

TRAVELS NOW AND THEN

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EL PICACHO 1992

The highest mountain in Baja California, Mexico, is a legendary peak known to the locals and all who attempt to scale her awesome walls as "El Picacho del Diablo" or "The Mountain of the Devil". While the official name according to the Mexican government is "Cerro de la Encantada (The Mountain of the Enchanted)" and the mountain was known to some for many years as "La Providencia (The Providence)" the name, El Picacho del Diablo, seems so appropriate to all who have walked in its shadow that it is doubtful that it will ever be known by any other name.

This magnificent mountain is a part and yet not a part of a massive block of granite that rises from the parched desert of Baja California about 100 miles south of the US border and 30 miles inland from the dusty village of San Felipe on the shores of the Sea of Cortez. The range itself is called the Sierra San Pedro Martir most of which consists of a wooded tableland between 8000 and 9000ft above sea level. On the west, the land rises to this elevation through a series of rolling benches mostly covered in scrub and mesquite bush. The eastern edge is much more dramatic with great yellow granite cliffs soaring into the sky. In terms of vegetation, the tableland on top is quite a contrast to the desert below. Lush meadows and stands of fir and cedar are interspersed with delicate aspen groves. Great heaps of boulders, granite knobs and "chickenheads" protrude in many places as if to remind the explorer of the essential ruggedness of the land. To protect this beautiful place, the Mexican government in 1947 established the first National Park in Baja, the "Parque Nacional Sierra San Pedro Martir". The only road into this park is a tortuous ribbon of gravel and rock that leaves the paved road, Highway 1, about 80 miles south of Ensenada and climbs over the benches to the west of the tableland, eventually, 50 miles later, arriving at the gate to the park. Along the way it passes two small villages, San Telmo and Sinaloa, and, higher up, the Meling Ranch, about which more later.

The high points of the tableland are on the extreme eastern rim and the highest of these is the 9450ft peak known as Cerro Botella Azul or "Blue Bottle" though even this does not rise more than about 1000ft above the meadow. El Picacho del Diablo is part of a sharp ridge that protrudes to the east of the main massif. This ridge stretches east from Blue Bottle and then turns north, forming between it and the main block a dramatic chasm known as Canyon del Diablo. This canyon begins just below Blue Bottle, travels north about 15 miles and then plunges eastward through a gap in the mountains to emerge in the desert and form a great dry lake, Laguna Diablo, that is part of the San Felipe desert.

In his book "Camping and Climbing in Baja" John Robinson describes El Picacho del Diablo as "... truly one of the finest mountains in North America. Composed of huge slabs of fractured granite, precipitous, almost inaccessible, towering almost two miles into the clouds, the peak is a challenge to climb, a wonder to look at." It was first climbed by the legendary Californian explorer and map-maker, Donald McLain, who, after viewing the mountain during a surveying trip in 1905, returned in 1911 determined to conquer it. His account of the ascent from the west makes it sound deceptively easy. Others who followed found it much more difficult than at first appears. This is particularly the case when approaching from the tableland to the west, the route taken by most of the early explorers. Viewed from that vantage point it seems deceptively close. Some tried to traverse the ridge that extends from Blue Bottle to El Picacho only to encounter crevasses and knobs ("chicken heads") requiring technical climbing gear and considerable time and effort. Others recognized the need to climb down from the tableland into Canyon del Diablo only to find it difficult to find a way up the mountain from below, in part because of the impossibility of seeing the peak until one is almost at the top and in part because of the existence of many blind canyons. After McLain's conquest, more than twenty years would pass before the second ascent by a group of six Sierra Club mountaineers in June of 1932. They set out from the tableland for what they thought would be a day hike along the ridge. Two days later they returned having reached the summit, but also having acquired a very healthy respect for the mountain. In the years that followed the mountain was climbed both from the east and from the west, but it was not until the fifties that Bud Bernhard discovered and described the one route up from Canyon del Diablo that requires no real technical climbing. This is known as Slot Wash and is the route that we were eventually to follow.

These days successful ascents are made just about every year and many hundreds of climbers have experienced the majesty of El Picacho del Diablo. As with any challenging endeavour, there are also mishaps. In 1967 two Claremont College students, Eleanor Dart and Ogden Kellogg, were lost for almost a month before Bud Bernhard found Dart wandering in Canyon del Diablo. The two students were lucky to escape alive. That same year another climber was not so lucky. He had a heart attack and died while toiling up the precipitous Slot Wash. His friends buried him in a side canyon and continued on to the top to record the events in the summit register.

