



Multi-pitch Climbing in Europe

Martin Fickweiler



Lofoten ▲

Fair Head ▲

Elbsandstein ▲

Wilder Kaiser ▲

Rätikon ▲

Wendenstöcke ▲

Dolomites ▲

Val di Mello ▲

Presles ▲

Gorges du Verdon ▲

Calanques ▲

Picos de Europa ▲

Mallos de Riglos ▲

Montserrat ▲

Bavella ▲

Sardinia ▲

Paklenica ▲

Vratsa ▲

Meteora ▲

Preface	7
Foreword	9

CONTENTS

Elbsandstein Germany	14
Dolomites Italy	28
Gorges du Verdon France	42
Rätikon Switzerland	56
Fair Head Northern Ireland	70
Calanques France	82
Montserrat Spain	96
Lofoten Norway	110
Mallos de Riglos Spain	124
Wilder Kaiser Austria	138
Presles France	152
Paklenica Croatia	166
Val di Mello Italy	180
Vratsa Bulgaria	194
Bavella France	208
Picos de Europa Spain	222
Sardinia Italy	236
Wendenstöcke Switzerland	250
Meteora Greece	266
Grading table	283
About the author	285
Acknowledgements	287



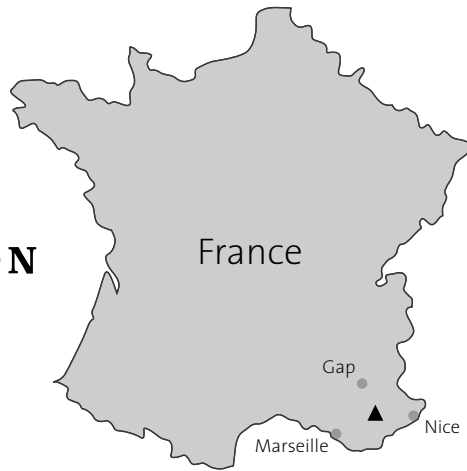


Gorges du Verdon | France

Looking down on the last two pitches of *Les Marches du Temps* (200 m 7a).

I have climbed the steep walls of the Verdon Gorge more than a few times in my life and each time I have discovered something different. Together with the Gorge, which seems to have witnessed the evolution of multi-pitch (sports) climbing, I seem to have taken a step forward in the development of my climbing with every visit. This time around I discovered a new range of beautiful routes and for the first time in my life and completely out of character, I approached the routes of the Verdon from the top down.

GORGES DU VERDON



At the end of the 1960s and the early 1970s, the first climbers approached the Verdon Gorge from the ground up. They tried to find their way down through new paths hoping that they would find an accessible line to climb up and out of the Gorge again. These routes follow striking cracks and chimneys through curved walls which seem to be otherwise structureless. This resulted in the establishment of traditional routes such as *La Demande*, *Ula*, *Luna Bong* and *Castapiagne Rouge*.



Marlies Quack descending into Jardin des Bananes.

After the first outstanding lines were climbed ground-up, the unique location of the rock walls invited climbers to also try to approach them from the top. This started at the end of the 1970s. A new way of exploring arose that led to a necessary change in the way routes were protected. In places where they initially used nuts, pitons and wooden blocks, placing bolts on the smooth walls became the new norm which resulted in a whole revolution in climbing. In some cases only the top pitch of a route was opened.





Gerke Hoekstra climbing the fourth pitch of *Les Marches du Temps*.



The entrance of the Verdon Gorge, with the north facing sector Le Duc on the left side.



Casper ten Sijthoff on the last pitch of *Dingomaniaque* (160 m 6c+).

The challenging walls of the Verdon Gorge were transformed into a vertical arena where people could climb hard and exposed routes in a relatively safe manner. The best climbers in the world came to the Verdon to test their limits in this extraordinary place.

I climbed my first route in the Verdon during the winter of 2001. The initial plan was to complete a rope-solo ascent of *Le Voyage de la Mandarine*. But after taking a ground fall from the first pitch this plan was short lived. After recovering from the fall, being pretty battered, I didn't want to leave the Verdon without making another attempt at climbing the beautiful massif. The next day, I decided to invite a friend, who had come with me as a photographer, to climb his first multi-pitch route. We climbed *Tobogan de la Mort*, a beautiful route which took two days starting from the Sentier Martel. We spent the long winter's night on the wall on a portaledge (a hanging stretcher) only two rope lengths from the top of the route. Still awake from the adrenaline, I vividly remember that the night sky was very clear and that I watched the moon travel over the whole gorge.

