

LOGICAL PROGRESSION

*Sometimes the best rock and traditional bolting ethics follow different lines.
What's an enterprising climber to do? Going down on El Gigante.*

LUKE LAESER



Pete Baumeister scopes the giant from the other side. Luke Laeser

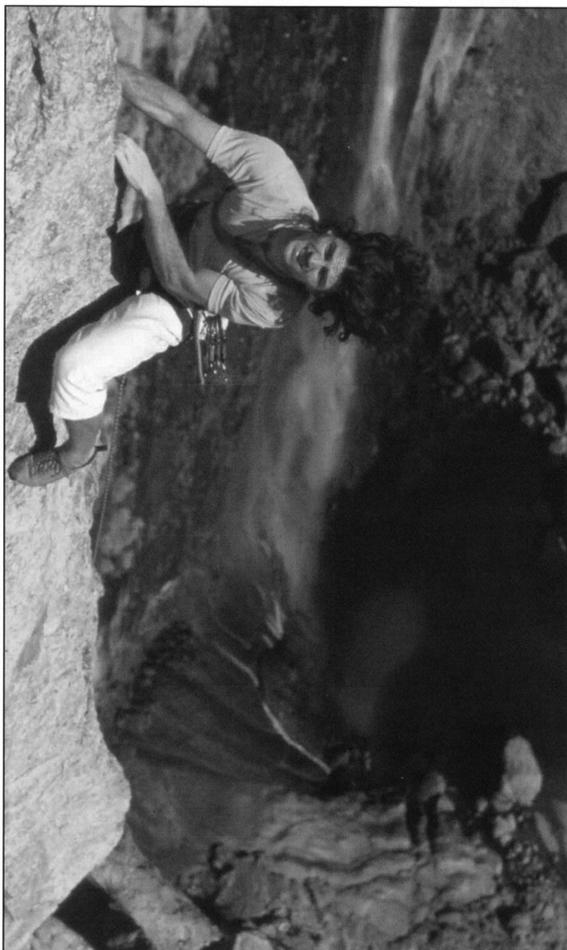
The original intention of Peter Baumeister, Dierk Sittner, and myself on our 2001 trip was to establish a new free climb on El Gigante. But due to the difficulty of getting to the wall we chose a much closer objective, and established Subiendo el Arcoiris, a 10-pitch, rappel-bolted sport climb up a prominent buttress on Cascada Wall; it was the first multi-pitch free climb in the canyon. Rap-bolting was simply the easiest way to put up a free route here, and it yielded clean, safe, and excellent climbing.

In February 2002, Pete, Bert van Lint, and I traveled to Basaseachic with one goal: to establish a bolt-protected free climb on the northwest face of El Gigante. The idea of a downward-bound mission made us a bit uncomfortable, but it seemed the most efficient way to establish a quality route. There are many advantages to the top-to-bottom approach, such as: no hauling, no belayers (which meant we could all work at the same time), no bat-hook holes, and the ability to preview all the moves before placing a single bolt. Since this was probably the biggest route ever attempted in this style, we knew we might be vilified. But when the road ends at the top of the wall, as it does on El Gigante, you simply come in from the top.

Van Lint, from Belgium, met us at Hueco Tanks, and we all traveled to Basaseachic together. Bert had been touring Mexico for several months, sharpening his Spanish and multi-pitch sport-climbing skills. Once in Mexico, we proceeded to get our visas for an extended stay, but both Pete and Bert had passport complications. “Border Horror” is what we nicknamed the expense of having to pay off the customs official to “adjust” the paperwork. Wallets thinner, we continued south from Juárez to Ciudad Chihuahua, where we stopped for tacos and gas. The people of this city are great and always curious about what you’re up to. The year before, with Dierk, we were lost and needed to find a big grocery. A policeman, impressed that we had traveled to climb and vacation in the state, gave us a flashing-light escort, with the traffic parting around us, straight to the market.

From the capital of Mexico’s biggest state we headed west through Cuauhtemoc and into the mountains, where the welded-tuff formations begin to appear. We were equipped for a two-month stay in Basaseachic, having learned the previous year what to expect. My truck, packed to the max with food and supplies, sagged from the weight.

