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Misión Improbable: Climbing in Tenerife

(Plate 29)

It was just like the picture in the travel book. A little boat moored beneath gigantic ochre-coloured cliffs, which seemed to smoulder in the evening sun. Knowing nothing about the rock, we sat on the harbour wall at Los Gigantes and sketched an imaginary line up the steepest and cleanest part of the cliff. We would only do one climb, so it must take the best line, forging directly up the open faces, grooves and cracks. In our dreams! The cliff would quickly cut us down to size.

Rising to 600m and extending for 10km along the south-west coast of Tenerife, El Risco de Los Gigantes is the biggest vertical sea cliff in southern Europe and North Africa. According to the tourist guidebooks there are even bigger 'sea cliffs' in the Canaries but to the climber the others aren't true cliffs, more like the steep vegetated slopes of Slieve League in Ireland.

On the first day we planned to make a reconnaissance by traversing along the base of the cliff from the port of Los Gigantes. Before long we discovered that there was an aqueduct running exactly where we wanted to go, about 50ft up, and we made rapid progress following this for about a mile. It ended at a streambed, which emerged from a hanging valley. We tried to traverse beyond it but were but were stopped by the sea, so we followed the stream way and found that the aqueduct continued across the cliff at a higher level, about 200m up. Here it took the form of an old steel pipe fractured in places and no longer carried water. Going along it was akin to a very scary *via ferrata* with no protection, with just the pipe to grab if you slipped or the ledge you were on crumbled, which it often did. There was a section of climbing around a gated section, and then the pipe swung round to the main bit of the cliff, a huge amphitheatre with a couloir at the back. We looked at several lines and decided that the couloir was the only feasible route as far as the pipeline, above which there looked to be more options. It was too late to begin climbing so we decided to carry on along the pipe. This ended in a 300m crawl through a tunnel in pitch darkness, arms and shoulders aching with the weight of rucksacks full of ropes and climbing gear, till we finally we emerged in a hanging valley *behind* the main cliff and climbed up to the jagged ridge forming the clifftop. The way off from here involved hours of ridge climbing – 'half the bloody Cuillin Ridge' – to a point over 1000m above the sea before we could head back towards the port of Los Gigantes. A knackered day but we had at least grasped the scale of the place.

Next day we hitched a ride with a diving team in a big inflatable, straight to the base of the line. The couloir led to the pipe in five pitches, two of which were 'XS'. So far the XS grade seems to be a peculiarly British phenomenon. Normal traditional climbing grades apply to rock that most people would consider to be okay for climbing. You can get anomalies like routes graded E3 5b, like Wendigo on Gogarth, where the rock might be a little worrying. But the standard system caters for this. In some parts of the country however, most notably the coasts of North Cornwall and the Lleyn Peninsula in North Wales, there is another category of climb on rocks which have always been considered unsuitable for climbing, that are too loose, too soft, too brittle. This is the home of the 'XS'. These climbs may not be that hard technically but they are demanding in every other way – strenuous, serious, committing, hard to protect, needing good judgement and experience. For their size they usually represent a 'big adventure' and this is their attraction. Los Gigantes is 'XS' territory on a grand scale.

Back on the climb, above the pipeline the rock improved and a pleasant rib followed by an exciting E4 pitch led to the base of a deep recess. That was it for the day so we abbed back to the pipeline and followed it down to the port.

We made a pre-dawn start next day as we thought we might make the top. Having regained our highpoint by 10am, an easy pitch to the back of the recess took us to the start of the massively overhanging chimney which led to its lip, some 100ft away and about 60ft out in space. The rock was the worst yet, everything you touched or stood on broke away, and the only protection was a couple of slings draped around loose material precariously wedged. After 10m I decided it was madness, the chimney from hell, and reversed amid a shower of debris. We abbed back to the pipeline. Some 100m to the right was another possible line. I led a deceptively steep pitch up to a cave with a poor belay. Steve led through but was stopped by a crumbling overhang.

'What do you make of the rock Steve?'

'On a scale of one to ten I'd give it one'.

I gave the pitch a try but bad gear and the rotten belay forced me back. We abbed carefully from all our belay points, packed up the kit and left. We'd failed but were happy to have survived some very serious climbing.

We clipped bolts for a couple of days like normal people and explored the north coast, but Los Gigantes was still nagging. I couldn't help thinking of some shallow grooves I'd spotted on the buttress right of the hellish chimney. There was a slim chance they might lead somewhere. After all our struggles I was almost embarrassed to ask Steve if he'd make another attempt, but he was up for it since the prospect of sport-climbing away the rest of the trip was none too riveting. So next morning we made our fourth journey along the pipe.

After two pitches on familiar ground we headed off into the first of the grooves. The rock was flaky but at least it was culm. It was like on-sight