Sometime during the summer of 1991 I was browsing in my favorite outdoor shop, Sports Chalet in La Canada, when I came across John Robinson's little book. Upon a whim I bought it, thinking it might be fun to return to Baja and camp on the beach. I had never heard of El Picacho del Diablo before, but as I read Robinson's account of its history and the challenge it presented to mountaineers I became increasingly fascinated. Here was a truly awesome challenge and yet one that might just be within my power to conquer. I lent the book to my hiking companion Doug Hart and it had a similar effect on him. In fact, he went out and purchased his own copy of the book. In the ensuing months we often jokingly referred to the possibility of an expedition to climb the mountain, but it was not until the end of 1991 that we seriously began to consider the possibility. Early on we decided to take the "easiest" route, involving very little technical climbing. This consisted of an approach through the eastern desert to a trailhead near the mouth of Canyon del Diablo. A long hike up the canyon would then take us to a base camp near the head of the canyon. The next day would involve a strenuous, all-day climb from this base camp up through Slot Wash to the peak and back down. The last stage would be a return hike down through the canyon. In February and March of 1992 we began to prepare for such a trip during the Easter break. It was my feeling, erroneous as it turned out, that we might be better off if we added a couple of others to our party. Several people at Caltech expressed interest, but, in the end, only a first year graduate student by the name of Steve Walton joined the expedition.

So it was that in early March of 1992 we made final preparations for our expedition to "El Picacho del Diablo". In addition to our normal hiking gear we acquired 50 ft. of climbing rope and a number of carabiners ("beaners") for the few places where such gear was apparently helpful or recommended for safety reasons. We had read of the waterfall at the entrance to Canyon del Diablo which, even though it was only

about 4ft high, was difficult to pass because of the depth of the pool and the smooth vertical walls on both sides. Pondering this obstacle, I had the idea of carrying a crude 6ft ladder made from 2 by 4s from the trailhead to the falls and so constructed such a ladder. With all this gear loaded into my 1981 Chevy Citation, the three of us set off at 6.15am on the morning of Friday, March 20, 1992, for our first attempt at the Mountain of the Devil. Little did we know of the trials and tribulations that lay between us and the moment we would conquer the mountain.

To begin with things went quite well. We drove southeast past Palm Springs and the Salton Sea to Calexico on the US side of the border. There we stopped to acquire the obligatory Mexican automobile insurance. It was, perhaps, an augur of things to come when, upon backing out of my parking space next to the insurance agency, I came into contact with the side of another car. Though the damage was not great, the incident was unpleasant. When the woman who was driving the other car failed to get a satisfactory response from me, she decided to call the police. We waited for them to come and take a report. Unfortunately, the woman had made more trouble for herself because the policeman ended up giving her a ticket for not having any insurance. At the very least, the incident caused us more than an hours delay. Finally, we drove over the border into Mexicali and headed for San Felipe, turning west onto Highway 3 after about 90 miles. About 20 miles from that intersection, we encountered a clearly marked signpost for a dirt road toward "Col de San Pedro Martir". Four miles of that dirt road brought us to the edge of the large dry lake, Laguna Diablo. About 15 miles long but only a couple of miles across, this dry lake has clearly been formed by the run-off from storms high in the Sierra San Pedro Martir. After some difficulties, we managed to get the car onto the dry lake itself and headed off southwards looking for the dirt road that led from the other side of the dry lake to the trailhead. Unfortunately, we missed this turn-off, and found ourselves at the very south end of the dry lake with no dirt road in sight. We then turned around and headed north again, eventually finding what looked like the right dirt road heading west toward the mountains. This we followed for about four miles, eventually reaching a point where the road petered out. We were all fairly sure we were now on the right track though we had no way of being certain. It was, incidentally, a very beautiful spot for, in a strip of the desert close to the mountains, there is sufficient moisture to create the most magnificent cactus garden I have ever seen. Growing out of the sand and rock was a vast array of cacti of all shapes and sizes from giant Cardon cacti to whispery Ocotillo and the most delicate small cacti. And we happened to have encountered them when many were flowering.

All of this induced a sense of well-being as we prepared to set off on our hike. Our instructions indicated that we should proceed northwards parallel with the mountains in order to locate the mouth of Canyon del Diablo. And so we set off in a jaunty mood, taking turns to carry one end or the other of the ladder. However, the mood began to shift as, instead of the mouth of a canyon, we began to encounter increasingly difficult terrain. So it was that we came to a halt in the gathering twilight after about three miles of hiking and, reluctantly, reached the conclusion that we had come up the wrong road and would have to retrace our steps. At this point a minor rebellion occurred for Steve and Doug refused to carry my "silly" ladder back across the desert to the car. The ladder was unceremoniously propped up against a giant Segora cactus and left standing there in the middle of the wilderness. If anyone ever happens by that spot, they will be greatly puzzled by this man-made artifact in the middle of the desert. Other than this light moment, the trudge back to the car through the gathering darkness was depressing, and, by the time we got back, it was very dark indeed. We ate dinner and settled down for the night, sleeping in the sand by the side of the car.

The next morning we set off again on our search for the right trailhead. Back on the dry lake, we drove northward again until we encountered clear markers for "Rancho Santa Clara" that we had missed the previous day. These led to a dirt road that was clearly the right one, and we followed it past a primitive ranch and corral and through about 5 miles of scrub to a trailhead containing several old wooden shacks and various leftovers from previous hiking expeditions. Two other Americans were camped there and provided the final proof that we were now on the right track. However, they also spoke of how difficult the hike up the canyon was and of the even greater difficulty of climbing the mountain. They also observed, as had we, that the top of the mountain was covered in snow. The book indicated that the final stage of the climb was difficult even in the absence of snow. I began to doubt that there was any chance that we could make it to the top.