Basaseachic, a village of about 1,000, has a few small markets, a pricey phone service, and limited electricity due to the difficulty of running lines to such rural areas. This made it hard to charge our battery packs. Pete, however, had engineered a portable solar-



Holger Heuber climbs the stunning last pitch of Subiendo el Arcoiris.
Klaus Fengler



Bert van Lint drilling high on the wall.
Luke Laeser

power station for charging the batteries for our hammer drills, lights, and CD player. The system was perfect in that it was fairly lightweight and portable. However, every system has its weaknesses. El Gigante is a northwest-facing wall, and the sun doesn't provide enough light in the depths of Candameña Canyon. As a solution, Bert had borrowed a Ryobi gas drill from the Flemish Mountaineering Federation to use on the dark territory of the lower face.

On our first few days in the park we established Contessa Inessa (two pitches, 5.10), the first route on the super-pocketed, west-facing formation above the cul-de-sac at the north entrance of the park. The volcanic rock in Basaseachic is like that in all the areas around my home in New Mexico: Cochiti Mesa's clean faces dotted with pockets, Enchanted Tower's fairytale formations, White Rock's dark basaltic textures, and the Dungeon's blocky roofs can all be found there.

After warming up a bit we decided it was time to go to work. Fernando Dominguez—the boss of the area—owns Rancho San Lorenzo, which borders the east side of the park. He has helped the sponsored

“expeditions” get their equipment to the wall and deal with the logistics of getting around this rugged, desperate country. Since we were on a tight budget, we couldn't afford such support, so we decided to move our gear around ourselves. Fernando introduced us to a great guide, Don Rafael, who knows the canyons of Basaseachic better than anyone. For a small fee Don Rafael showed us how to find the rugged 4x4 logging roads that end near the summit of El Gigante. This was the method the first descentionists had used to approach the formation and, in similar style to the original rappelling team, we began our adventure from the top.

We shuttled the first loads out a narrow, twisting trail through pine and scrub oak across the “Devil's Backbone,” a narrow ridge that drops steeply on both sides. The summit, which ironically served as our “base camp,” is an island in the sky, with a 360-degree view of the canyon country. Its bushy oaks and junipers provide relief from the sun and wind, making it quite comfortable. After almost a week of preparations, we were eager to finally get on the wall, with all our systems and equipment ready.

The goal was to create the most continuous and sustained free route on El Gigante. Grade VI, going down. Anti-alpine. It's not fast, it's not light—and by most climbers' standards it's the most unethical thing one could do: the creation of a fully bolt-protected, site-specific “art installation.” So, with that in mind, we began rappelling the wall and soon found ourselves on a steep, super-pocketed welded-tuff buttress.

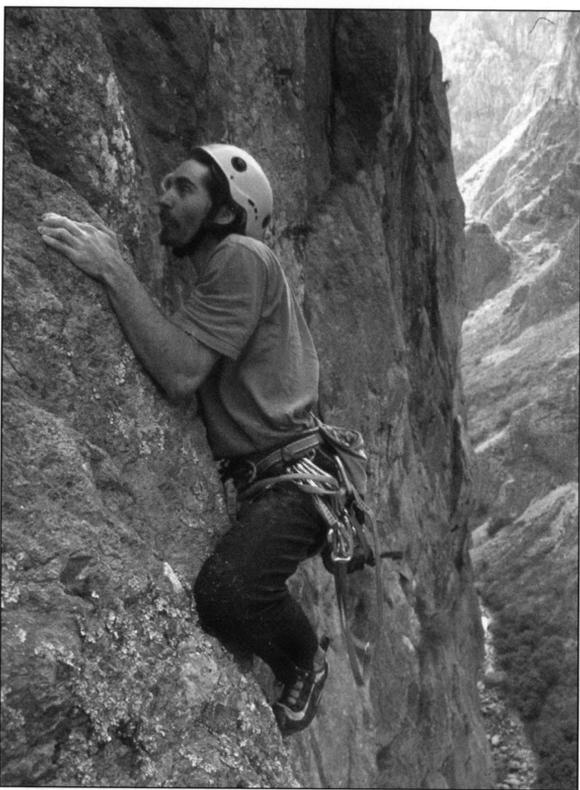
In the beginning we were cautious and placed very few bolts because we were uncertain where the route would go. We used removable bolts, which require only a small hole and thus conserves battery power. We referenced photos of the wall Pete had collected from other teams, guiding ourselves onto the steepest, longest, cleanest faces away from the other routes.

We fixed about four ropes down the wall before we actually began bolting any pitches.

