay in Mexico City also meant that we had to eat in restaurants for a couple of days rather than the cheaper option of catering for ourselves.

## **Accommodation**

Staying in Mexico city was expensive as it is always difficult to find a very cheap hotel with space for 9 people on a wet late evening in a foreign country. For the first week we stayed in a casita on the ranch. This was in the interests of having our own space and for security reasons. It soon became obvious that we had the ranch to ourselves and that security was not going to be a problem so we were happy to take the slightly cheaper option of camping or sleeping in hammocks around the ranch.

## **Others**

As we were staying in a ranch with cooking facilities for much of the time we didn't use as much fuel as we had supposed. The guidebooks were expensive but the money goes towards the climbers who have put in millions of hours route setting and spent vast sums of money on bolts and abseil chains.

We saved money from our original budget on transport but overspent on food and accommodation. This was mostly our decision not to fly to Monterrey moving the money around slightly. The remainder of the money was spent during the days after we split up on transport, accommodation and food.

## Acknowledgements

### Financial

A great thanks goes to our chief sponsor The Imperial College Exploration Board, without their grant, their insurance cover and their organisation of our accounts this expedition might never have happened.

Thanks also to our other financial contributor the Dunsheath Award from the University of London Convocation Trust.

### In Mexico

Thanks to Joshua and Emillio and family for helping us feel welcome at the ranch and for numerous lifts down the road.

Thanks to the beer drinking, truck driving locals for their friendly lifts into town and the occasional "après climb" entertainment.

Thanks to Kurt Smith for the website, the accommodation(even if he didn't know it) and for his numerous excellent routes.

### Climbing

Thanks to guide book compiler Mr Jackson and to all the route setters and pioneers of climbing in the Potrero Chico.

### Other generally extremely helpful people

Zoe at STA travel for her patience and deal finding.  
The BMC for honoring our insurance even though it was paid retrospectively.

## Appendix 1

Article as published in Felix Friday 19/10/2001

Written by Gareth Morgan

"Forget your hands, trust your feet." The climbing shoe advert comes back to me as I balance awkwardly on the rockface, a hundred and twenty feet above the valley floor. If I were more comfortable, I could look behind me to see the towering limestone cliffs on the other side of the pass that forms the entrance to El Potrero Chico, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. To my left, the mountains a mile or two away are still shrouded in haze, but the sun is just peeking over the hills behind me.

My feet are on to small ledges, enough to hold me but far from reassuring. My left thumb and right forefinger are buried deep within small pockets around chest height, and the rest of my fingers are clinging to the smooth rock, more for psychological than physical support. In the back of my mind, though, is the vague thought that if my feet slip, I could break both digits quite easily.

There's what I hope is a big hold is about four feet above me, and I should be able to clip into the next bolt when I reach it. But I'm already five feet above the last bolt, which will catch the rope if I fall, and there's enough rope between myself and Phil, who is belaying me from a small ledge to ensure that I'll drop about twelve feet before swinging into the rock. Even on 'safe' sports climbs, where the bolt is permanently fixed into the rock, I've never quite got over my fear of falling, and as I feel my arms tiring, I try not to imagine the scraping impact onto the sharp, water-shaped stone. Why didn't I wear a long-sleeved top, despite the thirty-degree heat?

I've been stood here for perhaps fifteen minutes, trying to figure out how to make the next moves. My feet are throbbing, and I shift position slightly, looking for better holds. These rock boots are tight at the best of times, and the heat here is making my feet swell, so that taking them off is blissful relief. But I'm glad of the friction that's keeping me on the rock.

There's a hint of a pocket about eight inches above my left foot. I plant my toe into it and stand up, scrabbling for any slight purchase with my right. Pulling hard on my right finger, I pull out my left thumb and reach up, curling the tips of my fingers over the illusion of a ledge, then bring my right foot up to a sloping hold underneath my hand. I'm off-balance now, and my left hand aches as I cling to the hold, carefully extract my right index finger and reach up for something more positive. My short stature is suddenly a blessing as I rock my weight onto my right foot, leg folded beneath me, pull myself over the slight bulge and gasp with relief as I sink my left hand into the hold I'd seen earlier, mercifully deep enough to hang from.

After a moment's pause to catch my breath and clip my rope to the bolt, I move on – my position isn't quite comfortable enough to actually rest. The sun's out

properly now, and I can feel the back of my neck warming up. I go through similar moments of anguish twice more before I reach the top of the route and relax. I can just summon the energy to smile in weary achievement before I head back down.

Now, repeat that entire process two, three or more times a day for three weeks (apart from when it rains, at which point the rock turns dangerously slick). Add in basic but pleasant camping, spectacular scenery, spicy food, cold beer, linguistic difficulties, a limited supply of books and many, many games of Hearts, and you're not too far away from a climbing expedition. In this case, we were in Mexico, so our list of pleasures also included tequila, aggressive invertebrates and cacti. Big, spiky, painful cacti that infested the higher slopes – but more of them later.

Sound like fun? It should be pointed out that rock climbers are a strange breed, and the Imperial College Mountaineering Club are stranger than most (we are Imperial students, after all). Unless you've tried it, there's no way that I can convince you that good climbing makes all incidental hardships fade into the background, and the inherent risk only adds to the exhilaration.