Thirteen years later, also in winter, at the crack of dawn I was once again ready to start a climb in the Verdon Gorge. This time I was standing at the top of the route looking down into the Gorge. Even though the selected route has been climbed since 1989 and has plenty of bolts, I take a deep breath before rappelling down the first few pitches. It's still cold in the gorge and the wall seems extremely steep. Although the rock looks almost smooth it does provide some grip in the form of small pockets that the French solemnly call gouttes d'eau. Some of these pockets have icicles hanging out of them and if one looks carefully they can see the course of the route, perfectly protected by bolts. But also without these steel markings the course of the route can be spotted by an experienced climber.

Casper ten Sijthoff climbing the second pitch of *Belle Fille Sûre* (160 m 6b+).



While this wall appears completely smooth when seen from the bottom, from the top one can see enough holds to make for a great adventure. My mind wanders to the first ascensionists of the routes in the Gorge and I understand why the pioneers chose to approach the walls from above. I realise, with some regret, that in the mountains where routes are almost never approached from above, a lot of similarly magnificent formations will never be climbed.

The route we are planning to do is a good example of this approach. *Les Marches du Temps* follows a sequence of beautiful and often subtle features. Over and over, the steep rock offers just enough holds to keep the climb challenging but also very pleasant. Before I realise it the morning has gone and the air passing through the gorge is rapidly heating up. The sun shines on the walls and only when I look really carefully at the blue shadow at the bottom of the gorge I can see the signs of winter. Our thermal gloves disappear into our jackets, which are now hung from our harnesses. I am once again climbing a route in the Verdon which I will often think back on with fondness.

Back in the Netherlands during a conversation with Sascha van Gemmert, a connoisseur of the Verdon and ambassador of hard multi-pitch climbing, he reminds me of the fact that there is a wave of modernisation once again in the Verdon Gorge. People are still opening routes of all difficulties, which keeps it interesting for the present but also the future generations of climbers who will visit the Gorge. The style of these new routes seem to fit in with the movement within the sport of climbing itself, where routes are getting longer and steeper. I look forward to going back to the Verdon, on some sunny winter day, but I would like to encourage all new generations of climbers to go there too.

Because of the exposure, *Wide is Love* (20 m 6a) feels like a multipitch climb.





La Palud parish church in true wintertime.

How to get there

The starting point for climbing in the Verdon Gorge is the village of La Palud sur Verdon. If you are flying to the south of France it is best to go to either Nice or Marseille and rent a car from there. It is a full two hour drive to La Palud.

When to go

Climbing in the Verdon is possible all year round. However, spring and autumn are the best seasons to visit the Gorge. It can be very warm and crowded during the summer and there can be a lot of snow in the winter.

Accommodation

There are numerous camp sites, gîtes and hotels in and around La Palud.



Climbing the Verdon cliffs in wintertime will assure you long nights in La Palud bars.

Rock quality & routes

Climbing in the Verdon Gorge is a unique experience, it is not often that you climb with so much air around you. Most routes require a top out, therefore it is imperative that you master the rescue techniques before you leave. Most of the limestone routes are between 200 and 300 m long.

Gear

A large number of the routes in the Verdon Gorge are protected by bolts and can be climbed with fifteen quickdraws but in some classic routes you will have to place your own gear. For the techno-artificial routes of the Verdon you will need a full bigwall rack. Double ropes are recommended because you can often only reach the start of the route by abseiling.

Documentation

50 ans & 500 voies d'escalade au Verdon, edition of FFME 2013.

ISBN 978 2 95447 960 6



Picos de Europa | Spain

Beautiful climbing conditions on the east face of Naranjo de Bulnes (2519 m).



Picos de Europa is a relatively small mountainous area in the heart of the Spanish Costa Verde and is still unknown to many climbers. The rugged limestone mountains offer a wide range of challenging routes. There is a lot to do for both the ambitious and the more reserved climber. The summits look spectacular but 'only' reach a maximum height of 2600 m, so you don't need to acclimatize and you can start your adventure almost immediately!

PICOS DE EUROPA



Naranjo de Bulnes (locally known as Picu Urriellu) is the most prominent mountain in the area and maybe the most popular mountain amongst Spanish climbers. Almost every Spanish alpinist dreams of summiting the 2519 m peak at least once. There are no walking paths to the summit of this impressive monolith and even the easiest route, the direct route through the south face, requires some serious climbing skills.

