

# The Czechoslovakian Exchange

MARK WILFORD

**B**EING A SELF-CONFESSED sandstone and adrenaline addict, I'm continually looking for my next fix. Having such traits, a visit to the spawning grounds of my obsession would be quite a treat. That is, as long as I didn't overdose there.

Recently I took the opportunity of such a trip, via an American Alpine Club exchange, and visited the somewhat unknown climbing regions of Czechoslovakia. For five-and-a-half weeks Matt Kerns, Rick Powell and I participated in, and were awe-stricken by, some of the oldest and most traditional climbing in the world.

Geographically, Czechoslovakia lies in the Eastern Bloc of Europe. For obvious and not so obvious reasons, few Western climbers have explored the many climbing areas Czechoslovakia has to offer. Really a shame for all parties concerned!

Basically, Czech climbing can be divided into two main regions. These centers are the granite walls of the High Tatras and the sandstone pinnacles of Bohemia. Besides these two main regions, many smaller areas of basalt, limestone and granite abound.

By far the most significant and impressive of the climbing is on the Bohemian sandstone. It is this region which offers amazing pinnacles combined with unbelievable ethics and rules resulting in some of the boldest and most well-defined climbing anywhere. The idea of rules and regulation in climbing will come as a surprise to most climbers. Nobody tells *us* how to climb. Czech sandstone climbing is different. Entrenched in a very old tradition are a set of rules governing and protecting this climbing and rock. With the printing of the 1958 guide book to the sandstone came the first occasion for the rules to be written down. These rules are the common sense and opinions of the majority of sandstone climbers. Following are the general rules accepted after discussions in 1968. This should help in understanding the confusing nature of the sandstone sport.

Rules:

1. One may climb using only natural hand- and footholds while incorporating one's own strength and technique.

*Photo by Mark Wilford*

**Towers of ADRŠPACH in Northeast  
Bohemia.**





2. It is strictly prohibited to:
  - a. change the nature of the rock intentionally.
  - b. use chocks, pitons, friends or other metal protection devices in cracks or pockets.
  - c. climb on wet sandstone (Suché Skály excepted).
  - d. use hard-soled shoes, i.e., Vibram.
  - e. use alcohol, drugs, etc., which might affect the safety of the ascent.
  - f. use magnesium. (This was included after 1968.)
3. The rope can only be used to belay from under the rock. No top-roping.
4. The placing of protection knots and slings has to be based only on the natural properties of the rock. It is also necessary to protect the rock from damage by using slings to eliminate friction over the rock. Slings can only be used for protection. Resting on a sling lowers the "sport value" of the ascent.
5. A shoulder-stand by one's own strength, so called "clean shoulder-stand", is allowed only at places where it was, with good reason, employed during the first ascent. A shoulder-stand using a ring (bolt), sling or knot for aid is prohibited. The areas in northeast Bohemia are officially excluded from this rule.
6.
  - a. Rings (bolts) are to be used only for belaying and protection. Use as a handhold/foothold is prohibited.
  - b. The criteria for proper placement must be followed. i.e.—proper depth of hole and packing of the ring upon placement. Whoever places the ring is responsible for its safety.
  - c. During the first ascent the ring must be placed from a free position. During the drilling one is allowed to rest on the drill. The ring must be placed in the original hole started. A second hole denotes that it was used to rest on while drilling the main hole. Again, northeast Bohemia is exempt from this rule. Regarding this exemption, the distance between the two holes cannot exceed 30 cm.
  - d. One is not allowed to change the place of or add more rings to an established climb. The exception to this is when the ring's position is such that the friction of the rope over edges damages the soft rock.

Enforcement of any violation which might damage the rock is possible by forest ranger/park warden types. Local climbers will also discourage infraction as I found out by using chalk on my first climbs. In certain areas, climbers will form ethics committees. If, for some reason, there is doubt about the style of a first ascent, the committee can request that the first ascentist reascend the route in front of them. If it can't be repeated legitimately, the climb is deemed impure and the rings removed from it.

