

Madagascar's Big Walls

The first ascent of Tsaranoro Atsimo

by Erik Svab, *Italy*



The local villagers of Andringitra National Park, Madagascar, with Tsaranoro Atsimo and Be in the background. EMANUELLE PELLIZZARI

Have you ever dreamed of a corner of paradise and then, in the realization of the dream, found it to be truly immense? So it befell us for one month in the heart of Madagascar. In the southeastern part of the island, in the Andringitra National Park, there is a valley of high walls of super compact granite. The most impressive of these forms the east face of Mount Tsaranoro, which is two kilometers long and up to 800 meters high. Tsaranoro is composed of three independent summits. On two of these, Tsaranoro Be and Tsaranoro Kely, routes had been put up. The third summit was still virgin.

Our dream began when Marco Sterni and I saw a photo of the granite wall in the Italian magazine *Pareti* on which the boys from Southern Tyrolia had put up *Gondwanaland*, a long (19-pitch) and committing (5.12c) route. From then on, we had only one immutable focus: to see Tsaranoro and to try to climb it in the style we had used for years in our own Dolomites and Julian Alps—ground up, with a high degree of difficulty, and using bolts only where it wasn't possible to get any other gear. A visit with Helmut, who made the first ascent of *Gondwanaland*, confirmed our suspicions: we would be dealing with a stupendous place. It was an adventure not to be missed.

After one year, we were there: the airport in Antananarivo, capital of Madagascar. The stress and exhaustion of our preparations dissolved. It's impossible to cling to the past when you are overwhelmed by an intense present, a different way of life, new rhythms to which you must adapt. My God, what poverty! We were not used to seeing people shoeless and half-naked—but in Madagascar the land gives one everything, hunger is non-existent, and poverty becomes simplicity and wealth.

Seven of us crammed in a Toyota with all our climbing gear, our provisions and more than 15 cases of water. We were wasted, but full of enthusiasm and impatient to see the spacious valley of Andringitra National Park. After a number of kilometers, it became impossible to continue by jeep: we had to get out and go forward on foot, following a roadcut that more closely resembled a path in the savanna. The high grass was of an intense yellow interrupted here and there by enormous boulders of dark granite. We were enraptured by them, moving almost unconsciously for want of familiarizing ourselves with this kind of rock. Though it was barely our first day in the valley, we had dreamed and waited so long that we were impatient to measure ourselves against it, so different a rock from that to which we were accustomed.

We put up our tents under a group of mango trees that soon became our home. Exhausted from three days of travel and trekking, we went to sleep. The next day, anxious to climb to the base of the wall, we left our tents and made our way to the small village of Tanambao. We thought to take leave of the inhabitants quickly, but we immediately discovered an uncommon pride in their eyes. It became clear that we were aliens to them, come to disturb the peace of the place. They didn't understand why we *vazah* (foreigners) wanted to come climb on their mountains. The locals climb what summits they can without ropes, but only to transport the remains of the deceased to inaccessible places. It is, for them, part of a strong tradition of demonstrating respect for ancestors. They couldn't comprehend that we climb only for fun, only for passion. Strange: at home in our Western world, we are often faced with the problem of explaining to others why we climb. Now we had to do so here as well, on an island that has remained the same for 1,000 years and where the people continue to not understand the strange habits of foreigners. We quickly became indebted to our guide, Jean-Calvin, for explaining to the chief that our intentions were good.

At the end of the negotiations, we came to understand that it would be the young man Jojò, son of the village chief, who would show us the way. He walked, almost running, bare-foot among the granite stones, to bring us to the base of the wall. Once we arrived, we spent our first day deciding where to begin our route. The possibilities were immense, but the wall that attracted us the most was the steepest wall in the valley, one no one had climbed on before. We watched as lemurs shot up the initial slabs with extreme ease. Nature makes us green with envy when we become aware of the simplicity with which it moves. As far as climbing is concerned, the easiest thing to do would be to transform ourselves into birds. But here we were, and we are only men, with merely the strength of our hands and legs to climb the splendid, terrible wall soaring over us. And now we were to begin the realization of our dream—and now to begin the dance!



