
JOHN ARRAN

Rainbow Jambaia

A first free ascent of Angel Falls face

Climbing is not about dreams, not usually. It's about tangible things: challenge, strength, guile, camaraderie, judgement, fun. The stuff of everyday life without the dull bits. But as I walked from the edge of one of the highest overhanging cliffs in the world, finally leaving behind a thousand metres and 19 days of free-climbing adventure, I knew this dream had been as real as any of our marginal placements. As real as the burning pump that had seared though our forearms like the hot-aches. As real as the very rock we had sought to climb, had been thwarted by, and had finally overcome by all manner of devious and sometimes desperate measures these last three weeks.

And suddenly it was over. Silently exploded into a thousand cherished memories; each a smile or a warm glow, but together as rich a resource of satisfaction as I could ever have imagined possible from such a simple act as starting at the bottom of a rock wall and finishing at the top.

The view from the top of a mountain, so they say, is much finer after a long and difficult ascent. And our irrepressible glow of satisfaction that afternoon on the summit plateau was all the more radiant for the years of trial, heartbreak and finally success that eventually brought us there.

Little could we have imagined, as we sat watching television on a cold and dark evening in the year 2000, that the course of much of our energy and emotion for the following five years was quite literally passing before our eyes. The programme was a documentary about BASE jumping and the hero of the piece – the venerable Eric Jones no less – was becoming the oldest person ever to launch himself from the top of the highest waterfall in the world, Venezuela's remote and magnificent Angel Falls. As the plunging photographer locked his helmet camera on the free-falling alpinist, the immaculate orange cliff behind him was disappearing out of frame at an alarming rate. Anne and I sat mesmerised, wondering how such a huge, staggeringly beautiful and quite possibly climbable face could have escaped the attention of the world's climbers, and the very next day I determined to find out more.

Five years later our team of seven internationally accomplished climbers had finally discovered what it would take to free climb this incomprehensibly high and relentlessly overhanging edifice. In doing so we had all pushed our physical and psychological limits, particularly as we had been determined not to protect the climbing with bolts or other fixed gear.



80. A very happy Alfredo Rangél jumaring the final 80m rope to the summit.
(Anne Arran)

So wonderfully remote and pristine was the objective, it would have been a crime to have bludgeoned our way up the wall rather than to have met the challenge in all of its natural glory. We had been scared. Exhausted. Baffled. Sometimes all three at once. The terrain had been sustained and unpredictable, every day bringing new and unique challenges with a constant threat of coming up against a free-climbing impasse. So much so that it wasn't until the nineteenth and final day of climbing that we could admit to and enjoy any certainty of success.

For Anne and I, and for our good Venezuelan friend Ivan Calderón, it was our third attempt on the face. Hindsight tells us that the first, in 2002, was a triumph of determined optimism over reasoning. 'Some routes have been climbed from the jungly shoulder on the left,' explained Ivan as we excitedly approached our rainforest base camp for the first time. 'Maybe we should repeat the American free route, or try to free the Japanese line, which traverses across closer to the falls at the top. That would be very hard.' But Anne and I were insistent. We had come to free climb the main challenge of the wall direct – an unrepeated line up which had been forced by Basque climbers at A4 twelve years earlier – and we weren't to be talked out of it, however daunting a prospect it was now we were there, gazing up at its *impossible magnitude*.

With little prior knowledge to go on we had arrived under-prepared. Despite our best endeavours, our optimistically lightweight ropes were no match for the super-abrasive rock, and one by one we had to knot out sections that were no longer safe to use. One time the sheath of a fixed line ruptured while our other Venezuelan team-mate, Andre, was nearing the top of a free-hanging 85m jumar, plummeting him five metres or more before the tattered remains of the sheath rucked up enough to catch him on the bare rope core. At 300m, having climbed enough of the route to convince us that maybe it could be climbed but if so it would be hard, very loose and extremely hard to protect, we realised we soon would not have enough good rope to descend. Retreat was sad but inevitable.

Much sadder was retreating the following year. Venezuela was in the grip of political turmoil and the General Strike almost prevented us from getting there at all. As it was we made scant progress up the wall before Henry – our replacement for the absent Andre – had to retreat with a fever. When Ivan slipped and cracked a wrist bone soon afterwards, we knew our chance had gone. Clearly a bigger team would help, and we had many a day to ponder our mistakes as we waited by the dried-up river for it to rain again so that a dugout boat would be able to navigate up the river to fetch us.