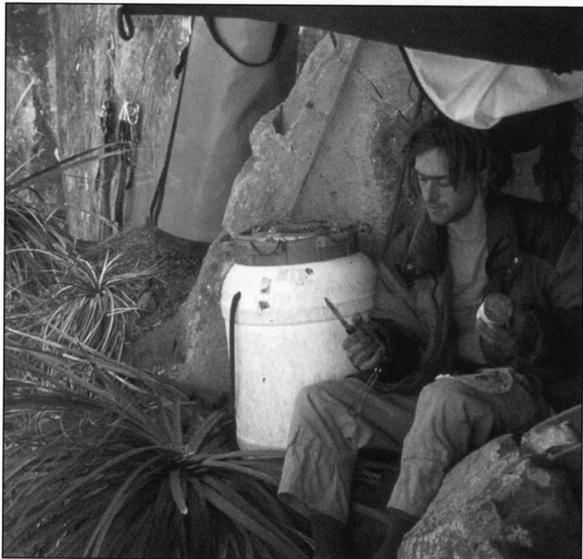
Our system was to have all three of us working on something at all times. To do this, the lowest climber would always be searching for where to climb and set belays. The next climber would be a couple of pitches higher, or wherever he could safely maneuver without dropping anything on the worker below, trying moves on jumars, marking bolt placements, cleaning rock, and eventually bolting the pitch. The last climber would either go back across the “Devil’s Backbone,” shuttling loads of water and supplies back to camp, or finalizing pitches by brushing and cleaning. Before finally bolting each pitch, all three of us had inspected it several times.

Over the next few weeks we began to piece together the upper section of the route at less than one pitch per day. It went so slowly because the person pushing the low point was confronted with so many options. Some days we made no progress; on other days we inspected a dozen different paths. But poor rock quality, no good stance, and other factors forced us to abandon most paths. The fractured rhyolite and andesite could be hollow and rotten, which made it difficult to locate solid continuous sections. It’s amazing that we managed not to hurt each other or cut a fixed rope in almost two months on the loose face.

Since we began from the top, we used “pitch one” for what would be the last number from



Luke Laeser looking gripped on pitch 11. Peter Baumeister



Pete Baumeister contemplates the salami at the critter bivv. Bert van Lint

the bottom. Pitch six, also known as “the Diarrhea Pitch” because of all the brown streaks (there was loose shit almost everywhere), took more time than any other section. The vertical face was covered with razorblade flakes and almost no features. For three days Pete, Bert, and I swung to the left and right before deciding to go directly through the middle, where we originally thought it would go. Diarrhea turned out to be a terrific pitch, one of the hardest on the route; we had taken great care to figure out a way through the sustained crimper sequences.

After about a month we had equipped what seemed like half the route (the top half), reaching a long, sloping ledge that would serve as the midpoint bivy. We called it the “Critter Bivy” because there was a raccoon (or ringtail?) skeleton on the ledge, along with a family of mice. Before leaving on this trip Pete and I had constructed a one-person wooden portaledge to use as a scaffold, or big bosun’s chair. Our theory was that since we would never haul the portaledges, it wouldn’t matter how heavy they were; however, I thought I was going to pass out when Bert and I carried that thing to the top of the wall. Fortunately, it lowered just fine.

On a rest day we took a trip to the other side of the canyon to photograph and scope El Gigante. When we observed the portaledge camp only two-fifths of the way down the wall, we were dumbfounded. At this rate we were going to run out of time. With as much rope as we had fixed (about 1,200 feet), we could go no lower. Our next step was to move onto the wall, capsule style, and sever our connection with the top.

With enough supplies for five days, the three of us rappelled with the haul bags, pulling the ropes as we went. We made good progress on this downward push, but we had only one charge on our drill batteries. We began to empty the gas drill, which worked like a charm. We cleaned, bolted, moved ropes lower, and inspected farther down and found good climbing on what seemed to be another crux pitch. A steep, flaky, pocketed, chocolaty, frosted-with-yellow-lichen bulge guarded the gray slabs below. Bert spent almost a whole day before finally finding the “passage” through this beautiful section. On the fifth day we spotted anchors on the German route, Conspiracy of Fools, and swung onto their gear. We were exhausted and tired of bad rock, so we rappelled their route for seven pitches to reach an oasis on the canyon floor.

We had almost no food left and also no ideas about how to get back to the top, where our truck was parked. Hungry and tired, we bushwhacked up gullies and steep talus for several hours straight back to the truck, discovering a great new connection. Now we had a way to get to the bottom easily.

