

# RELEASING BELLAVISTA

*Seventy years ago the Tre Cime Group in the Dolomites was home to the world's boldest and most overhanging aid climbs. The overhangs are still there—and so is the boldness—only now they're beginning to go free.*

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The Tre Cime di Lavaredo, in the Parco delle Dolomiti di Sesto of the Provincia di Bolzano. The 500-meter Bellavista route is shown on the north face of the Cima Ovest. Konrad Kirch

Most of us like to be cozy and warm, and prefer the weather fair and dry. I said most of us, because there is a small group of human beings who—at least at times—like it different. The members of this obscure sub-species revel in the cold and rave about steep, loose, difficult rock. After weeks in centrally heated and fully insured civilization they get fed up and start dreaming of freezing, shattered dolomite and dubious pieces of protection. They are looking for the enchantment of an adventure strong enough to withstand the drudge of everyday life.

By now you understand that I am talking about alpine climbers, those people who have a hard time understanding why some folks call rock “bad” when they actually mean “loose.”

Those people who feel marvelous when perched among the tottering phone booths of the Tre Cime, and who find exactly what they are looking for in the preposterously dynamic north face of the Matterhorn.

However, when I set out in February 2000 to scare myself on the north face of the Cima Ovest, in the Dolomites, the quest for adventure was not the only reason. Six years earlier, with the Spanish climber Lisi Roig Alegre, I had done the Swiss-Italian Route, a classic that goes free at 5.12. A real gift. It also gave me the opportunity to spend hours looking at the huge roof to the right of the Swiss-Italian Route, an upside-down world that cast its spell and refused to release me. I had an inkling that the great roof of Cima Ovest might be the home to one of the world's craziest freeclimbing lines. But it took a few years for me to return to the Tre Cime. Too many dreams, goals, and plans were buzzing around my head, crying for realization, and elbowing out the idea of the great roof each time it rose to the level of consciousness.

Its turn came during a long stretch of cold turkey after an injury in the fall of 1999. I had squashed my right index finger and was afraid to lose an important part of my life—climbing! Although Doc Hochholzer, the famous Teutonic finger guru, assured me that my days on the rocks were not yet numbered, gnawing doubts persisted. For five months I was completely out of commission, reduced to immobility. After this I couldn't think of a better jump-start for my life than a real adventure.

It turned out to be pure fun. Instead of putting up another direttissima, I wanted to do a winter solo following a natural line with only nuts and pitons. Bolts would be allowed only at the belays. I was very scared and had to mobilize all my skills not to make unhealthy contact with the snow-covered talus under the wall.

The route was loose to my heart's content, challenging, and wild. After the five days on what I named Bellavista, my thirst for adventure had been quenched—and I also knew that every meter of the route could be climbed free. Maybe hard—very hard!—but possible. A free ascent of this huge roof became my obsession: a 5.14 route up the loose dolomite of Cima Ovest's gloomy north face!

I was not ready yet. After the long break enforced by injury, my arms were in such a sorry state that three months of training would in no way build the strength I needed for this roof. I had to postpone the project. The summer of 2000 at least made it clear that climbing wasn't a thing of the past; a visit to Yosemite gave me the confidence that really hard climbing would soon be possible again. I had a goal and knew what to do. So, back home again, without hesitating, I entered the circuit of torture chambers, training rooms, and plastic walls. If you want to climb really hard—in the mountains, too—you have to build a solid sport-climbing basis. In spring I started to slowly but steadily increase my performance level on the crags. I began to re-enter the realm of 5.14, where the holds get really small, the overhangs truly steep, and the moves extremely athletic.



At the beginning of June I feel ready. It is a cold day when Matthias Leitner, from Graz, and I cross the frozen snowfield under the wall to place the necessary protection for a free attempt. The feeling of fear is much more intense than during my solo, and I seem to have picked a very bad day. Then comes the first pitch I did on aid in winter. I am drained from the free climbing below, but Matthias' enthusiasm is unperturbed. Totally cool, he drapes himself

with the necessary paraphernalia—hammer, knifeblades, Lost Arrows, angles, nuts, skyhooks, étriers—and takes off into an upside-down world. Aiding has almost nothing in common with “proper” climbing—you move like a caterpillar at the pace of a snail—but it is in no way boring, even if it lasts for a long time. After two days Matthias and I manage to struggle out of horizontal purgatory. We have climbed Bellavista, leaving all protection and the ropes on the route. From the tiny lake under the face we stare up spellbound to the overhanging amphitheater glowing in the sunset. The stage is set for the rehearsal.