Nevertheless, with the enthusiasm of morning, we set off across the desert to find the elusive entrance to Canyon del Diablo, a task that was now easily accomplished. The stream leaving the canyon was quite full and provided assurance of a reliable water supply. As we left the desert and entered the canyon, it became clear that we were in for another scenic treat, for the stream had carved a magnificent gorge through these mountains, creating great granite cliffs and a canyon bottom with huge boulders and beautiful pools filled with crystal clear water. We stopped frequently to admire this rugged grandeur. But we also made slow progress because of the frequent need to climb around waterfalls or over giant boulders. Early on we were faced with the waterfall at the entrance for which the ladder was designed. Fortunately, someone had fixed a pin in the rock high on the left-hand wall and from this pin hung a steel rope. Douglas climbed up and fixed our own rope to the pin and we used this to swing ourselves and our packs up and over the waterfall. However, as we proceeded up the canyon, Steve began to labor. It became depressingly clear that he was not physically capable of hiking any great distance under such tough conditions. Shortly after midday, we reached a pleasant little campsite on a elevated sandy bench where we sat down to have lunch and evaluate our situation. Steve did not think he could go any further that day and yet we had only come a few miles up the canyon. There were, at least, another tough ten miles ahead of us before we would even reach the base camp. We encouraged Steve to sleep and, as he did so, Douglas and I conferred. We could not leave Steve overnight and it was clear that it would be pointless to drag him any further up the canyon. We had no option but to abandon our attempt on the mountain of the devil while consoling ourselves with the thought that, at least, we had conducted a useful scouting expedition. In that vein we fed Steve some Gatorade and left him to sleep while we explored about another two miles of Canyon del Diablo. We returned to camp with enough daylight left to climb about 1000ft up the canyon wall using a steep wash. From that vantage point we could make out the summit of El Picacho del Diablo and, on the opposite rim of Canyon del Diablo, the Mexican National Observatory. It was clear to us that we had greatly underestimated the effort it would take to conquer this magnificent mountain.



Left: Entering Canyon del Diablo. Right: 4ft Waterfall

That night I slept soundly after the physical efforts of the previous day. We awoke to a beautiful dawn and, after breakfast, started our return trip out of Canyon del Diablo. This was uneventful though we had some excitement at the entrance waterfall where we met another group of three young hikers. They were attempting to transport their large dog over that obstacle in one of their backpacks. The dog was amazingly docile during its very precarious transit. Back at the trailhead, we wasted no time in loading the car and retracing our steps down the dirt road, past Rancho Santa Clara, across the dry lake and onto the highway. We drove almost straight back to Pasadena, stopping only for lunch along the roadside south of Mexicali. We arrived about 7.00pm, having had a most interesting and enjoyable time even though we had not come anywhere close to our objective. Nevertheless, both Douglas and I were quietly determined that this devilish mountain was not going to defeat us; we were both sure that, someday, we would return to Canyon del Diablo and El Picacho del Diablo.

As we reflected on our first attempt during the weeks that followed, we realized that the period, during which one could expect reasonably comfortable weather conditions for the ascent of El Picacho del Diablo, was very narrow indeed. The winter and spring seemed to be excluded because of the snow at the summit. On the other hand, the summer temperatures in the desert are in the 100 to 110 degree range. This left only the fall, preferably late fall, when the desert temperature has fallen and before the snow arrives at the higher altitudes. As I looked forward to the future, I realized that Douglas would be leaving to take up his faculty position at MIT at the end of 1992, and that I would be spending most of the fall of the same year on sabbatical at Oxford University. Our window for the foreseeable future was reduced to a few weeks at the end of September 1992.

So it was that Douglas and I set off at 5.00am on the morning of Monday, September 21, to make our second attempt to climb the peak of the devil. The temperature in the desert was quite high, and we were concerned about a series of tropical storms that were traveling northeast over Baja and southern California. At least we did not have to worry about snow at the higher elevations. Our plan was the same as before except that, by making an early start and with knowledge of the route to the trailhead, we hoped to hike several miles into Canyon del Diablo before nightfall. This seemed eminently feasible as we crossed the border and drove over the desert toward San Felipe. Turning inland, we reached the dry lake, Laguna Diablo, before midday and managed to get the car onto the lake bed without too much difficulty. So it was that we set off across the dry lake bed in a direction we judged would lead to the right point on the far side.

Suddenly, and with little warning, adversity struck. Incredibly, I saw what I thought was water approaching us across the dry lake bed, and swerved to avoid this extraordinary phenomenon. Though only a few inches deep, the water caused the otherwise firm surface of the dry lake to become an instant quagmire in which the car would have become inextricably mired. At one point we did drive across a small rivulet and only just managed to get through it. Apparently, a storm, which we could see perched over the mountains, had released enough rainfall to create a flash flood that poured out of Canyon del Diablo to wet the dry lake for, perhaps, the only time this year. We were very fortunate that our second attempt did not end with the Citation stuck for ever in the middle of Laguna Diablo.

