Surveys



102. John Innerdale, *High Atlas, Morocco*, chromacolour, 40 x 32cm.

PAT LITTLEJOHN

Trad (For Now) on Gran Canaria

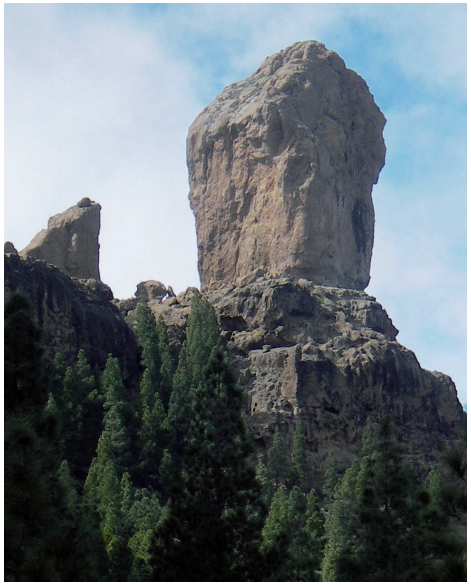


103. Crags above Ayacata – 'a bit of a Mecca' for trad climbers. (*Pat Littlejohn*)

Where can you go in the depths of winter to rock climb in warm weather? Spain can be great of course, but recently it has suffered several freezing-cold periods, as has the eastern Med'. Places like Joshua Tree, Mexico and South Africa are safe bets but they take a lot more time and cash.

So it can be worth heading south of the regular Spanish crags to the Canary Islands, and that's where Steve Sustad and I took a quick trip in winter 2009/10. There are many attractions: cheap flights with easyJet or Ryanair, a balmy climate with temperatures hovering around 20-25 degrees, loads of cheap accommodation and hire cars at £12/day. So why aren't the Canaries more popular with British climbers? Well, the sport climbing, though good and plentiful, doesn't quite match southern Spain for quality and is a little more scattered. However having sampled it on Tenerife and Gran Canaria, I can confirm that the latter is far better, with many more cliffs and climbs. And Gran Canaria has something else which might surprise you – very impressive and adventurous traditional climbing.

Though blighted with the usual tourist developments on its southern shore, most of the land area of Gran Canaria is a beautiful and mountainous national park, rising to nearly 2000m in the centre where the volcanic cores of several mountains give rock scenery that is a cross between the Dolomites and the canyons of Arizona. This area has seen



104. Roque Nublo – the basalt monolith offers quality bolt routes. (*Pat Littlejohn*)

traditional mountaineering since the 1930s but never a guidebook as far as I know, with information being kept with the local climbing club (*Federación Gran Canaria de Montañismo*, **www.fgcm.org/**) and more recently stored on the internet at: **topatras.eresmas.com/Escalada.htm** It's in Spanish so use Google Translate to get the gist of it – and have a really good laugh at the robotic English.)Sport climbing exists all over the island, but for trad the central group of rocky peaks around the village of Ayacata is a bit of a Mecca and has a rather interesting history. In the early days routes were established by traditional alpinists using pitons for protection and aid. We couldn't find any information about these but stumbled across them whilst doing our own explorations. We'd be climbing a line thinking it might be a first ascent, then right near the top after several challenging pitches we'd be humbled by discovering a rusted piton (more often than not an old Charlet Moser offset, one of the worst-designed pitons of all time). These climbers were obviously pretty bold and skilled at climbing on all forms of basalt.

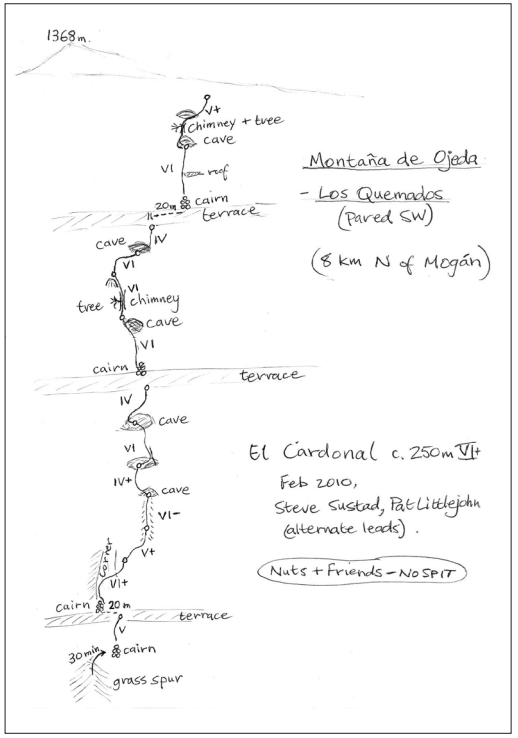
In the early '80s, when bolts were going in by the thousand in the crags of southern France and the Costa Blanca, climbers in Gran Canaria were making hard trad ascents which can only be compared with adventurous climbs at South Stack or the sea cliffs of the South-west. Topos for these can be found in the central café/bar in Ayacata and they make impressive reading. The routes are big, up to eight or nine pitches, and have hard, naturally protected free pitches (up to Fr 7a) as well as occasional aid sections up to A3+ (probably desperate). On many of the topo-diagrams the first ascensionists make a point of stressing that their routes were climbed without bolts and without hammers, so among some teams there was a strong 'clean climbing' ethic. This ethic may or may not be still alive and well on the island (we did hear that some older routes had now been equipped with bolts) but it was refreshing to find an area that had not yet succumbed to all-out bolting. It's my guess that many of these routes await second ascents and that they would give fantastic sport to people who would enjoy an enhanced 'Gogarth experience' in the middle of winter in a warm climate. I know I'll be back for more trad climbing there. It seems that equipping routes for sport climbing began on the Roque Nublo, a superb