Two big questions are waiting for an answer. Am I physically capable of pulling it off? And how do I protect the 55 meters of roof? To preserve the original state of Bellavista and the challenge of the route, I have decided that placing bolts is not an option. In an era governed by numbers, I have to make a statement—to prove that there is a way out of the blind alley climbing is stuck in today. Borderline moves: okay! Fun in our sport: okay! Still, for many of us climbing is more than a sport. Why not consciously renounce the safety of bolts and instead rely on our mental strength, our skills, and our willingness to take risks? These are qualities that every climber needs on the big alpine routes.

A week later I am back on the face. Goal number one is to improve the protection by placing reasonably good pitons, especially in the difficult pitches of the giant roof. But even systematic scanning of the compact yellowish-gray rock proves fruitless: long stretches of the most difficult ground yield only to stoic hooking, stretches that will have to be free-climbed without protection. On the thin line between sticking to the rock and yielding to gravity, the fear of impressive falls is ever-present. Some of them are really long—to the displeasure of the knifeblades ripped from their shallow cracks, sending the unhappy climber on another long, plummeting trip into space. The dreaded zippers rob me of more and more points of protection.

Three weeks later, Guido Unterwurzacher is nice enough to suffer through my first attempts to free the roof. For 10 meters, pitch number six follows a break under a six-meter ceiling, from where the line of least resistance leads through the roofs. At first sight it is hard to believe it could go free. But again and again, the fingertips slip into the junctures between the huge blocks forming this inverted world. At the end of the traverse there is even a resting spot, just enough to shake out the burning forearms, to clip the rurp for some imaginary protection, and to sort myself into the microledge before cranking through to a two-finger pocket, just making it to the second one—and catching sight of the large holds at the belay. But the forearms are running hot again, incapable of letting go and reaching out. I cling to the pockets for a few more seconds. “Aaahhh,” I scream as my body sails through the air, tearing the rurp and two knifeblades from their precarious placements and catapulting them against my forehead despite the helmet. Another jerk, then I find myself swinging in space. My eyebrows are drenched with blood, but Guido answers my worried look with a casual, “Just a small cut. You still look good enough.”

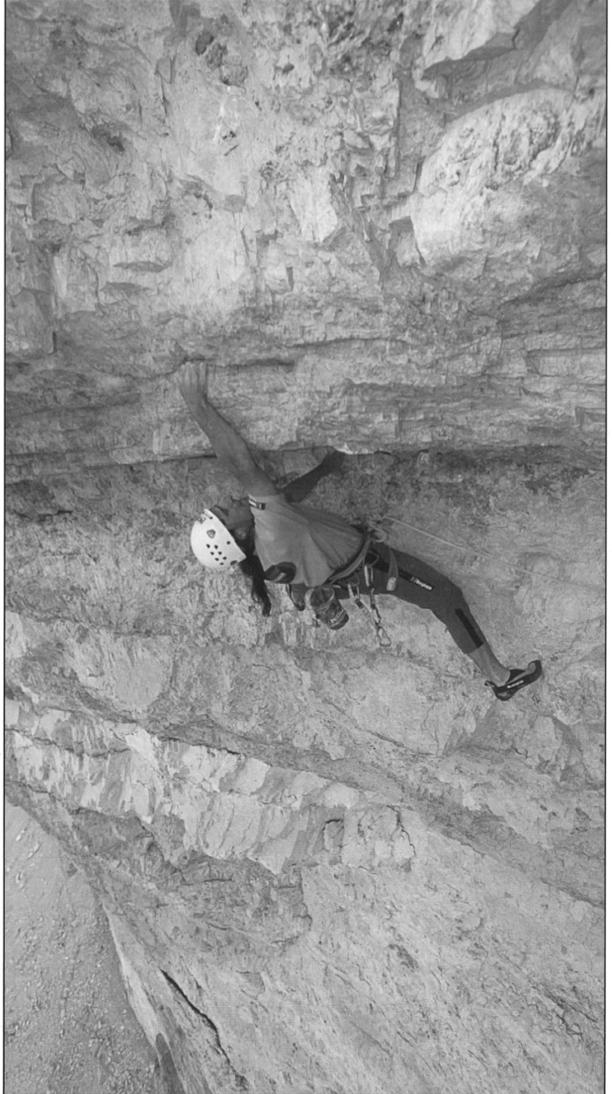
I jumar back to the belay. Twenty minutes of relaxing, then the next attempt. Having skillfully done away with the need to clip the last three pegs, I can spare my strength this time. Just cool it! Right hand on microledge, pocket with the left. Don’t think, just do it. I feel the big holds at the belay in my hands: the first pitch of the roof is cracked. Guido follows on jumars, experiencing the joys of abruptly increased exposure. Now every action is doubly planned and triple-checked. I, too, am feeling the stomach butterflies, for on the second roof pitch the protection is significantly thinner. When the first attempt ends abruptly six meters out from the belay, the only knifeblade between me and Guido also loses contact with the rock. After this