The subject of grades and grading is a fairly difficult one. It seems that the Czech grading system suffers too much from the old guard's ego as it is closed at 7c. 7c then contains quite a variety of grades and means little else than it's harder than 7b. Unfortunately, 7b starts to mean less and less as old 7cs are



PLATE 49

*Photo by Mark Wilford*

**Rick Powell on "The Whip," Teplice  
(5.10a).**

down rated to 7b to make room for the new 7cs. Generally 7a is 5.7, 7b is 5.8 and easy 7c around 5.9.

Fortunately, the neighboring East Germans have remained open-minded and open-ended. After 7c, the scale continues with 8a-c and 9a-c. 9c is currently the limit in both East Germany and Czechoslovakia. An approximate correlation between East German and U.S. grades is: 8a=5.10-, 8b=5.10, 8c=5.10+ or 5.11-, 9a=5.11- or 5.11, 9b=5.11 or 5.11+, 9c=5.11+ or 5.12-. These grades are further complicated when protection factors are taken into consideration. A certain climb may technically be 8c but because it has a 50-foot run-out off the ground it is given 9b.

Another factor regarding grades is the rings. It is stated that the rings cannot be used as hand- or footholds. They can, however, be used for rest points. This is a major difference from the U.S. view on free-climbing. Czech and East German grades can have little or no meaning when attempting something with a Western attitude. It's quite easy to transform an 8c climb into an arm-pumping 9b when trying to free-climb past these rings. It would be comparable to climbing Yosemite's "Butterballs" in three sections and grading it 5.10.

As interesting as the rules and strict ethics of the sandstone climbing is its seemingly ancient history. Czech sandstone climbing is separated into three main areas of Bohemia. The westernmost area, northern Bohemia, lies along the Elbe River on the East German border. Just to the east, in north-central Bohemia, is the Czech Paradise (Český Ráj) region. Further to the east, near the Polish border, is the northeastern Bohemian area. Although relatively close, each of these areas has different histories and developments.

Before most of us were even a gleam in our grandfathers' eyes, Czech sandstone climbing was maturing. Initial development started in northern Bohemia in the early 1880's. Responsible for this primitive insanity were Saxon Germans who lived nearby. These Germans monopolised the area for half a century with their first ascents. It wasn't until 1950 that the first significant Czech climb appeared. Because of this lengthy German occupation, a very strong Saxon influence can be seen in northern Bohemia's ethics.

The Czech Paradise region saw a slightly later development, again by Saxon Germans. Between 1920 and 1930 most of the main pinnacles had been climbed by the Germans. The Czechs were quicker in this area. Just before World War II they had produced their first climbs.

Northeastern Bohemia saw the latest exploitation of the sandstone regions. In 1925 the Germans, again, began development of this vast region. Activity was slow and by 1937 no more than 40 of the 1000 towers were climbed. The years just after World War II saw the boom of Czech climbing. Because of this late and slow development the Saxon ethics and traditions are weakest in this area.

Faced with such radically different ideas on free climbing, you can imagine the anxiety that beset our humble group as we began our sandstone journey. Introduction to the rock came on a typically hazy day at Suché Skály, in the Czech Paradise. After a warm-up on "Photographic Arête," 7b, I knew a good

time was going to be had. Declaring 7b to be too easy, I was given to a local expert for initiation into the terror zone of 7c.

With my first 7c, "Vega," I also received my first lesson in knot technology. I've never trusted nuts in opposition, but knots? Surely someone jests. I think the whole knot business is to inhibit falling. I will admit I cheated on "Vega," however. Being the kind souls they are, our "guides" forgot to take our chalk away from us. Unfortunately, the brightly-colored bags of courage were soon noticed by self-appointed "ethic enforcers." The show-down came swiftly as I was climbing "The Overhanging Arête," 5.11. While indulging in my habitual dipping, the air was suddenly shattered with "Nicht, nicht magnesium". Looking down I saw a scrawny yet serious figure gibbering at Matt and me. My life was crushed. I mean I can't even get out of bed without my chalk bag.