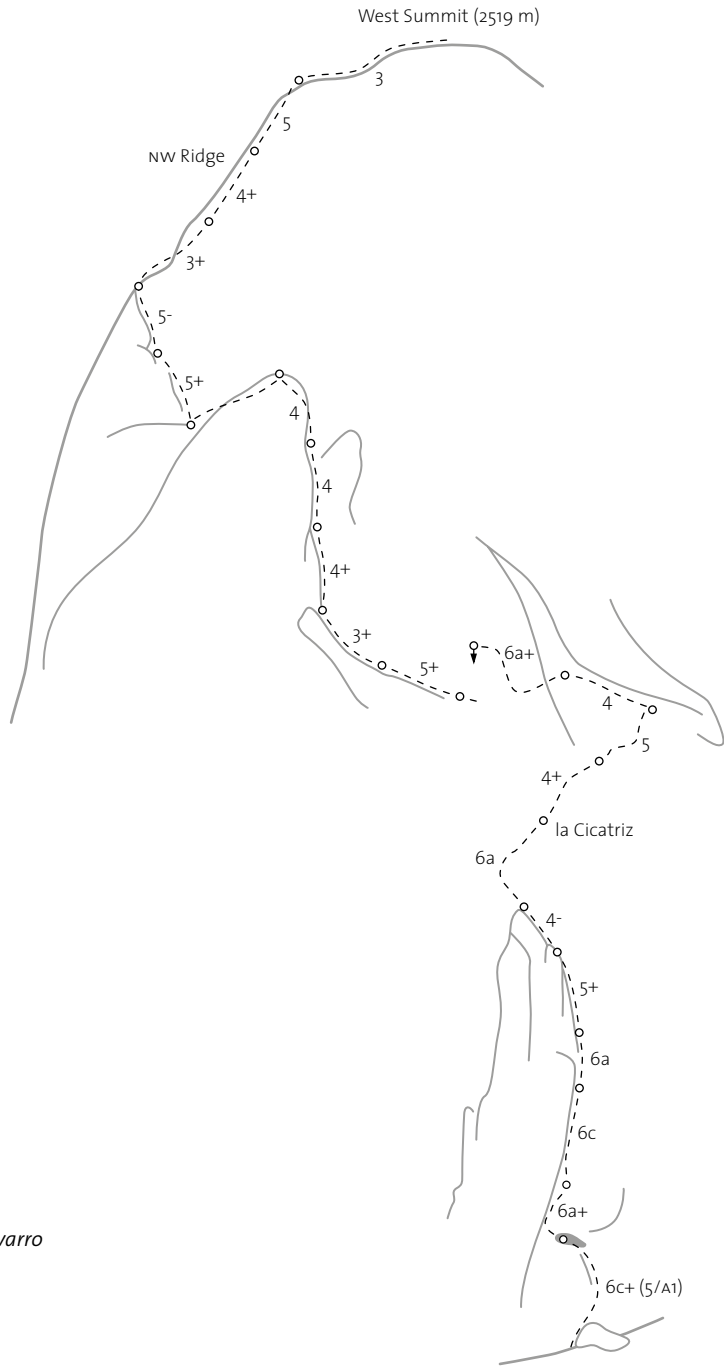
More than seventy routes are scattered across the four walls of Picu Urriellu. The classic route, *Rabadá-Navarro*, covers a height of more than 500 metres up the west-facing wall. With a climbing length of over 700 metres it is, without a doubt, the longest route on the



The first pitch of *La Luna* (200 m 6a) with the east face of Naranjo de Bulnes towering above.

mountain and an absolute must-do for the experienced climber. *Rabadá-Navarro* was put-up in 1962 and was the first route through the impressive west face of Picu Urriellu. The route was also the subject of the first winter ascent of the west face. The first two attempts in 1969 and 1970 both ended tragically and cost the lives of three climbers. The first winter ascent of the west face was done in February 1973.





Robadá Navarro

700 m

6c+ (5/A1)

The 550 metres high west face of Naranjo de Bulnes with Refugio Urriellu in the foreground.

A three pitch traverse half way up the steep west face was the surprising solution the first ascensionists, Alberto Rabadá and Ernest Navarro, came up with to finish the route after their failed attempt a year earlier. The first pitch of this traverse starts on a ledge called Tiros de la Torca and climbs easy terrain. After that real adventure begins:

We were four hours into our climb when for the first time the rock felt a bit unstable. We set an anchor and saw that the second pitch of the traverse led horizontally in a northerly direction. The impressive grey slab in front of us looked solid but didn't seem so easy to climb. Nevertheless, we continued in that direction thanks to the clear information from the guidebook. The shiny bolts also lured us and we climbed on without hesitation. While climbing I looked at the course of the route and I tried to put myself in the shoes of the first ascensionists. What were their thoughts when they started this part of the climb? The grey slab is steep but every time a foot or a hand hold is needed, it's exactly in the right place. All of the sudden the wall becomes completely blank and the pitch ended at a hanging belay at about 250 metres above the ground. Again, my thoughts went to Alberto and Ernesto. It was impossible to traverse any further or to climb up the smooth rock above. Should we go back? No, they started the third pitch of the long traverse with a short rappel of about twelve metres. From that point the route traverses further along a vague horizontal band. The first moves were a bit tricky, but the terrain soon became easier. When I found out that the fourth pitch led us to a striking dihedral I felt a little bit of the relief that Alberto and Ernesto must have felt. I imagined them looking at each other with tired faces and realizing that they were finally going to climb this coveted route all the way to the top.