Fast forward to 2005 to see seven excited climbers crammed into a tiny basecamp clearing. 'We're gonna beast it', declared Miles Gibson, his positive enthusiasm at once capturing the mood of the team and banishing any lingering doubts. Miles was our secret strongman; when the going got finicky and steep we were sure that he would see us through. Ben Heason

was with us too; he was our secret death-defier – when the protection dried up completely and we needed someone to solo huge sections we were sure he would come up with the goods. I was our loose rock aficionado; when the holds became disposable I felt sure of being able to levitate up whatever was still perched without dislodging too much of it. And if all of these options failed we still had our ultimate secret weapon. Alex Klenov was Russian and therefore hard as nails and able to cope with infinite amounts of adversity. He had more big-wall experience than the rest of us put together, most of it on aid but much of it in seriously hardcore Russian competitions in which the winner seems to be the one who endures the most hardship en route to topping out on a blank wall in hail and snowstorms. Yes, we were indeed ‘gonna beast it’!

Anne was keen to get in on the action too, as were the Venezuelans Ivan and Alfredo, so it quickly became a challenge to give everyone enough time at the front to keep them happy. Complications worsened when we started running into cruxes, often on consecutive pitches, which threatened to stop us all, and certainly put pressure on whoever’s turn it happened to be. But we loved it, and somehow everyone found challenge enough to thoroughly scare themselves. Secretly we wanted it to be hard, to live up to our expectations and to leave us with an experience we truly couldn’t forget. But too hard and all of our hopes would be dashed. Just a single point of aid or one bolt for protection and the dream would disappear just as quickly and as surely as it had sprung into being those years ago in front of the telly.

It was close too, maybe a little too often for our liking. Ben repeated my crux scare pitch of 2002, which I had thought to be nudging E7 and which had so little gear a fall was utterly out of the question. The very next day he went on to lead another, even scarier pitch, with just as little protection and with harder moves thrown in too. When we met up with him later that day he was still shaking! Miles on-sighted an E7 pitch too, although not the line he intended to climb; there was an obvious weakness through a 60m bulge and I was privately glad for it to be his lead as it looked so loose, so steep and so holdless as to be almost suicidal. The first four metres straight off the belay was some of the hardest and scariest climbing I’ve ever belayed, and the subsequent steepening clearly would be much harder still. He followed the only path available, improvising leftwards ever further from our intended line, one by one dismissing each of the possible options for regaining the route. All except one. Miles appeared from beyond a protruding fin where he’d arranged a cramped, hanging belay in a small corner. ‘I think it’ll go,’ he declared, optimistically as ever.

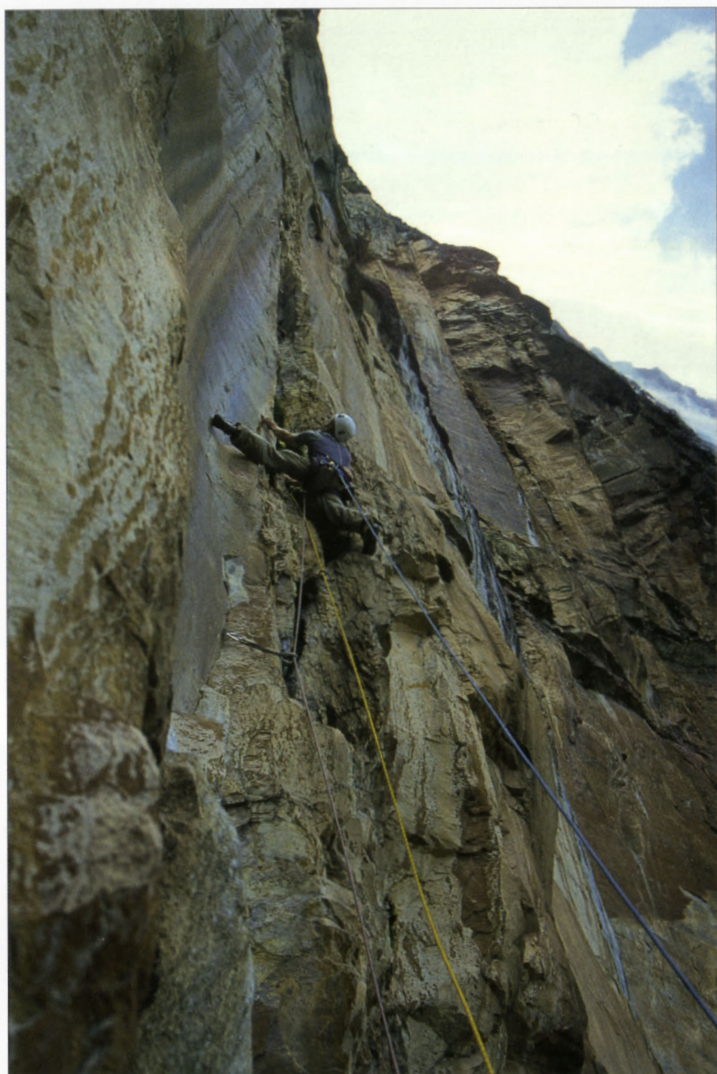
He was right as well: it went, but not without a fight. I tried onsighting and fell onto Alex’s head. He tried aiding and snapped a wire in the resulting whipper. Finally, after two days and two headpointed E7’s, we found ourselves once again in E5 terrain. Surely we’d cracked it now. Plain sailing to the top.