Having recovered from our astonishment, we began to try to find a way around the water. However, this had spread on such a wide front that it rapidly became apparent that there was no possible access to the trailhead some seven or eight miles away. We briefly considered hiking to the trailhead but we were not even sure that it was safe to try and walk across the mud. We retreated to the dry side of the lake, and stopped to consider the alternatives. As we sat there, a magnificent white stallion came into view and pranced across the flats with several other horses in its wake. An omen, but for what? Perhaps to remind us of the majesty of nature and of the unpredictability of the mountain on which we had set our sights.

We could simply abandon, this our second attempt upon the mountain of the devil. But, if we did, when would we ever have the chance to make a third attempt. Or we could wait for the lake to dry. But neither of us had any idea how long this would take and, in any case, our confidence in the integrity and reliability of the lake bed had been severely eroded. Another possibility would be to try and approach the mountain from the west rather than the east. But this would require a long and arduous detour of about two hundred miles as well as a difficult sixty miles of dirt road leading up to the tableland. In the end, we decided that we would not be defeated by this mountain and that the greatest chance of success lay in the approach from the west. So it was that we drove back to the road that crosses the peninsula from San Felipe to the Pacific Coast, and began the detour by driving 100 miles northwest to Ensenada. There we turned south and drove 85 miles through Santo Tomas and San Vicente to the point 10 miles south of Colonet where we were to leave the asphalt highway. It was with some trepidation that we turned left off Highway 1 onto the rough dirt road that leads, eventually, to Sierra San Pedro Martir National Park, some 60 miles to the east and some 8000 ft higher. Initially, we made slow and steady progress, often climbing quite steeply from bench to bench as we ascended the mountain range. We drove through the village of San Telmo, and, after 30 miles, passed the Meling Ranch. This 10,000 acre cattle ranch dominates the western foothills of the Sierra San Pedro Martir. Founded by the pioneering Meling family in the early 1900s, the ranch house was rebuilt after it was destroyed in the 1911 revolution. The Meling ranch has, for many years, been a favorite, out-of-the-way resort for those who enjoy remote spots. It dominates this entire area including the National Park.

After passing the Meling Ranch, the road again climbed steeply toward the tableland, and the flora began to change from desert scrub to firs and aspens interspersed by meadows. It was on this remote stretch of gravel, as the sun was setting, that the old Citation finally began to show serious signs of distress. The slipping of the transmission began slowly, and was initially avoided by running in low gear. I had detected signs of transmission failure early in the trip but had chosen to press on. As I tried to nurse the old car up the hill, the slipping increased dramatically and clouds of smoke began to appear. We made it through the gates of the National Park but, about a mile further, the transmission quit completely for the first time. It was now very dark and we were utterly alone many miles from anywhere with no means of transportation other than our legs. It was a somewhat worrying situation. We waited for a little while to see if the transmission would work better after it cooled. When it was topped up with transmission oil, we tried again and managed to go another mile or so before we again came to a halt in a cloud of smoke. There was nothing more that could be done, and so we made camp by the side of the road. Perhaps, the morning would suggest some way out of our predicament. Curiously, two large trucks passed by in the night but it was too dark to make out anything other than their silhouettes. It seemed to me that the coyotes howled quite ominously that night.

The bright and crisp morning improved our spirits and revealed a number of options. We could try to drive the Citation down the mountain. But the downgrade included some upgrades that I doubted we could surmount. And there seemed no hope that the car could make it back to the USA. On the other hand, perhaps it would be best to dump it here where we would not be observed and then wait for a ride down the mountain in a truck such as had passed us in the night. But that meant dumping a lot of general gear that I kept in the car; and the thought of the long slow ride back to the US in a beat-up Mexican bus was not very appealing. However, a third alternative began to form in our minds based on the Observatory that was apparently located some four or five miles further up the mountain, indeed at the end of the dirt road. We suspected, correctly as it turned out, that the trucks were part of the normal traffic to and from the Observatory. We also thought it likely that the Observatory would have a means of communicating to the outside world, and that we might be able to use this means to seek help from home. We even considered the possibility of continuing with our assault on El Picacho del Diablo if we could arrange to be picked up some three or four days hence. After some discussion, we settled fairly quickly on this last plan. So, again, the transmission was filled with oil and we crossed our fingers hoping that the car still had a few miles left in it. Such turned out to be the case, and we managed to climb the last few inclines before emerging onto the large meadow called Vallecitos that comprises the tableland and the heart of the Sierra San Pedro Martir National Park. As we sped across the flat meadow, we spotted the observatory on a ridge to the east. We left the car at the bottom of the incline leading up this ridge, and walked the last couple of miles to the Observatory.