Rogier Koppejan climbing the tenth pitch of *Murciana 78* (530 m 6a/A2 or 7c+) on the west face of Naranjo de Bulnes (2519 m).





Anne van Leeuwen climbing the big traverse halfway up the west face on *Rabadá-Navarro* (700 m 5/A1 or 6C+).

What I still remember clearly from my visit to Picos de Europa is the continuous presence of clouds. The wild character of the mountains combined with the swirling clouds created a unique atmosphere to climb in. Sometimes the clouds would drop deep into the valley which resulted in great climbing conditions. Other times the clouds were swept violently through the sky by a sharp winds which forced us to wear all of our clothes and to tape the bottom of our pants shut to barely keep ourselves warm enough. While I was scanning the western horizon for possible signs of approaching bad weather, I was often confronted with memories of Patagonia. Every day seems different in the Picos and that, for me, marks the beauty of the place. Personally, I love the uncertainty and the tension that can come with climbing in rapidly changing and turbulent weather. And I find it strange that so few climbers,



Descending from the summit of Naranjo de Bulnes (2519 m) towards the south face.

other than the Spanish, travel to Picos de Europa to climb there. Despite the (partly deserved) reputation of bad weather and long walk-ins, the area deserves a large number of visitors because of its remarkable beauty and wildness. In my opinion, Picos de Europa is a hidden gem because of its beauty and the large variety of climbing routes through the striking and often compact limestone walls. For instance, you'll find steep routes of more than 500 m long equipped with bolts within a 20 minute walk from the Refugio Urriellu, but you can also find multi-day adventures on remote walls in the Picos in which the element of adventure is reinforced by the absence of bolts. In short, this area should be at the top of the list of every rock climber or alpinist, because climbing in Picos de Europa is a magical experience.





Morning coffee with Refugio Urriellu (1953 m) and Naranjo de Bulnes in the background.

How to get there

Picos de Europa is situated in northern Spain. It's best to fly to Oviedo, Bilbao or Santander. From there, you'll be in the heart of the Picos in less than two hours by rental car. In order to arrive at Naranjo de Bulnes you drive to Sotres and then walk for three to four hours to the Refugio Urriellu. First you walk on a steep winding road for an hour and then you follow a clearly marked path for two to three hours that takes you 800 m higher.

When to go

The best time for climbing in Picos de Europa is from June until September. The most stable weather can be expected through July and August.

Rogier Koppejan climbing the overhanging fourth pitch of *Murciana 78* (530 m 6a/A2 or 7c+) on the west face of Naranjo de Bulnes (2519 m).

Accommodation

The perfect starting point for the routes on Naranjo de Bulnes is the comfortable and very well situated Refugio Urriellu which can accommodate at least 96 people. The guard prepares a simple but nutritious three course meal every evening. Climbers can use the hand written guidebook in the hut to plan their climbs. To avoid the risk of having to sleep in a sometimes overcrowded and overheated dormitory, it is possible to pitch your tent directly next to the hut. Any specialized food you need during your climbing days is best brought with you from the valley.

Rock quality & routes

The quality of the limestone is very good in almost the entire area. Apart from Naranjo de Bulnes, the symbol of Picos de Europa, the area has many other and often still deserted walls. Some interesting mountains for long rock climbs are: Torre de los Horcados Rojos (2506 m, routes up to 450 m long), Cuerto Agero (1016 m, routes up to 540 m long) and Peña la Regaliz (2193 m, routes up to 280 m long, with excellent rock quality).

Gear

Only a few routes in Picos de Europa require only quickdraws, a double rope and a helmet. Most of the routes and especially the bigger adventures require an arsenal of cams and nuts. So make sure you get all the information you need for your intended route from the guidebook, the guard of the hut and from other climbers.

Documentation

Picos de Europa Walks and Climbs (EN) by Robin Walker (information dated 1989).

ISBN 978 1 85284 033 4

Cordillera cantabrica escaladas selectas en roca (ES) by Miguel Angel Adrados 2005.

ISBN 978 8 46055 318 2



Rogier Koppejan freeing the third pitch of *Rabadá-Navarro* (700 m 5/A1 or 6c+).