The next few days saw us sampling many of the pinnacles in a variety of the Czech Paradise's sub-areas. As a rule, most of these climbs were on soft, vertical and highly pocketed rock. By now knots had become an accepted and somewhat trusted necessary evil. Giving up chalk wasn't quite as easy. Giving up a two-pack-a-day-cig habit would have been easier. Eventually the inevitable was realized; we did as the Romans.

After having collected a good number of routes, it was time to move on. Next stop was northeastern Bohemia featuring its two subareas Adršpach and Teplice. This region of pinnacles, although similar in appearance, varies greatly from the pocketed, soft towers of the Paradise area. Typical of most climbs are rough, wide cracks coupled with smooth, bulging friction walls. Even Yosemite would be hard pressed to offer more fist, off-width and chimney cracks. So much for my love of face climbing.

First day in Adršpach saw me teamed up with local hardman Roman. By now I was getting used to thrifty conversations. "Sieben c, gut, nicht so gut, classic sieben c, kein magnesium, sieben c, gut material, kein magnesium, gut sieben c, kein magnesium etc." As Roman and I were both monolingual, little was to be gained from the intellectual stimulation of conversing. Fortunately, you don't really have to talk to climb. If you pull hard enough on the rope, something is bound to happen. In keeping with the brotherhood of climbing and international good will, I was honored with a "classic 7c" as an introduction to Adršpach. It wasn't until I was halfway up the off-width, clad in shorts, that I wondered if classic and brotherhood held the same connotation world wide. They were smiling at me anyway. Classic or not, I had little difficulty, unlike the climb, in expressing my displeasure for any further swimming expeditions up wide cracks.

After testing a few reasonable hand cracks, Roman shepherded me to an isolated tower sporting the unrepeatable "Crazy Project". Sickening can best describe my feelings as I peered up the 80-meter, overhanging wall. Because of our language barrier, my usual response was pointless. I had no way of describing the flare-up of an old injury, the late hour of the day or the possibility of a sudden thunderstorm. I was doomed to climb.



PLATE 50

*Photo by Mark Wilford*

**Petr Cermak on the First Ascent of  
"Coloradical" (5.11) at Suché Skály.**

The honor was again mine as Roman "gave" me the first pitch. The climbing started out easy but, sooner than hoped, fear replaced pleasure. Above me the wall turned roof and I was forced onto an overhanging traverse. It was all there, except for the protection. Each time I ventured out the traverse the thought of a 10-meter pendulum pulled me back. Finally, concentration conquered fear and I managed the moves to find the salvation of the belay ring. The smiles were now mine as Roman arrived to ponder the next pitch. The climb was just beginning to show its teeth. Rising above us, on the 95° wall, was a short hand crack. Now I think hand cracks are always nice, except, on the rare occasion, when they end in a blank face. This was such an occasion. Roman was unfazed. Halfway up the crack he fired in the only protection, an 8mm knot. As it turned out, the face above wasn't completely blank. There were holds. The problem being, a matter of meters separated the holds. Knots do hold. This I can testify to as Roman began a series of nerve-shattering plummets while measuring the distance between the handholds. After more than enough of these wingers, my true ambition to be a secured second was replaced by the sharp end of the rope.

Why the protection knot was good I don't know. Better judgement denied my visual inspection. As I arrived at the top of the crack Roman's flight time was explained by the substantial void from hand-jam to fingerhold. Not one to duplicate the unpleasant, I broke sacred laws of statics and lunged for the goading hold. The gamble paid and I cashed in on the richly pocketed climbing above.

