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**El Sendero de la Caliza
The O Goes Pear-Shaped**



El Sendero de la Caliza

The beauty of sport climbing on Mexico's limestone

By Ray Pomponio



Ray atop a summit in El Potrero Chico, c. 2021.

As an avid rock climber and mountain enthusiast, I appreciate destinations that feel like paradise—both in access to geological attractions and ease of living. In Northern Mexico, an hour outside the city of Monterrey, there is one such destination called *Potrero Chico*, translating to ‘little corral’ in Spanish. On my third visit to this climbing *mecca*, I was fortunate to bring along my friends and partner. As I hadn’t traveled internationally since the pandemic, this trip felt like a splash of freedom mixed with tempered adventure. Sport climbing is perhaps the most standardized discipline in climbing; you bring the same gear to any crag in the world. Though there’s plenty of thrill to clipping bolts in another country, I was surprised by how homely it felt when life as a climbing tourist unfolded here. For those who appreciate the breadth of montane beauty, but also the invariability to hardware-equipped rock, El Potrero is wonderful for its abundance of both.

Ven por la aventura, quédate por la vida.

Synopsis

From December 28, 2025 through January 5, 2026, I co-led a ten-person climbing trip to Mexico. A few of us on the trip were current or former ECP’ers—including myself, Saul Schaffer, Monica Dayao, Drew McNutt, and Drew Gallagher. We spent eight days in Hidalgo, Nuevo Leon, just a ten minute walk from El Potrero Chico. This renowned park is home to multiple, thousand-foot walls and hundreds of bolted rock climbs. The trip was a resounding success and our group bonded over many triumphs and challenges of climbing in another country.



A view from our courtyard, relaxing with EPC in the background. (Left to right: Ray P., Drew M., Malini S., Monica D.).

The goal of this trip report is to convince you, the reader, to visit El Potrero Chico (EPC, for short). I'll share insights of our group's experience with an emphasis on lessons learned that can generalize to future trips. Since I plan to return to this international climbing paradise, this audience includes myself.



Even the camping digs are quite comfortable here (a photo from the popular campground called 'Rancho el Sendero', from my first trip to EPC in 2021).

Introduction to EPC

If you haven't heard of EPC, perhaps your obsession with the vertical world has only begun. Along with Red Rock in Nevada and Squamish in British Columbia, EPC is one of North America's few destinations with a high concentration of moderate, multipitch climbs. Let me unpack that term for the uninitiated:

- 'Moderate' means there are plenty of routes in the 5.8 to 5.10 range—approachable in difficulty for the novice-to-intermediate outdoor climber.
- 'Multipitch' means more than just one pitch, so you can reach greater heights and exposure—some routes are over 1,000 feet (10+ pitches) in length!
- 'Climbing' is the activity of ascending a mountain or craggy feature using ropes and hardware to manage the risk of falling, and the necessity of descending.



There are a few aspects of climbing in EPC that I find special. First, the community around the town of Hidalgo is incredibly warm to visitors. Being a tourist, I felt the privilege of witnessing life in a quaint suburb of Monterrey, which is an industrialized city much larger than Pittsburgh, closer to the size of Philadelphia. I sensed the presence of climbers was something of a spectacle to locals—for the most part, they are uninterested in scaling big walls that rise out of their backyard canyons, but they enjoy outdoor recreation according to their own tradition. On a Sunday evening, you'll find many locals relaxing by their trucks parked beneath the towering rocks, listening to Mexican music and hosting family-style barbecues. Both locals and tourists share an appreciation for this unique and natural playground.



The entrance to the park is on this street, with the gate marking the start of the canyon.

Second, the weather is highly inviting during the Winter. Between Thanksgiving and spring break, you can count on temperatures to fall within 50 to 80 degrees and skies to be sunny. The desert climate is also dry, so precipitation is rare, although possible (it rained the first day of our trip but then stayed dry for the next 7 days). This is a pleasant escape from the gloomy, gray days we experience in Pittsburgh. The canyon offers many aspects for chasing sun or shade depending on the conditions.