105. The massive cliff of Los Quemados on the south side of Montaña de Ojeda where Littlejohn and Sustad essayed their 13-pitch route *El Cardonal*. (*Pat Littlejohn*)

monolith of hard, weathered basalt perched at almost 2000m on the highest plateau of the island. There about a dozen bolted climbs here now, all good quality, as well many others on rock formations in the vicinity.

As it was, on this trip the main objective for Steve and I was a big mountain escarpment he'd spotted just before my arrival. This was the south side of a peak called Montaña de Ojeda, where it forms a massive tiered cliff called Los Quemados. We had no idea whether anything had been climbed here, so we just went up with all the gear and took a look. From a distance it seemed that there would be several possible lines, but up close we weren't so sure





106. Steve Sustad on Pitch 5 of *El Cardinal*. (*Pat Littlejohn*)

107. Opposite: Pat Littlejohn bridging on the crux Pitch 2 (VI+). (*Steve Sustad*)

– many nice features petered out into blank, protectionless rock. With bolting gear many things would have been possible, and that may be the ultimate destiny of the cliff, but for us the challenge was finding a way that would go in our preferred style, i.e. no bolts, pegs or hammers, just a good old British trad rack of nuts and Friends. We found a cairn at the base of the cliff below a likely-looking line so we wondered if climbers had beaten us to it, but after five metres of climbing it was obvious that no-one had touched this line before and that the cairn was probably marking a path.

Steve kicked off up the first VS pitch, a little snaking groove which gained the base of the very big and impressive main tier. We wandered up and down this for a while before deciding on the line to attempt. For me it was straight in at the deep end – I was in recovery from a knee operation and hadn't done any rock climbing for four months, so I wasn't prepared for the 20m of sustained technical bridging that started the next pitch. This turned out to be the crux of the route at about E2/3 5c, or UIAA grade VI+. We had to break right to reach some more grooves, which gave really good climbing on perfect rock for two further pitches, but after this we realised we were in no shape to continue – we had made too late a start on a baking hot day, and we had not brought enough water. Too close to sunstroke for comfort we retreated, pleased to have found a very promising line.

Next day an 'alpine wake-up' saw us approaching the crag at dawn, with six litres of water between us. Above our high point the line linked a series of scoops and caves before landing us below another steep and imposing tier. By now the sun was beating down again and the crag felt truly African. We had hit some unusually hot days. As I led another technical groove with some memorable finger-tip layback moves, Steve roasted on the belay and warned that he was overheating again. Luckily his pitch took him into a chimney and he was able to stuff his head into some shade for several minutes, after which he felt better. My next pitch was a thin crack which





108. Steve Sustad starting Pitch 7 of *El Cardonal* (XS). (*Pat Littlejohn*)

looked nice from below but turned out to be nasty and crumbling – the rock had taken a sudden turn for the worse, as basalt can. After struggling for a while I realised I could swing right to reach a big wind-eroded scoop which had been invisible from below – now the way was clear to the top of the tier, above which loomed the final 50m wall.

We were now three quarters of the way up the face so the desire to finish it properly up the final tier was strong, even though the terrace below it promised an escape of sorts. There was a possible line straight ahead but after 15m it was blocked by a rotten overhang, and to press on into XS territory at this point would have ruined a potentially fine route. Luckily, a groove 20m to the right turned out to have better rock and better gear than had been apparent from below. It led past an overhang to an amazing 'bell' of rock formed where wind erosion had hollowed out material behind the hard outer layer of basalt. By striking it with a karabiner you could play different notes in different places. I took cover in a cave stance while Steve dealt with the final pitch and soon we were on the great shelf where the cliff terminates, enjoying a breeze and views of the peak and the island's interior. The result of our efforts was *El Cardonal*, a 13-pitch route that was sustained but nowhere too hard, definitely a worthy objective for people wanting to experience a long, adventurous trad climb on Gran Canaria.

At the present time (and provided the well-meaning but misguided bolting zealots don't destroy all the traditional climbing) Gran Canaria offers a fascinating mix of different types of climbing and is a good venue to enjoy both styles in the depths of winter. I know it's tempting just to throw a bunch of quick draws in a bag and jump on a plane, but taking trad gear gives you the 'freedom of the hills' and a more varied trip, and I think we all know which routes will be the most memorable.

MARTIN GILLIE

Alpine Climbing in The Mountains of Cogne



109. The ENE ridge of La Grivola from near the Balzola hut. (*Jonathan Halliday*)

The mountains of Cogne appear to have been forgotten by British alpinists. Apart from the Gran Paradiso, the highest peak, which is well known for being amongst the easiest of the 4000m peaks to climb, few British climbers could name any mountains in the area. However, there are more than 20 peaks between 3500m and 4000m that offer fine alpine