scary screamer, my muscles seem to have entered the same state of disruption as my shattered nerves. No wonder the left foot slips from a hold just four meters from the belay on the last half-hearted attempt of the day. “Aaahhh,” etc. etc. Amen.

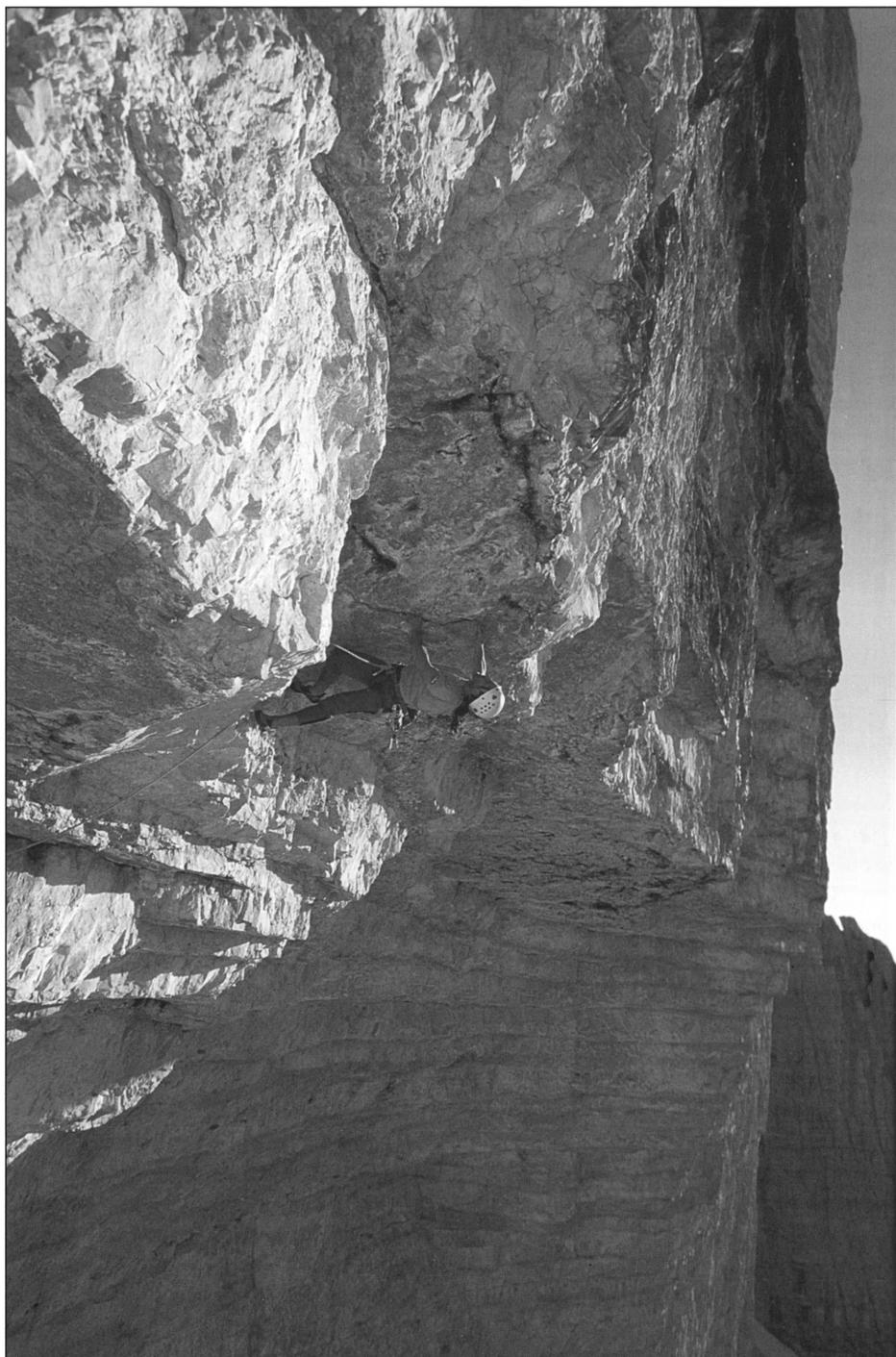
A week later. More and more pegs have resigned their service as pieces of protection, but the second pitch has also succumbed. The next item on the agenda is the redpoint ascent of all the pitches in a day, starting from terra firma. So as not to make things too easy, I’ve decided to get rid of the hanging belay between the first and the second roof pitch. To call it a proper free ascent, we would have to climb all of the 55 overhanging meters in a single uninterrupted push—quite a challenge for my poor forearms.