The next pitch refused to relent and so did we. After a short traverse, a flaring crack split the wall above. Placing protection at the bottom of said crack, Roman went for it. There is no fear of flying here. Five meters of overhanging laybacking insured no time for protecting and lots of time for sweating. Roman was not protecting and I was sweating. My comrade prevailed. Soon I found myself cranking up the crack.

Although the angle had now laid back some, the climb still wasn't over. To be dealt with next were two devilishly deceiving pitches of vertical and horizontal breaks. All the remaining holds involved friction. No jams or edges, just friction. No matter how close the protection is, and it wasn't, nothing is worse than slipping up a climb. This was a typical feature of most last pitches in northeast Bohemia. Frictioning for the top was usually as hard as any of the crux sections below. After many less-than-graceful maneuvers (i.e. groveling), we were allowed the summit. "Crazy Project" was ours for the mere fee of a couple of extra heart beats and a few white hairs.

Besides surviving the constant climbing, I was also becoming quite proficient at the number one sport in Czechoslovakia, that sport being beer drinking with the ability to stand after six pints of Pilsner. At 25 cents a pint, beer was becoming a major staple in my diet. Just as bouldering, nuts and good ropes are an integral part of our climbing, beer drinking contributes many necessary requirements to sandstone climbing, the obvious being courage and as a pain killer. After a week of primo climbing intermixed with great drinking



PLATES 51 AND 52

*Photos by Vladimir Weigner*

**Mark Wilford and Matt Kerns on  
the Hlaska Pinnacle, Teplice,  
Northeast Bohemia.**







sessions, it was time to move on. The mountains were calling and we had to answer.

Located in the northeastern section of Czechoslovakia, along the Polish border, is the smallest alpine range in the world, the High Tatras. This range is actually shared by both Poland and Czechoslovakia with Polish Tatra climbing being more publicized. Unlike the highly regulated and well defined sandstone climbing, the Tatras have the all-important summit syndrome. Anything goes in the no-holds-barred climbing. Tactics and styles are reminiscent of most West European areas. Bolt ladders, pitons and nuts. Everything short of air compressed drills and scaffolding goes, even chalk! You can imagine that this came as quite a relief to our sandstone tried-and-fried brains.

The beauty of the Tatras is vast and sudden. Unfortunately, my initial opinion was adversely affected by the combination of my intense laziness and the lengthy trudge to our Base Camp. My heavy load only seemed to dim the warm sunlight. All things come to an end, as did our death march, and the true majesty of the Tatras appeared to me just as I stumbled into camp.

Since we were in an alpine range, an alpine start for the next day seemed in order. Again, the splendor of the Tatras was being tested. Four A.M. starts and I mix like oil and water. In self-defense I slept on the approach hike to our climb.

The walls of the Tatras are not spectacular in a Yosemite sense. Often, the climbs appear to be shattered and loose. It's not until you're 200 meters up and find it *is* straight down that you realize respect is in order. In general, the rock is good granite offering fine face climbing with adequate protection from crack systems stuffed with fixed pins.

Besides occasional rockfall, a major hazard of the Tatras is its unpredictable weather. Storms can blow in quickly, leaving climbers in serious situations. A fear of some Czech climbers is being caught, two-thirds up a climb, in a storm and being drowned. Apparently, this has happened. It seems the large dihedrals near the tops of climbs funnel rainwater, very quickly, down crack systems and onto hanging belays. Hopefully our early start would be early enough since I'd left my life-preserver back at camp.

Accompanying me on my first Tatra climb was rat-urologist Yeti Hausman. Our objective was the 300-meter "Studničkova cesta" on the Galerie Ganku. Yeti was a horse of a man and quite a good climber. His brain just had a great desire to keep the rest of him alive. For this and other reasons, I was to do all the leading and Yeti was to carry the pack. O.K. by me.