A group of cruciform Quonset-like huts set amongst the pines formed the hub of the support facilities for the Observatory. We approached cautiously, in part because of two loudly barking dogs, and in part because we were uncertain of the reception two wandering gringos would receive. There were a number of people hanging around but none took much notice of us, so we headed for the hut that seemed to contain the canteen. It was breakfast-time and the canteen was filled with people. After a pause, a young man stepped forward to greet us; we took him to be the foreman for he emanated a sense of authority confirmed by the walkie-talkie at his belt. We tried to explain our circumstance but it was clear that he spoke little English. I then turned to an older man who had a look of easy authority and whom I guessed was an astronomer. He had initially seemed unwilling to become involved but, when approached, was most cordial and, luckily, spoke excellent English. The two men, the foreman and the astronomer, conferred with us and with each other. First, it was decided that I should compose a message that would be radioed to their office in Ensenada; the operator there would then telephone the desired party at Caltech and relay the message to them. Doug and I had decided that the best idea would be to call the Mechanical Engineering Office at Caltech where either Jackie or Dana would be sure to be present to receive the message. And so it was that we sent off a brief communique telling of our car trouble and asking Yan to come and get us at the Observatory on Thursday, some three days later. Yan Kuhn de Chizelle was a French graduate student of mine with some knowledge of our plans and an automobile that we thought capable of making it up to the observatory. More specifically, we asked Yan to meet us at 2.00pm on Thursday at the white gate in Vallecitos meadow on the tableland below the Observatory. The white gate was chosen because it was an unmistakable point on the road through the meadow, and because we could hike there from the trailhead without having to climb to the Observatory. We could only hope that the message would not become too garbled as it was translated into Spanish and then back into English.

This accomplished, we had to make appropriate arrangements to dispose of the car which, in its present state and location, was worth negative dollars to me. I therefore decided on a grand gesture that I was fairly sure would impress our new friends. Thus I approached the foreman (who had arranged the message transmission) and told him that I wished to give him the car. I think that both he and the astronomer were somewhat startled by this gesture but also surprised and pleased by it. Our relationship with them which had begun to warm when they discovered that we were from Caltech, was enhanced considerably by the offer of the car. They drove us back down the hill to the car which I was able to drive up to the observatory since the transmission had had time to cool.



El Picacho from observatory



Citation's last stop

By this time we had discussed our planned assault on El Picacho del Diablo with our Mexican hosts. It so happened that the astronomer was also a mountain climber and, most remarkably, that he had, that very morning, returned after a successful four day climb of the peak with a visiting French astronomer. This common interest strengthened the bonds of our new friendship; they supplied us with a better local map

showing the best route to and up the mountain. And, when it came time for us to head off on our hike the foreman, Alfredo, and the two astronomers decided to take us to the best starting point in their four-wheel-drive Jeep. Thus we drove down to Vallecitos meadow and turned south along a narrow, dirt track, travelling in a southeasterly direction for several miles until the track became so rough even the Jeep could go no further. Here we parted company with our Mexican friends and set off for El Picacho del Diablo. For the first time we had some confidence that we might finally be able to conquer this devil.

Initially, the trail was fairly well ducked and wound its way up a very beautiful valley with a mix of trees, firs, cedars and aspens whose leaves were beginning to turn yellow and red. Further up this valley the trail became less distinct and seemed to divide. We followed a line of ducks that led in a more southerly direction than I would have liked but we assumed that the ridge above us was the edge of Canyon del Diablo and therefore it did not matter very much how we climbed it. However, when we reached the top of the ridge, it was clear that we still had some way to go before we would reach the edge of the canyon. Mistakenly assuming that the mountain ahead of us was the 9450ft Blue Bottle, we left the poorly ducked trail to climb this peak for our climbing notes recommended that we do in order to get our bearings. When we reached this summit, I managed to persuade Douglas of our error and the need to return and find the earlier trail. This we did in a somewhat dispirited mood for it was proving much harder than we anticipated to get to the edge of Canyon del Diablo. While Doug prepared lunch, I climbed a nearby rockpile in order to try and determine our location. After lunch, the trail began to climb more steeply and we grew increasingly pessimistic for the hours of daylight were dwindling. Finally, and rather suddenly, we arrived at a rocky peak, the top of Cerro Botella Azul or Blue Bottle at 9450ft. The view we expected unfolded in awesome majesty before us. The bottom of Canyon del Diablo lay almost a mile below us and yet, rising again on the other side, was an immense buff-coloured wall that culminated in the twin peaks of the magnificent El Picacho del Diablo. It was quite overwhelming; on a cerebral and physical level it challenged me; on an emotional level I had great difficulty believing that it was possible for me to climb it.

