

## Rock On

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Rowland Edwards, owner and chief instructor at the Compass West International School of Rock Climbing in southeastern Spain, takes a few metres of rope in his tight, muscular hands, and gathers it into a small coil. "Watch this," he says. He gives the coil a couple of short swings, and then lets it drop, over the edge of the precipice on which he is standing. He steps back quickly. The coils fall away: and then the rest of the 150-foot length of rope begins to follow.

Have you ever seen the film "The Piano"? There's a scene towards the end where Holly Hunter, playing the lead, decides to throw the eponymous instrument into the sea. A group of sailors row it out in a ship's lifeboat, and when they get to a suitably bottomless stretch of ocean, they manhandle it overboard. How they manage to do it without capsizing, their boat is one of the film's great mysteries, but they do, and, being so heavy, it sinks fast. The only problem is that it's still attached to a length of rope, and as it falls, the rope goes with it. Now, this rope doesn't just unwind. Pulled by that heavy piano, it whips and thrashes; fast, hard, frightening, dangerous. Anyone near it is likely to get into trouble, and that's what happens to Holly Hunter when her foot gets caught up in it. In a instant, it snatches her over the side of the boat, and drags her down, deep into the cavernous green water.

I didn't believe ropes could do that. But now, watching Rowland's rope follow itself down over that ledge, yanked away by its own weight, I can see that I was wrong. No wonder he got out of the way. If ever there was a graphic demonstration of the power of gravity, of its massive, unconquerable force, this must be it. It lasts only a few seconds - perhaps five - and then the other end of the rope twangs taut against the metal bar around which it is tied. Now it is our turn to follow it over the edge.

It's the fifth and final day of our course, an introduction to all aspects of rock climbing, and today we are going to be climbing sea cliffs. Rowland has brought us to a favourite spot of his, about fifteen miles along the coast from Benidorm, to tackle a route he was the first to climb, called "Rowland's Magical Mystery Tour". First, however, we must get to the bottom of the cliffs, which at this point are overhanging, and to do that involves a free abseil, lowering ourselves down this long black rope without any reassuring rock to rest our feet against.

It's a perfect day; an empty blue sky, bright sun, and a slight breeze working its way in and out of the coves and bays along the coast. Under any other circumstances, this would seem like the perfect place too. Behind us is the rocky headland we walked over to get here, choked with wild rosemary and lavender. To our right, stretch the holiday resorts of the Costa Blanca, their impact diminished by distance, and the overwhelming grandeur of the mountains behind. To our left, there are only cliffs, sky, and the sun, scattering its silver over the rich, turquoise sea. It's what is in front of us that spoils the effect for me; an edge of rock with a little nick in it, two bars with the rope tied around them, and then nothing, except the waters of the Mediterranean, rising up to meet the horizon.



There is, apparently, at the other end of the rope, a ledge for us to stand on, but I can't see it. And besides, between it and me is all that space. Of course, a system exists to met us down there; not only will we be abseiling ourselves, but we will also have Jane, Rowland's assistant for the day, to lower us down on another rope if anything goes wrong.

But what's the rational reassurance of a system against the silent menace of a 150-foot drop? Instinct and imagination win the battle hands down. I know that I trust my life to systems all the time - aeroplanes, car brakes, water purification - but usually their workings are happily out of sight and out of mind. Here, the knot and the karabiner that will keep me safe will be inches away from my face. All I can think of is what it would look like if, 125 feet up, they started to come undone.

Rowland goes over first. He's fifty-nine, and has been climbing and teaching climbing, mostly full-time, for twenty-five years. He is nonchalant, chatty, and doesn't use the safety line. Fabrice, a 25-year old Swiss student who has been spending a year in the UK, and has, against all expectation, only just begun to climb, follows him down. He is the best climber amongst this week's students, but as he steps out onto the ledge, looks down, and tries to work out where he is going to put his feet, he looks rather less relaxed than normal. I elect to go next, because I can't bear to wait any longer. When Fabrice reaches the bottom, and the safety line comes back up, I step forward, and attach myself to both it and the abseiling rope. Then I take a very, very deep breath.

The previous day we were climbing on the Puig Campana above the village of Finestrat, where Compass West is based. It's a barren, rocky mountain slightly higher than Ben Nevis, with near-vertical rock walls on its upper southern and western faces that are well over a thousand feet tall. We didn't get to the top, but even from a third of the way up the southern slab, eating lunch on a small ledge above a muscular mountain pine, we could see the Spanish coast stretching over one hundred miles to the south. That's when Rowland said to me that climbing was a bit like reading a book. When somebody has finished a book, and put it down again, he explained, there's no physical evidence to show that they ever touched it; and yet, that book will have changed them slightly. So it is, he said, with climbing. When you've finished a climb, and walk away, you take something of the cliff, or crag, or Mountain-inside away with you.