The first pitches of our climb were about 80° and in the 5.7 to 5.8 range. We quickly gained altitude as I ran out the rope on the moderate climbing. After 150 meters, the wall started bulging and dripping. The next pitch completely changed the nature of the climb. In a dry state, it would have gone at a reasonable 5.9. Unfortunately, a small waterfall was seeping out above us, sliming up the whole pitch. Out came the rain gear. I started the lead up a slab to the overhangs above. Every hold was wet and glassy. My chalk was becoming a worthless paste. Upon arrival at the overhangs, I was forced onto

a traverse across the walls of a large, vertical dihedral. This was also soaked. Luckily, protection was in situ and abundant. The handholds were jugs but just as their namesakes, they also held water. Each time I used a jam or clipped protection, water would run down my arm. Just as agonizing was the serious rope-drag I had acquired from all my zigzag climbing. I hollered down for a belay on the 7mm haul line and went onto a double-rope belay. Big holds or not, I was gripped. After 30 meters of slip-slide traversing, I found a hole protected from the waterfalls. It was now Yeti's turn for an exciting bath as he began the traverse. Long swings stared at him each time he unclipped a piece of protection. Fortunately, steel handholds are legit in Yeti's book. More than one screamer was saved by the fixed protection.

Like the rats Yeti tested, we clawed our way out of the hole and up to the base of yet another large dihedral. Our situation was a spectacular one. Two hundred meters of air below and the looming walls of the dihedral above. The climbing was perfect now. All the wet sections were below us. Piercing the left wall of the dihedral were thin finger-cracks accompanied by pleasantly spaced, square-cut edges. After salvaging some dry chalk, I attacked the cracks and face-climbing. All the protection was in and I was playing clip-and-go. Much to Yeti's dismay, I didn't clip into all the pitons, making long run-outs instead. It was quite an ordeal for Yeti when he was left with one nice hold only to find the next one unclipped and therefore much too small. These "blank sections" of unclipped pegs often produced a tremendous scream of "Big tension" from a usually quite calm Yeti. After two long pitches in the dihedral the talus slope of the summit met us. Just in time as well. Like a synchronized movement, the clouds rolled in and we moved out.

Adventures of this type were to become typical of the rest of our Tatra climbs. Something was always being thrown in to make a normally humdrum, 300-meter climb exciting. Racing clouds and thunderstorms, wet and loose rock, the freeing of aid sections, 10-meter roofs and the labyrinth of a descent were all ingredients of one climb or another.

With our departure from the Tatras I again felt the loss of a brutal yet passionate relationship. Still, I was satisfied. Our imaginations, abilities and styles had opened up new doors to extreme climbing on the massive granite walls.

As a last reminder of who was really in charge and who was just along for the ride, Matt and I lost the trail on our way out. The extra miles of stumbling about in the dark seemed fair retribution for our brash exploits on the lofty peaks.

After the Tatras, we still had another week in which to dismember ourselves. The Elbe valley of East Germany and Czechoslovakia was next on the agenda. We all had great expectations of what was to come. Rick Powell was expecting to live through our stay, I was expecting another beer with dinner and Matt Kerns was expecting a child *soon*, like yesterday. I was the only one who was immediately satisfied. Matt and Rick would have to wait a couple more days for their results.

PLATE 53

*Photo by Petr Brzak*

**Mark Wilford on the Second Ascent  
of "Contact" (5.11) in the Czech  
Paradise region.**



The climbing of the Elbe valley is on nearly perfect sandstone pinnacles set in a beautiful countryside. On the German side are the humbling test pieces of the god-like and barefoot Bernd Arnold. Impossible lies in another dimension when it comes to 9c and Bernd. Through personal experience, I found barefoot 9a to be both mentally and physically ridiculous. Only by digressing to an instinct-driven and prehensile-toed Neanderthal creature, was I able to enjoy the fruits (usually a banana) of success.

Northern Bohemia offers the same spectacular and difficult climbing. It seems to go on forever. In regards to the climbing, my only regret was the inability to climb all of the pinnacles. But then I'd have no reason to return. You see, besides the excellent beer, friendly and hospitable people, tremendous scenery and beautiful girls, collecting pinnacles makes Czechoslovakia a true climbers' paradise no one should miss.