81. Ben Heason eyeing up the final dyno on his successful headpoint of pitch 17 (E7 6b). *(John Arran)*



82. What a life! Anne, Miles and Ben wake up in one of the most spectacular locations on earth. *(John Arran)*



83. John Arran onsighting the last of the crux (E7) pitches, 900m up and still not sure of success. *(Ben Heason)*

Or maybe not. Relief lasted only two pitches then we were back into crux terrain; a Gogarth-like flaky weakness but with the smoothest of walls all around. Certainly it was this way or no way. Two more E7s, one of which I managed to flash but only after Ivan had impressively aided through it first. And then another hint of relief. Anne pounced on the rare chance of a lead and determinedly teetered up a loose, RP-protected wall to an exposed ledge and welcome belay.

While the lead team rotated duties at the front, the others were kept busy in supporting roles. We needed nearly 300 litres of water between us, even

with a fairly severe 2-litres a day rationing, which meant hauling 300kg – the weight of four people – in water alone. And before this water, our food, fuel, ledges and sleeping equipment could be hauled we needed to make sure the jumar and haul lines were in the best possible places, which seemed to require constant reorganisation of belays and ropes. Many of our ‘rest days’ from climbing didn’t feel too restful.

Once again our sharp-end reprieve was short-lived, and within another pitch the wall reared up above us again, neither holds nor protection evident in any quantity. With options severely limited, we picked our way up thin walls, along breaks and through bulges, now within a couple of hundred metres of the top but still far from certain our line wouldn’t disappear into even blanker unclimbability. Miles impressed us all with another scary E7 onsight, all on Avon-like sloping holds, and just before even he confessed to serious fatigue he pulled off another crux headpoint – well enough protected but seriously sustained and with fantastic technical moves.

Back on a narrow, snaking ledge – our most comfortable accommodation since we’d left the ground seemingly eons ago – we finally had time to relax. Not that we had much choice because steadily we were becoming incapable of hard work; the incessant toil, heat and discomfort having worn us down to shadows of our former energetic selves. We were reduced to one day at a time at the front, the pattern of two days on having been abandoned in favour of more frequent and increasingly necessary rest. We played backgammon, slumped against packs and ropes, and at times felt barely strong enough to roll the dice.

I recovered just enough to finally get an E7 onsight, which was just as well as that pitch was unavoidable and would have been enormously difficult to climb on aid. Ben followed, gashing his leg when he pulled a huge block off, but managed to lead on through up a rising traverse at E6, taking us to within spitting distance of the falls’ spout. Once again we were on a roll. Surely we couldn’t be stopped now?

Sure enough, the next afternoon Alex and Miles topped out, upon which our whoops and hollers could almost have been heard back in Caracas. It’s fair to say we were happy, even though the rest of us wouldn’t endure the arduous series of jumars until the following day, one by one inching up the four 60m rope sections with aching muscles but with a euphoric anticipation we wouldn’t have swapped for the world.

I arrived on the summit mid-morning, alone. My first feeling was relief, mixed with fascination about the curious landscape that now presented itself – the wind-sculpted boulders, deep rocky ravines and curious, unique-looking plants I’d never seen the like of before. I untied. What a wonderfully liberating feeling, after two full weeks of tethered living, eating and sleeping. Then as I walked from the edge into a horizontal world I was overcome by a well of emotion I never could have predicted. It was over. The dream hadn’t ended; rather it had become reality. Finally we would inhabit a world we had imagined so vividly and so often. Finally we, and the climb, were free.



84. A weary Miles Gibson rose to the challenge of headpointing pitch 27 (E7 6b) at the end of day 16. (*John Arran*)

Summary: The first ascent of *Rainbow Jambaia*, Auyan Tepui, Venezuela, in 2005. The route takes a direct line up the face behind Angel Falls, the highest waterfall in the world, and there are other superlatives. The face is 1000m high and overhangs some 60m in total, making *Rainbow Jambaia* the biggest overhanging free climb in the world. The 31-pitch route took 19 days to climb with the nine hardest pitches rated E7. The team comprised: John and Anne Arran, Miles Gibson, Ben Heason, Alex Klenov (Russia), Ivan Calderón (Venezuela) and Alfredo Rangél (Venezuela).

Acknowledgements: The team would like to thank the Mount Everest Foundation, UK Sport and the Alison Chadwick Memorial Fund for their support.