Conspiracy was fully but poorly bolted, a bit run-out, and loose; however, it was climbable. If we chose to use it to access our route, we would be done. After several rest days we returned to the canyon floor to finish the job. But for fear of wrecking what we had worked so hard for, we established seven clean and safe pitches about 50 feet to the left. The route shares only the first two pitches of Conspiracy, which are pretty good. Finally, the project was established after six-and-a-half weeks of work. We estimated that we had placed 380 bolts and jumared the wall five times each.

Pete’s girlfriend from Germany, Ines, arrived with her friend Michaela to support us for our last week. They helped carry the last round of supplies, clean out the base camps, and keep our psyche up. After several rest days we returned to the bottom of the canyon to begin climbing out. Sieging the lower section, we rappelled to the ground every night on our fixed ropes. Pete, Bert, and I climbed the first eight 5.10+ and 5.11 lower pitches on clean slabs, (a terrific warm-up for what was to come). At pitch 9 (5.12c) and the 10th (“Bert’s Passage,” guarding the upper wall, 5.12d), the angle steepened. I managed a redpoint of the 9th pitch,

but the 10th kept spitting us off.

With only days remaining till we had to leave, we packed the haul bags and ascended the fixed ropes for the last time to our high point. Bert tried the 10th pitch one last time. He almost sent it, but a hold broke after he had passed the crux. We continued up the wall but, with only three days left, could try the harder pitches only once or twice. Despite being exhausted, we all managed to do some terrific flashes. The climbing was awesome! Diarrhea a 12d, another short and brown 12c, and two 12a's long and thin, we fell on, and didn't redpoint because we had to keep going. However, we were still really proud of the route we'd made. We had done all the moves free and placed all the draws on the route, proving to ourselves that we could climb it. We knew someone strong could on-sight the entire route.

We decided to call it Logical Progression because our method seemed like the best way to establish a high-quality free climb on a loose and vegetated cliff. The bolts are of stainless steel, which should last forever. This 28-pitch route, the longest sport climb in the world, provides a unique free-climbing experience. For Pete, Bert, and me it was a difficult project, but the rappel-bolting technique produced a wonderful route. Beautiful setting, dependable climate, challenging pitches, gut-wrenching exposure, and solid protection—the criteria for a one-of-a-kind world classic.

SUMMARY OF STATISTICS

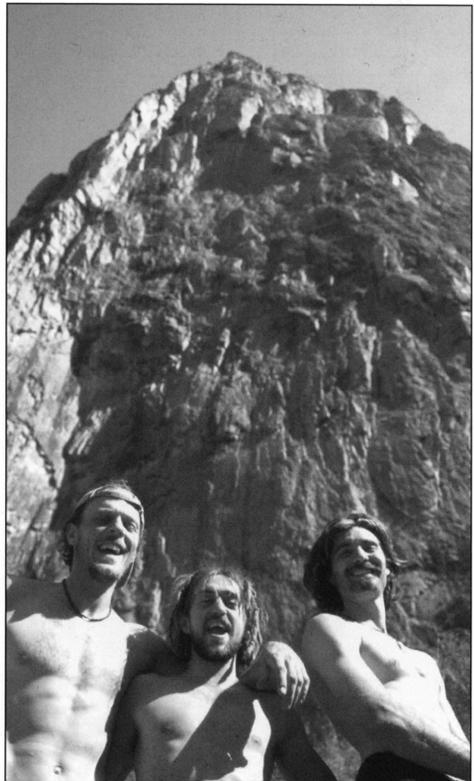
AREA: Parque Nacional Cascada de Basaseachic, Chihuahua, Mexico

ASCENTS: Cascada Wall, Subiendo el Arcoiris (10 pitches, IV 5.12d A0), Peter Baumeister, Luke Laeser, Dierk Sittner, 2001. (See AAJ 2001, ppg 268-269)

El Gigante, Logical Progression (28 pitches, VI 5.12d), Peter Baumeister, Luke Laeser, Bert van Lint, 2002.

A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Luke Laeser, 29, works as a graphic designer at *Climbing* magazine in Carbondale, Colorado. A lifelong artist and native New Mexican, Laeser has been climbing for 15 years. When not out at the rocks, or dominating in the rollerball arena, Laeser chills with his wife, Melissa, their dog, Priscilla, and cat, Portia.



The Logical Progression Team on the final days before climbing out: Bert van Lint, Pete Baumeister, Luke Laeser.