Attempt number one. Matthias has volunteered to come along. This is good, because he knows the route and is aware of the fine points of belaying it. The initial pitches yield without draining us physically and mentally. I feel strong and the conditions are just right—dry and relatively warm. I start up the roof. Although there is nothing to lose, my body is vibrating like an electric eel. Just short of the old belay, the mental maelstrom starts churning: “You’ll never make it today!” Another one of those screams discharges my anger while I swing 200 meters above the talus.

We still have a chance. As so often, the nervousness has vanished after the first fall and the arms seem strong enough for a second try. Half an hour. After the traverse to the left I calmly manage to pull over the roof and reach the resting spot with the large holds at the belay. One-third of the stretch is covered. I manage to shake out the forearms, to steady my breath, and to reduce the heart rate. I set out, following the path of my thoughts. Above and below



Alexander Huber on the sixth pitch (5.14b) of Bellavista. *Heinz Zak*



Alexander Huber on the eighth pitch (5.11c) of Bellavista, on Cime Ouest. *Heinz Zak*

have ceased to exist, the exposure has vanished, the quality of protection has become irrelevant. Everything is under control. One hard sequence after another gives in to my unwavering determination. I reach the pin eight meters out from the belay, clip it, and immediately climb to the resting spot a meter to the left. Again I take my time to lower the heart rate and loosen the arms. The crux. A traverse to the left, eight meters long with no pro to go for. You must pull it off in an athletic, dynamic fashion, not giving gravity a chance, spooling off the sequences like a gymnast doing his well-rehearsed Olympic program. “The foothold doesn’t work!” Thoughts reappear. There is a mistake in the sequence. I must try to correct it! But how? At least do something!

“Aaahhh!” The colossal arena amplifies my scream. Strain and fear burst from my body while it plummets toward the ground. The rope goes taut, transforming my fall into a huge pendulum. Matthias, too, has taken a beating. He was hanging three meters below the roof when the force of the fall hit and catapulted him against the horizontal ceiling. We’re through for the day. Let’s get out of here as fast as possible!

Back in the valley I decide to prepare the next attempt more thoroughly. Every mistake could mean the loss of more points of protection. Two more days of training in the route, bouldering out the moves, and internalizing the program. Then back to serious business, this time with Gernot Flemisch.

The cold turns out to be an advantage. The body doesn’t overheat even when working hard, and the fingertips stay dry. Again the crux. The hands are shaking and, despite the low temperatures, sweat beads my brow and the tongue sticks to the palate. Sport climbing at 5.14, with gadgets from the bag of aid-climbing tricks as protection. Reaching far to the left, I touch the first good hold, go into an undercling, and manage to sink my hand into a big hole—the resting spot. Stomach cramps, burning forearms, my spirit on the verge of surrender—and still 10 meters to the belay, 10 long meters that won’t forgive any mistake. Inch by inch I force myself upward—from resting point to resting point, filled with fear of failing so close to the goal. Then the last move. The left foothold is dubious, but I can’t afford to hesitate, as the arms are approaching the final stage of exhaustion. Staking everything on this last chance, I make myself go on. At last, the handhold! My horizon and release.

The way to the top is open, today, on July 18, 2001. My adventure has reached its conclusion. At last the giant roof of Bellavista has been climbed free.

#### SUMMARY OF STATISTICS:

AREA: Tre Cime di Lavaredo, Dolomites, Italy

ASCENT: Cima Ovest, north face, Bellavista (500 meters, VI 5.12a/A4 or 5.14b). First ascent March 15-20, 2000, Alexander Huber (solo). First redpoint ascent July, 18, 2001, Alexander Huber. The pitch list: 5.12a, 5.11a, 5.10a, 5.11c, 5.11d, 5.14b, 5.13b, 5.11c, 5.11a, 5.10c.

Translated by Nicholas Mailänder