But we could not dally long for time was of the essence. It was clear that we would have to make it to the bottom of the canyon before sunset. The next obvious objective was the saddle to the north and about 1000ft below Blue Bottle. Fortunately, a ducked trail seemed to lead down the steep slope toward this objective and we reached it with little difficulty. From there we knew that we had to contour around the south wall of the Canyon Diablo to our right before attempting to descend. The more direct route straight down is known as Gorin's Gully and contains several vertical sections requiring ropes and technical climbing gear. Such difficulties can be avoided by contouring far enough around to a large rubble strewn gully known as Blue Bottle Wash. Fortunately this route was well ducked and we found our way fairly readily to the wash and began to descend. There were several difficult places during the descent where large blocks of granite had created substantial obstacles and each of these required some route finding and some climbing. But, for the most part, the descent was very long and extremely hard on the legs as we stepped from boulder to boulder. We could not afford to stop for any extended periods for it was clear that we would only just make it to the canyon bottom before nightfall. Such haste is often unwise and so it proved in this case for both of us suffered falls. Fortunately I escaped relatively unscathed. Douglas, on the other hand, sprained his ankle quite badly and was thus handicapped for the rest of the trip. The Motrin which I happened to have with me proved invaluable in easing the pain of the ankle while, at the same time, providing muscle relaxant.

Though the descent seemed endless we did, indeed, reach the bottom just before nightfall. The need to do so was not dictated by the desire for a comfortable campsite but by the more basic and essential need to find water. Indeed, we had run out of water about two thirds of the way down the wash. Therefore, it was a great relief to come upon a small but sparkling waterfall tumbling out of a side canyon to form a clear and inviting pool of water directly ahead of us. Having sated our thirst and refilled our water bottles, we pressed on through fairly thick brush to find a suitable campsite for the night. Fortunately, we had only to go a few hundred yards before we came upon a small flat clearing by some rocks and another pool and, with relief, we shed our packs and quickly made camp. After dinner, we bedded down to try to get as much rest as we could before the major effort of the following day. It was a beautiful, still night. We had been lucky with the weather; though we had seen a number of thunderstorms in the distance none had come our way.

Perhaps we should have made an effort to arise before sun-up but the efforts of the previous day required as much recuperation as possible and so the sun arose with us. The weather seemed ideal and our excitement grew as we began preparations for the final assault on El Picacho del Diablo. We correctly surmised that we were still some distance upstream of Camp Noche, the starting point for the ascent of the mountain. Nevertheless we decided to stow our packs at this pleasant little site and to return here after our climb. There seemed little point in carrying our heavy packs down to Camp Noche and then have to bring them back up. I had brought along two large plastic trash can liners and, to be safe, we covered our packs before we left. So we set out on the final leg of our ascent with just one light day-pack.

As we proceeded down Canyon del Diablo, we were able to identify several reference points. After a few hundred yards, we encountered a clearing surrounded by thin logs on a bench to the west of the stream. This small site was Camp Cedar oak at an elevation of 6600ft. About a half mile further downstream, we came upon Camp Noche (6300ft), a larger site on a bench to the east of the stream. An enticing swimming hole nearby helped to confirm our identification. We also found a small Mexican flag that had been placed in the middle of Camp Noche by the preceding expedition led by our astronomer friends.

We wasted little time in embarking on our ascent of the large, shallow gully immediately above Camp Noche, named Night Wash by a group from UCLA who had descended this way after night had fallen. It is a steep but easy climb up a rocky slope that eventually reaches a saddle at about 7400ft. This saddle leads to the much larger gully known as Slot Wash. The reason for this sideways entrance into Slot Wash is that the latter is too steep to be climbed in its lower reaches. From the Night Wash Saddle we contoured around and then dropped into Slot Wash. Here the going became significantly harder because one had to surmount many large boulders and a few steep falls. About 7800ft we were pleased to encounter running water and stopped by a small pool to refresh ourselves. It was clearly going to be a very tough climb, not so much because of the height but because the terrain was extremely rough. Moreover, while the route was well marked by ducks for some stretches, there were others in which ducks were few and far between. Worse still, there were ducked trails that went off in what were clearly wrong directions. Thus there were numerous stops for navigational purposes, and there were many times when we were quite unsure whether or not we were on the right path (though that word was quite alien to the terrain in which we found ourselves). However, as we proceeded to thread our way past the boulders of Slot Wash, we did not have too much difficulty in identifying the prominent rock mass that divides the Wash at an elevation of 8200ft. Here, our navigational notes told us to take the left branch but, almost immediately, we had to climb onto a shoulder on the left side of the canyon in order to circumvent several large waterfalls. This was the most dangerous part of the ascent and a slip could have been fatal (on the way down I persuaded Douglas to anchor me with a rope while I negotiated these sections). Having completed this stretch of the climb we came upon a junction where I made the only serious error in navigation. We had climbed a rough dirt and rock slope to a point where a steep wash branched off to the north; the ducks appeared to lead in this direction. According to our notes,

we needed to find a wash like this, called "Wall Street" that would lead us directly up to the north summit of the mountain. At this point, I should explain that the summit of El Picacho del Diablo consists of a very steep and ragged ridge of granite. At each end of this short ridge are the north and south summits measuring 10154ft and 10152ft respectively. It is a difficult, technical climb to get from one summit to the other, for there are several gaps and knobs that present substantial obstacles along the granite ridge. We sought the branch to Wall Street for that would take us to the north summit whereas to continue straight would take us to a point midway along the summit ridge. The reason I chose not to take the steep wash that I now suspect was Wall Street, was because it appeared to be headed north and I thought Wall Street was in a northeast direction. Therefore, we contoured around to our right in an attempt to find Wall Street. We found ourselves in a steep narrow wash which, at the time, I thought was Wall Street but that was, in fact, the upper reach of Slot Wash.