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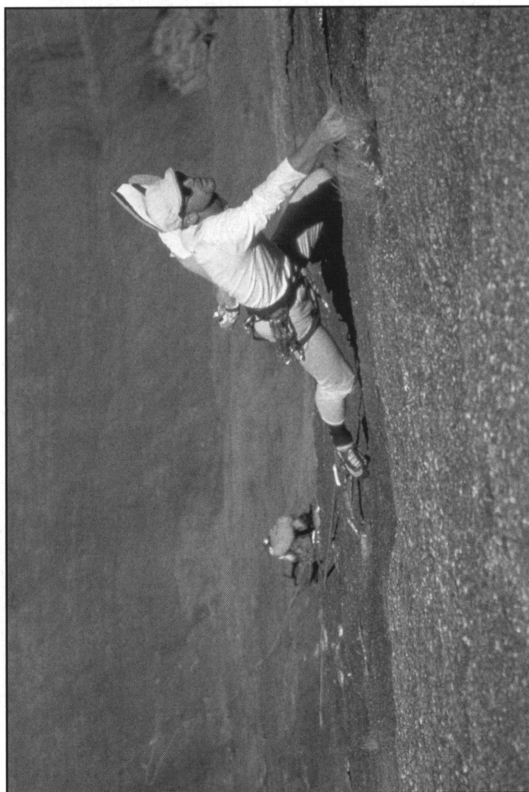
Our bodies wanted to move, our hands yearned to caress and then clasp the ideal holds formed by quartz crystals. We began to ascend on a granite eroded and worked like splendid slabs of limestone. It is a rock very different from the granite of Mont Blanc or Yosemite: no dihedrals or cracks, only slabs and bulges. What strange climbing! If you use force you don't rise a centimeter; only agility, together with ever-fluid movement—a search, almost, for an elegance of gesture—will ultimately carry the day.

It appeared that it would be nearly impossible to climb through the middle of the wall. A mixed color somewhere between black and yellow indicated an overhanging section when we scoped it with binos. No cracks and extremely compact rock meant we couldn't use pitons or natural gear for protection. Instead, with the help of a battery-powered drill, we would be forced to place bolts while hanging from hooks.

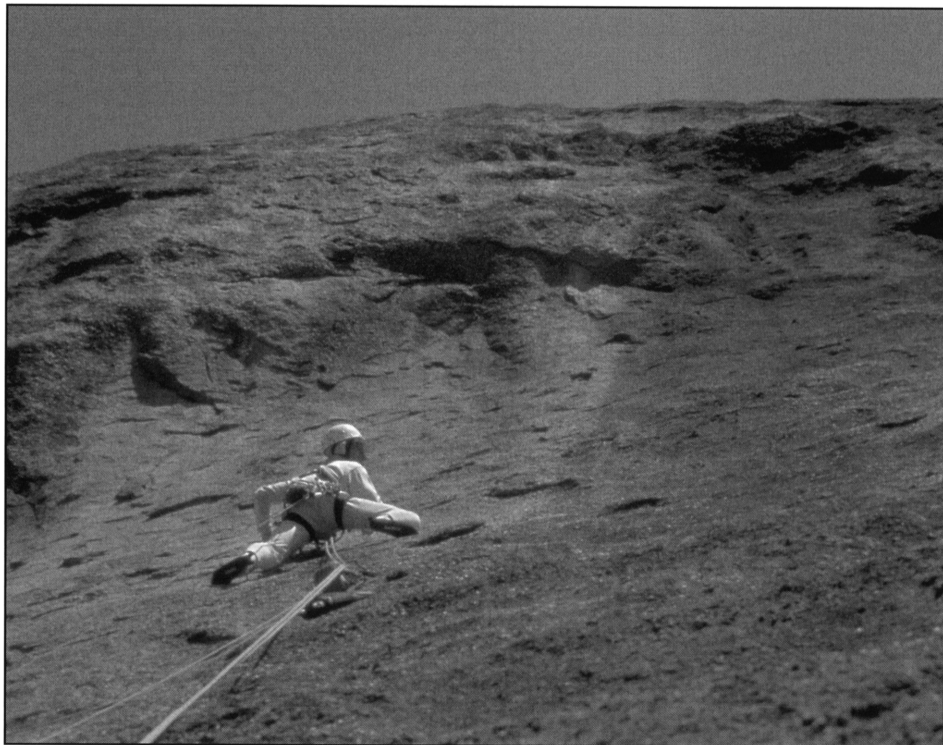
We had come to Tsaranoro seeking to limit the use of fixed gear as much as possible. We wanted to create a route that presented notable mandatory difficulties and that asked of future ascensionists a certain commitment to climb it. This is, in fact, the purpose of modern multi-pitch routes: to unite physical and psychological difficulties to create a difficult and committing climb even for those who repeat it. To aid from bolt to bolt is a game without a purpose, because then the limits don't exist. You can truly climb everywhere. For us, if we aren't in shape to climb something free, we try variations or give up and return when we are better trained. This is how we always establish new lines at home, and it is the same method we wanted to use in Madagascar.