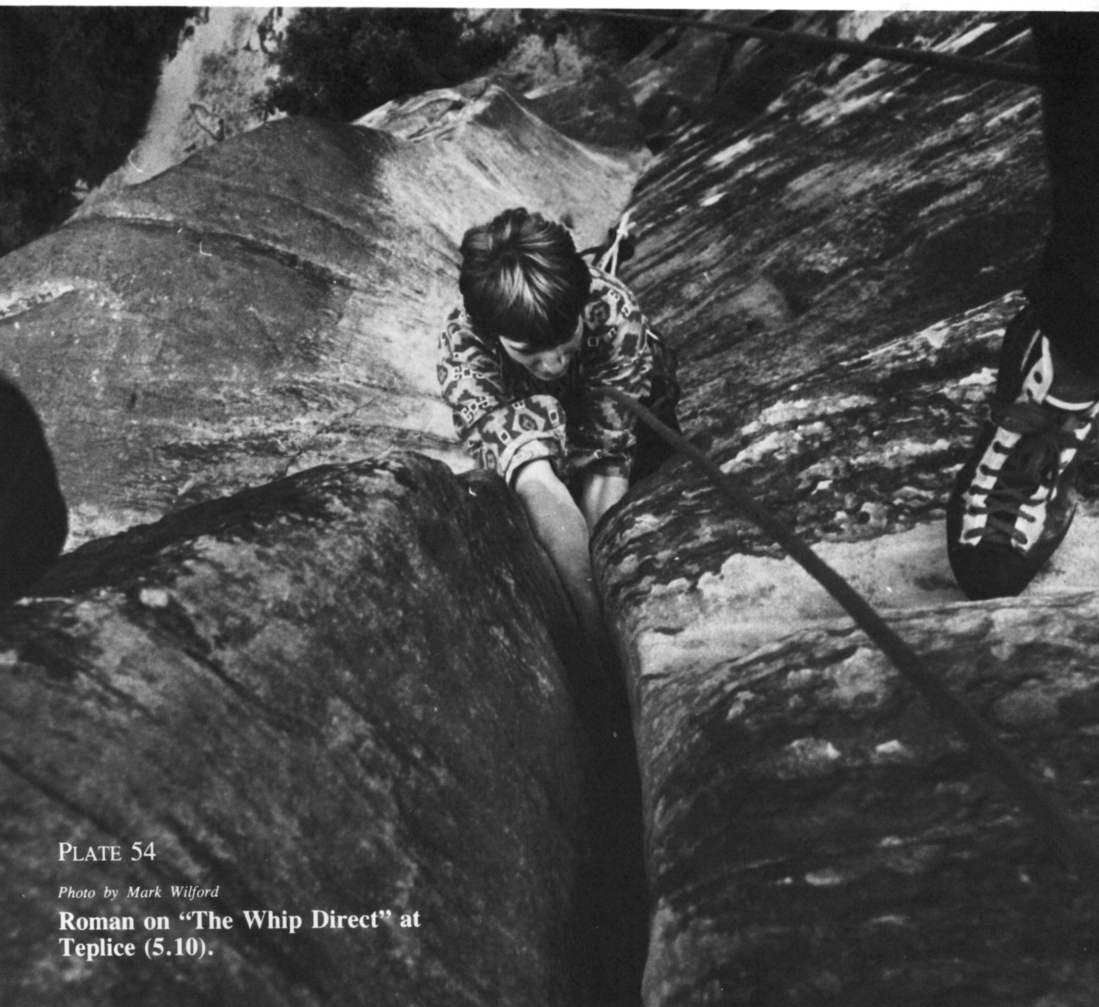


PLATE 54

*Photo by Mark Wilford*

**Roman on "The Whip Direct" at  
Teplíce (5.10).**