Climbing toward the summit



The summit of El Picacho

We were now very excited about the fact that the summit of El Picacho del Diablo was but a few hundred feet away. At the same time, we were quite exhausted and so struggled up the last few hundred feet to the summit. The last fifty feet or so were over bare rock and culminated in a sharp ridge. Then, quite suddenly, a truly awe-inspiring vista exploded before our eyes and I felt as though I had been propelled into space. The drop on the far side, to the east, was several thousand feet straight down. We could see the notorious dry lake 10000ft below us and could even discern the various dirt roads leading to and from it. Beyond this lay the inland coast and the Sea of Cortez. And, turning around to look back in the direction we had come, we could make out the Pacific Coast through the desert haze. Most mountain summits evoke a sense of exhilaration and that emotion is heightened when the climb is difficult or when the view is spectacular. In this case, not only had we expended great effort and overcome substantial difficulties but also the view was truly mind-blowing. I was overcome, even frightened though I was in no danger. It was an experience that I doubt I will ever have again because I think the climb taxed me to the furthest limits of my physical and emotional resources. I had met the devil and had survived. And, still, this mountain was like a magnificent, wild animal that should forever remain unshackled. We never, in fact, reached the actual north summit for it was a few yards away and a few feet higher. We were separated from it by a knob and a gap that would have required rock climbing expertise and equipment to traverse. While we had reached the top of this mountain, in some strange way it seemed appropriate that we had to leave the absolute summit untouched. We had developed a special, mystical relation with this mountain that would be with us the rest of our days.

But time was short and we had to start to descend to have any hope of reaching our camp site before dark. We were also concerned about the very active thunderstorm that we could see off to the west in the vicinity of the entrance to the Park. Up to now the weather had treated us very kindly for the summit ridge is often hidden in cloud and had, in fact, been so hidden the previous day. El Picacho was not yet finished with us and had at least one more surprise for us resulting from this storm we could see in the distance. But the weather was just fine during the early part of our descent. We made good time because it was quite easy to navigate, retracing the route we had taken on the way up. We tried to hustle along because it was becoming evident that we would not make it to the bottom of the canyon before nightfall and we were apprehensive about finding our way in the dark. Then it also began to rain. We donned our waterproof jackets though not the pants since they would have been torn to shreds. Fortunately, we only felt the edge of the storm and the light rain soon abated. Of more concern was the impending darkness. We reached the saddle leading from Slot Wash to Night Wash while it was still light and so it only remained to descend through Night Wash. Douglas, fearing the darkness, set a very rapid rate of descent. Trying to keep up, I took one head-over-heels fall, fortunately without injury. Darkness fell but we reached Camp Noche in the bottom of the canyon without further incident. There we rested and took advantage of the pause to congratulate ourselves on our conquest of El Picacho. The elation persisted as we made our way by flashlight up Canyon del Diablo to our camp site about half a mile upstream. I was glad that I had noted in my mind the fact that there was a large, fallen tree lying across the gully just downstream of the campsite for we might otherwise have had difficulty finding it in the darkness. We were also thankful for the trashcan liners that had kept our packs and all our stuff dry during the rain.

It had been an extraordinary physical effort for me that day, and, by the time we returned to camp, I only wanted to climb into my sleeping bag. This I did while Douglas cooked and ate dinner. Both of us slept soundly after all our exertions and awoke at dawn to another bright and clear morning. We anticipated a long and tough climb up and out of the canyon while carrying our packs and such proved to be the case. One must be careful not to leave Blue Bottle Wash too soon to begin contouring toward the saddle on the rim below Blue Bottle. But mostly it was a hard slog punctuated by rest stops during which we could again admire the magnificent view behind us. Finally, we reached the Blue Bottle saddle about lunchtime and so paused for Top Ramen. Thus replenished, we began the gentle descent through a shallow valley traveling northwest in the direction of Vallecitos meadow. We soon discovered that we still had much further to go than we imagined but the going was fairly easy, and we knew that, as long as we headed northwest, we had to intersect the dirt road along which we had traveled to the trailhead when we began our hike. The trail was initially very well ducked and passed through some beautiful aspen groves. But it then seemed to evaporate and we crossed from one canyon to another on several occasions. Finally, we came upon the trail again in a flat, sandy-bottomed canyon and were able to follow it all the way to the dirt road. This was the very first point at which we thought we might possibly encounter Yan if he had indeed come to get us and had learnt of our route from our friends at the Observatory. That seemed a really long shot, so we were not at all surprised when we found no-one at the junction with the dirt road. After a brief rest, we set off to walk along the road to Vallecitos meadow. We were both quite exhausted and hoping that Yan would show up at every turn. But there was no sign of anyone and, after about three miles, we reached the junction with the main dirt road to the Observatory. There we sat down beside the road somewhat