The bolts were spaced at an average of around six meters apart. This was not a sport route, but one that required a certain psychological commitment. Falls might seem normal in today's climbing, but it's difficult to convey the anxiety that gripped us during the climb, the fear that we had to live with and continually overcome. Every fall could mean the end of the dream in that sea of granite. Even on the most difficult pitch, 15-meter falls are possible; elsewhere, one can fall up to 25 meters—or not at all, because it would be too dangerous to slam onto a ledge or angled slab below.

Our fingers were begging for rest, and we had to temper our desire to climb on the wall every day with a need to renew our energies. We alternated climbing days with rest days at



Erik Svab on the fifth pitch (7b) of Never the Same.
ERIK SVAB COLLECTION



Sterni on the first attempt of the crux (8a+) of Never the Same. ERIK SVAB

base camp, where water gathered in a hole in the paddy field. We fixed a jerry can from a mango tree for a shower; the trees also gave us shade, and a breeze made our rest days very pleasant. Meanwhile, the people from the village surrounded us, observing curiously. Our contact with them will remain with us always, making us remember Madagascar as a place in which we climbed, but above all one in which we came to know a people stupendous in their simplicity.

We continued to advance our route very slowly. Every day we gained precious meters, hoping that the next day we would understand the wall better, hoping that we would be able to climb all the pitches free. We didn't want to put up an aid climb! We are trained for free climbing, and we wanted to find a route straight up through the middle of the overhangs. But each day the pitches became more difficult and it became ever harder to have faith, both in ourselves and in the possibility that the wall would go free. Exhaustion arrived, and our thoughts brought us far away, out of the valley to the beaches and clear water of the sea.

We returned to camp on a Sunday to find a warm welcome. The children of the village sang and danced for more than an hour, and the curiosity and joy we felt in watching them made us forget all our exhaustion. Another day passed by, and we succeeded in climbing a few more difficult meters on what was becoming "our" wall. The next day we would need to rest well, because after that the day of truth awaited us—a day that might be our last. We went to sleep dreaming of the summit.

The much-desired day arrived. But after so many days of intense sun, we found ourselves stopped a few meters from the summit by a powerful tropical hail storm! We sat on the ropes to keep them from soaking, tired as could be from having climbed all day. It was almost as if nature were mocking us, once again demonstrating how small we were before its presence. But after an hour a rainbow announced that, on this day at least, nature was magnanimous. We had permission to rapidly climb the last bit to the top.

The tropical sun returned after the rain and hail, and the change in weather accentuated the contrast. We had a few moments to realize that no one had ever climbed up here before: the summit is flat, and surrounded on all sides by walls that one would have to climb to ascend. There were no signs of humans. We had time to scoop up a small piece of granite to bring to those who had faith in us, to those who stayed at home, and to keep alive the memory of a moment when our hearts gathered up a fragment of the story of alpinism.

We called our route *Never the Same*, because we're convinced that it will never again be possible to climb so beautiful and difficult a route on a wall that marvelous in such a tranquil and uncontaminated place. Two friends from Brescia, Ermanno Francinelli and Mario Cavagnini, were with us as well, and they too were able to achieve their objectives, repeating five established routes, including *Gondwanaland* on Tsaranoro Be. We had experienced a singular and unrepeatable adventure: for us, Tsaranoro Atsimo had the power of revelation, an adventure of being in which every minute fiber of our selves was thankful for its existence.

The peace and serenity of the valley below Tsaranoro will soon be disturbed by other climbers and tourists come from all over the world to see and use this beautiful place. We realize that some of the fault will lie with us. We had hoped to be successful to the maximum, and our definition of success helped limit our devastating impact on the ambiance and the people of the place. Still, we remind all those who have the fortune and opportunity to find themselves in this or similar places in the future that we are only visitors and must comport ourselves with the respect and discretion Nature commands.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

AREA: Andringitra National Park, Madagascar

NEW ROUTE: *Never the Same* (V 5.13c/d A0, 13 pitches, 670 meters) on the east face of Tsaranoro Atsimo (South) (2000m), September 11-16, Rolando Larcher, Marco Sterni, Erik Svab (Pitch 8, 5.13c/d, was climbed with one rest on the attempt to redpoint the route. The moves were made, confirming the grade, but the route awaits a redpoint).