And the climbing was great. El Potrero Chico is a ring of limestone peaks, thrust up among the Sierra Madre Oriental, a few miles down the road from Monterrey, Mexico's third city and industrial heartland. The northern edge of the Potrero (Spanish for corral – a ring of mountains) is split by a steep-sided pass, where most of the existing climbing has been done. Vast slabs of limestone, hundreds of feet high and ranked like sharks teeth, form small valleys and canyons on both sides of the pass.

There are literally hundreds of routes on the various rock faces, and their varied orientations mean that even in the fierce afternoon sun, there's always something in the shade. The rock itself is mainly hard carbonates, especially limestone, and is covered with cracks, pockets, flakes and imperfections that make for varied and challenging climbing. Best of all, the surface of the rock is rough, without the 'polished' feel of more popular areas.

With financial help from the Imperial College Exploration board, nine students set off on the long flight to Mexico City at the start of September. Our mission: to develop new routes in one of the world's most exciting climbing areas.

Mexico City is impossibly huge, and located in arguably the worst possible place to put twenty million people. On a high plateau, surrounded by a ring of volcanoes (some of which are still active), the city's air is a thick smog of exhaust fumes from its crowded streets and heavy industry. There's little in the way of a sewer system, and the whole place stinks. It may be a lively, vibrant metropolis, but we left without regret on an overnight bus for the long journey north to Monterrey. Although Monterrey turned out to be fairly nice, we wasted little time there, making instead for the town of Hidalgo and El Potrero Chico. We spent much of our time staying at the Rancho Cerro Gordo, a campsite ten minutes walk outside the Potrero that catered to the growing numbers of climbers who come from all over the world to visit the area. The ranch was quiet – September is just outside the peak winter season – so we more or less took over the tin-roofed pavilion, where

the traditional shower block and kitchen area were joined by some old sofas, a pull-up bar and a tightrope. There were a couple of spare helmets we could borrow, too.

The ranch was to become our base for the rest of our time there, but we spent a few nights camping in the Potrero, looking for new crags to develop. We all spent the next two weeks there, before some people drifted off to see more of the country, specifically the Pacific coast.

After the bustle and grime of the cities, it was great to be out in the country. People were friendly and relaxed, living was easy, if not spectacularly cheap, and the rock was gorgeous. Even the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> seemed a world away – our only contact with the outside world was a Texan radio station and the occasional trip into Monterrey for a cybercafe.

After a few days acclimatising to the heat and remembering how to climb, we set off into the wilderness to look for new routes. We camped at the opposite side of the Potrero from the pass, and set out in small groups to find fresh, unconquered rock. Unfortunately, it looked like said rock was going to remain unconquered for a while longer. Despite several trips into the bush, towards the tantalising rock faces we could see in the distance, we never quite managed to find anything.

The problems were twofold. For starters, the approaches to the actual rock were up steep slopes, covered with vegetation. While this was not at first a problem, the higher we went, the more cacti we found. I used to think that cacti looked quite nice, but I now regard them with the kind of venomous hatred usually reserved for the Student Loans Company. Fighting every step of your way up an often loose slope, and being repeatedly impaled on sharp thorns which are thrust at you from every direction is not my idea of a pleasant walk in the desert. Clearing a path wasn't an option either – uprooting cacti is illegal in Mexico. We eventually decided that the pain and blood loss were too severe, especially since no-one in their right mind would want to make their own way up to repeat any routes we did manage.

The other trouble was the rock. We had decided before we left to avoid drilling into the rock to place bolts, so would be relying on 'traditional', hand-placed protection. Although riskier, this avoids leaving unsightly metal bolts in the rock face, and is generally preferred in Britain. Unfortunately, limestone does not always lend itself to such practices, and we found few possible lines which would be safe to climb. A further problem was that the rock was quite loose in places, and had various plants growing in it elsewhere. At the start of one potential route, the first hold came away as soon as it was tried. On reflection, we decided that our initial plan was not feasible, and since we had no bolting equipment to set up sports routes we resigned ourselves to enjoying the climbs already there.

Those climbs were spectacular, though. As well as scores of short routes, the Potrero has spectacular long routes, which can take an entire day to get up and down. One of these is Yankee Clipper, which climbs up almost a thousand feet to a summit on the west side of the pass. Our glorious leaders, club President Kevin and Vice President Phil had three attempts on this monster – twice, they were

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forced by darkness and rain to abseil down from about halfway. Other memorable experiences included a rope getting stuck two hundred feet up in the dark, and a thunderstorm that flooded our sleeping area at one in the morning. We left the Potrero with mixed feelings. It was a shame to travel halfway across the world and not achieve our main goal, but we'd had a great time, and the experience of fantastic climbing in a new country had been great. Given the opportunity, I'd go back there, but unless you happen to live in the States it's a long, long way to get there. But the people are nice, the rock's great and Mexico's pretty civilised by South American standards, so it's well worth considering. For more information, or to see more photos, check out [www.su.ic.ac.uk/mountaineering](http://www.su.ic.ac.uk/mountaineering) or [www.potrerochico.com](http://www.potrerochico.com).

## Appendix 2

Area of expedition