Third, the rock type is limestone and conducive to 'vacation climbing'. While the features can sometimes feel sharp and textured, they are generally not abrasive on the skin. With decent technique and a streak of good weather, you can climb six days during a weeklong trip here. More on the rock type soon...



Drew M. enjoys the view from atop a multipitch. In the background, the many ridges and canyons of EPC offer a variety of sun aspects to climb on. The summit of Mota Wall, in the top right corner, is about a thousand feet higher than the road below!

Climbing Style

The first thing our group noticed about the style here was the degree of intensity of the footwork. Many of the great moderates here are near-vertical slab climbs, and quite long (a 70 meter rope is mandatory). Climbers accustomed to the Red and the New River Gorge might find this style challenging at first, because in EPC, sequences tend to demand balance and precision. After the first two days of our trip, we felt an acute soreness in our calves and toes—a result of smearing and edging on slabby surfaces.



Many of EPC's slabs, like this one in Virgin Canyon, require technical smearing on smooth, often polished faces. (Left to right: Monica D., Lora W., and Drew G.)

Another characteristic of the climbing in EPC is that its developers tend to place a lot of bolts on their routes. This gives the climbing a 'safe' feeling as runouts are uncommon. One downside of this bolting ethic, though, is that some crags can feel very crowded, almost gym-like, on busier days. We found that communicating with other parties about intentions for various routes was effective in maximizing the tight spaces at the Mota Wall and in Virgin Canyon.

If you come to EPC and consider yourself a competent sport climber, you're probably thinking about climbing any of several-dozen multipitch classics in the park. These routes are incredibly fun and range from 2 to 23 pitches in length! However, the most-popular ones tend to be about 4-6 pitches, taking parties a half a day to ascend. Climbing over high exposure seems to be a popular tourist attraction. One example is the classic 'Space Boys' (5.10) an 11-pitch sport climb with several exciting pitches over *big* air.



Two views of the same route on an iconic formation called 'Las Agujas' (the Spires) - On the left, the first pitch leads to a notch between two narrow pillars. On the right, the second pitch takes an exciting, knife-edge arete to the summit.

General Strategy

By now I hope that I've convinced you, the reader, to consider traveling to this unique paradise of rock climbing. If so, here are some tips to make your first trip a successful one:

- You don't need a car to get around, and that's the beauty of climbing in EPC. Your airport cab driver will likely offer to stop at the grocery store on the way from the airport (if not, ask them to), but you can even walk to town on a rest day, which takes 25-20 minutes depending on where you stay.
- To adapt to the climbing style without straining your lower body, limit the pitch count during the first 2-3 days. After easy climbing and some rest, you'll get the hang of limestone, and your calves will be grateful for any technique improvements.
- When selecting your first multipitch route, it's a good idea to choose something well below your leading limit. The cumulative effect of a long route and the weight of a pack tend to make pitches feel a little harder, especially if you haven't quite dialed in your systems.
- Getting to the canyon by 09:00 will put you first in line for all but the most-mega classics. For four-star multipitch routes, it's not uncommon for parties to start in the dark, with headlamps.
- Rocky Talkies are easily worth their weight and makeup for difficulty communicating between long pitches (sometimes over 120 feet, especially if linking pitches). Wag bags and headlamps are essential on all multipitches, too.
- Bring skin and lip care for the dry climate, and the possibility of treating small cuts from the sharp limestone, or the prickly vegetation.

Conclusion & Emergency Info

Mexico is a wonderful country to visit for outdoor adventure, but the rock climbing in El Potrero Chico is especially great for bolt-clipping tourists like myself. Learn some Spanish, and you will enjoy even more of the warmth that the little town of Hidalgo has to offer. If you do find yourself in any sort of emergency situation, note that the park entrance fee (300 pesos) covers the cost of rescue services, mostly evacuation and transportation. You will need to communicate with locals as to your preferred hospital—in that case it helps to have travel insurance to pay for medical bills (about 30 USD per week). The 'Proteccion Civil' is the phone number to have saved—most places in the canyon have cell service: +52 813 588 3636.