It is a compelling notion. During the course of our week at Finestrat Rowland and his son Mark give us an excellent grounding in the basics of climbing; how to construct efficient rope and protection systems, how to move competently over rock, how to rescue our climbing partners if something goes wrong. Equipped with these basics, they encourage us to push and commit ourselves. They introduce us to sport climbing routes, which have bolts on them and are safer to climb on, and to traditional routes. After each day, we come away tired and sweaty, but a little stronger, a little more agile, and, generally, a little more confident. We also bring back memories of the rock we have climbed over. After our day on the Puig, I can't help staring back at it, and searching its distant face for the features I remember; the ledges where we rested, the arrets that seemed particularly challenging, the points from which we abseiled.

So what goes into the book of our day on the sea cliffs? Several of the pages are left almost entirely blank. At moments of stress I have the

innate, and rather unwanted, capacity to let my mind slip into a kind of self-induced paralysis: and so I do very little thinking at all on the way down that 150-foot length of rope. Only the occasional line is written; about the ladybird who catches a ride down on my knee; about the ladder, put there by the tuna fisherman who used to fish from these cliffs, which is now severely decayed and only loosely attached to the rock; and about the sudden fit of shaking and laughing I have when I get to the bottom. Of the rest of that experience, there is very little trace.

Other pages, however, are crammed full of text. This is, after all, a fabulous route. The rock is exceptionally good; limestone weathered by wind, rain and sea until it is rough and solid like granite, and richly-textured with cracks and ripples. For the most part, the handholds and footholds follow one another like a line of reasoning whose logic is inescapable. All Rowland has to do, as I follow him up, is say, "go left", or "go right", and I discover that the next five or six climbing moves come almost automatically. At some point during every section of the climb, I have to fight a rising tide of panic; when I move out onto a steep spine of rock above an overhang, for example, or when, at one point, I take the wrong line and have to retrace my steps. But at the end of each of them, I find myself wishing I could go back and do it again, more confidently, more expertly, with a little more control.



Suddenly, I find myself at the top. Simon, an accountant from Birmingham, is following me up, and after I have roped myself into a belay point established by Rowland, I belay him up, pulling his rope in through a simple pulley system that can be locked off if he should fall. When he finishes the climb, my responsibilities are over, but I stay where I am, sitting on the ledge overlooking the sea. This time round it really does look beautiful. Soothing too, now that my fears are behind me. It is, I realise, a sight I have only been privy to because I have been climbing: just like the whole of this miraculous, hidden stretch of country.

I stay there until the last moment, and then, when it is time to go, I pick up a small, flattish lump of limestone. It's rough, like a fine sandpaper, and dry, just like the rock I have been gripping on the cliff face on the way up. It sits neatly in the palm of my hand. I'll take it back to London, and on dull, cold days, when the sound of the traffic gets unbearable, I'll get it out, and feel its weight and texture. It will be, I guess, a kind of bookmark.

Sean Newsom climbed in Finestrat as a guest of the Compass West International School of Rock Climbing.

### **Travel Brief**

The Edwards run their rock-climbing courses in Finestrat from November until the beginning of June, when it starts to get too hot to climb. Throughout this period, conditions for rock climbing are very good - even between December and March the average daytime temperature is close to seventy degrees Fahrenheit - and a week there makes an excellent winter or spring pep-up for both mind and body.

The courses run from Saturday to Saturday, with a rest day on Fridays, and are very flexible, in that they can accommodate both complete beginners and more experienced climbers. The first day is spent establishing a rope system that everyone will use for the week, and

encouraging the development of good climbing skills and habits. Thereafter, days are spent at sport-climbing locations or on the mountains, with an easier day half-way through to learn self-rescue techniques and the art of gear placement of the rock face. How challenging each of these climbing days is depends entirely on individual skills, preferences and fitness levels.

A word about your rock boots: if you are buying your first pair for this course, make sure they are big. Most experience climbers wear boots about a size smaller than is normal for their feet. This bunches their toes up and helps them keep their feet more rigid and powerful. It will only cause you pain. When you go to a climbing shop, ignore the sale people's advice and get something in your normal shoe size. Your feet will swell in the Spanish feet, and you won't be climbing routes that are difficult enough to warrant the squashed-foot policy. You have been warned; toenails have been known to fall off. It's also a good idea to bring your own rucksack for day trips, some waterproofs, and some warm clothing to deal with any sudden changes in the weather or chilly winds in the mountains.