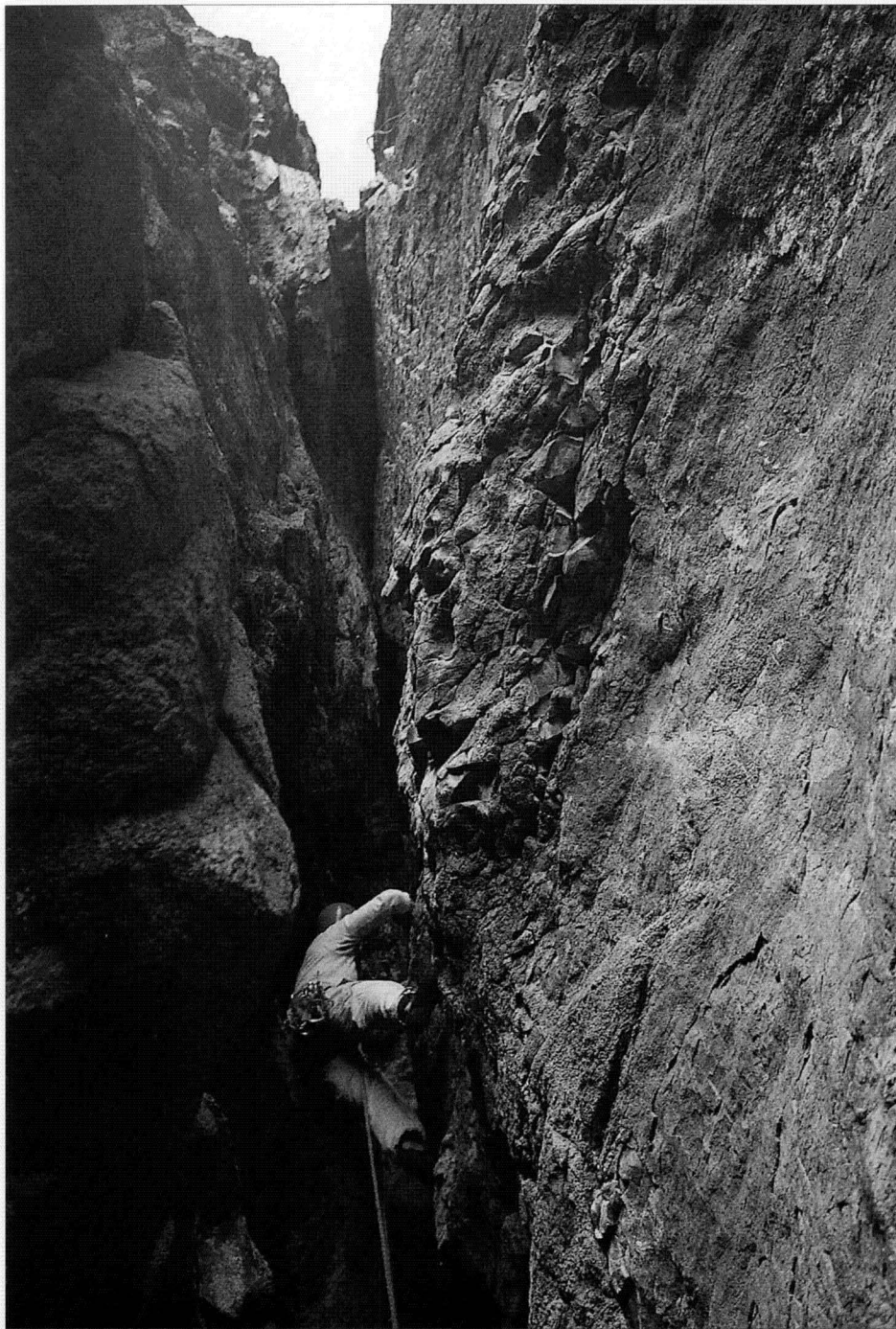
pioneering at Blackchurch, in North Devon. There was the odd bit of gear which inspired confidence. Hundreds of feet below us pleasure boats laden with tourists cruised beneath the cliff, playing classical music appropriate to the majesty of the surroundings and hooting when they spotted us. By now we felt like a fixture on this part of the cliff, having spent two days trying to get up the same section. On the next pitch the rock became more and more compact till I came to a dead halt at a blind corner. A small wire went halfway in but the game was up. This line wasn't going to go and it was the last option. It was early afternoon. We had two choices: forget the whole thing or return to the chimney of horror.

So, inevitably, I'm back at my highpoint in the chimney, in the half-light deep inside the huge recess, everything as horrible as I remember it. Anything like a positive hold just breaks, the only way to make progress is to use opposing pressure holds to force a way upwards. It is closer to extreme caving than it is to the sunny sport climbing on the rest of Tenerife. An hour later my T-shirt is in shreds, I'm filthy, bleeding, and every muscle aches, but at least I'm at the top of the chimney. I fix one of my ropes so I'll never have to do it again as long as I live, and knock off for the day. By dark we're back in the port of Los Gigantes sinking the beers, more confident now but aware that we're still only halfway up the cliff.

Back again. Steve got a fun pitch on near-perfect rock above the chimney and we cruised onwards but were heading for another massive recess. As we got closer we could see it was capped by a roof at least 30m across so we broke right and tried a steep wall, which should lead to the continuation of the couloir line. Like everything else it was four grades harder than it looked and started to gobble up time. Our priority was to get up the cliff rather than climb the most direct route, so we retreated again and traversed 80m right on a ledge system to a rib of granite-like rock. Steve led it, a nice 'normal' 5c pitch, which inspired false optimism that the rock might be improving. It led to a complex but lower-angled area of cliff. This must surely go somewhere but we were out of time so again it was lots of abseils back to the pipe and eventually the bar. Purists would have bivouacked, I know.

Summit day and our sixth spent on Los Gigantes. We made another pre-dawn start and toiled back to our highpoint. Now the climbing was serious rather than hard with infrequent anchors, various rock types but always weak and brittle. Get there slow and careful or not at all. We half expected a nasty sting in the tail as anything could happen on Los Gigantes, but the ground became more and more amenable and we topped out at 1pm. We still had to get down of course, but for a happy half-hour we drank all our water, ate fig rolls and basked in the Spanish sun. Misión accomplished.

Summary: *Misión Improbable*, 18/19 pitches, XS, 5c/6a. FA: Pat Littlejohn and Steve Sustad (varied leads) over five climbing days + one reconnaissance day, 14 to 22 Jan, 2003. Gear taken: set of nuts to Rock 10 + spares, cams to Camalot 3. Long slings.



29. Steve Sustad starting up the central chimneys on day one of the first ascent of *Misión Improbable* on Los Gigantes, the vast sea cliff off the Canaries. (Pat Littlejohn) (p49)