dejected. Not only was there no sign of Yan but I could not remember whether the white gate was to the east or west of us. I volunteered to hike along the road in order to try and find the white gate while Douglas stayed by the packs. But I had gone only a short distance when we spotted the cloud of dust associated with a vehicle coming up the road. Our spirits rose only to fall as the vehicle came into sight and proved to be a beat-up old pick-up instead of Yan's Subaru. It was loaded with a refrigerator and other supplies clearly headed for the Observatory. I tried to find out from the driver whether or not he had seen anyone waiting by the white gate further down the meadow but this was much too complex an issue to have any hope of communicating given the severe limits of our common language. I did not want the driver to begin to question our sanity and so switched to a much simpler request, namely that he give us a ride to the Observatory. And so we completed our epic hike to El Picacho whilst hanging on to a refrigerator bouncing along in the back of a pick-up truck. At the Observatory, there was no sign of Yan or any other rescuer. We were, however, greeted by our new friends who seemed pleased that we had returned safely though they were clearly somewhat amused by our bedraggled appearance. Both my shorts and Douglas's new hiking pants had been torn to shreds by the rocks of El Picacho. At least Douglas's pants had provided some protection; my knees, on the other hand, were almost devoid of skin.

We sought out our English speaking astronomer friend to find out whether he knew anything of Yan's whereabouts. He radioed our other friend Alfredo the foreman who was somewhere out on the road. The story that was relayed to us from Alfredo made little sense to us. Apparently two women had come to rescue us but had been stopped at a point on the dirt road up to the tableland by the fact that the storm of the previous day had washed out part of the road. Who these two women were was a mystery to us. Apparently, Alfredo had taken a four-wheel-drive truck down to the point where the road was washed out in order to inspect the damage. There he had found the two women and was driving back up to the Observatory, bringing them with him. They would arrive in about a half-hour. But, at this point, I must backtrack to tell of the events that were set in motion when our original message was radioed down the mountain.

Apparently, the telephone and radio operator in Ensenada had called Caltech and Dana Young, one of the secretaries in the Mechanical Engineering Office, had taken the message that told of our car trouble and of our request for Yan to come and rescue us on Thursday. Also received were some instructions on how to find the turn-off for the dirt road to the Observatory. Though we had tried to couch the message in as low a key as possible, it inevitably caused significant consternation. The first problem was that Yan, having a French passport, had serious doubts as to whether he could get back across the border into the US. On the other hand, Beth McKenney, another graduate student of mine, was used to the mountains and seemed eager to be part of "the rescue". She and Ann, Douglas's wife, decided that they would drive Douglas's Volvo down to the Observatory. They even started out on Wednesday evening and stayed the night in San Diego before crossing the border on Thursday morning. They had some difficulty identifying the turn-off onto the dirt road leading to Observatory but made good progress up that road until halted by the washed-out road just beyond the gate to the National Park. Indeed, their circumstances had become quite problematic since they no longer had sufficient gasoline to get back to the highway. They were very fortunate to meet up with the group from the Observatory who were inspecting the damage to the road. In any case, it was clear to all that Ann and Beth would now, also, need to seek refuge at the Observatory. So it was that, after the gate attendant had helped park the Volvo beside his cabin, they set off with Alfredo on his way back up the mountain. It was dark before they reached the Observatory and we were finally able to identify "the two women who had come to rescue us". We were delighted to see them and excitedly swapped the stories of our respective adventures. Our hosts quickly arranged a room in one of the cabins where the four of us could camp out for the night. Then we all repaired to the canteen for dinner and an impromptu party at which I was introduced to the local delicacy, roasted pine nuts.

The rest of the story is briefly told. The next morning the four of us walked the mile or so to the telescopes perched on the rim above the rest of the Observatory facilities. We did this for a last look at El Picacho and the magnificent view of the desert and sea to the east. Then our hosts loaded us and all our gear (including the stuff from my car) into a pick-up truck. We said our goodbyes to my car and to our marvellous hosts who could not have been more helpful to us, and set off for the ride down the mountain. The morning was again clear and bright and it was exhilarating to stand in the back of the pick-up and to enjoy this beautiful land as it swept past. We crossed the washed out road with little difficulty and then loaded all our stuff into and onto the Volvo. The Observatory staff had even given us some cans of gasoline and we were, therefore, well supplied for the drive down the mountain. It was necessary to negotiate some damaged sections of road just below the gate but, after that, we made steady progress down to the paved Highway 1 and north on that road to the US border in Tijuana. After crossing into the US, it was time for a celebration. We had discovered that it was Beth's birthday. So in her honor and in celebration of our rescue, we found a small Thai restaurant near San Diego. The food was marvellous and we had a most enjoyable meal though I am not quite sure whether our impressions were entirely objective given the circumstances. About three hours later, we were back in Sierra Madre. It was very hard to believe that only five days had passed since we set out on our adventure.

And so another chapter in my mountain travels drew to a close. We had succeeded in our ascent of the "mountain of the devil" despite the many difficulties that we encountered. Even subtracting those, it had taken a great physical effort that strained my endurance to its limits. And I will always be proud of that achievement. But I wonder whether or not it will be that aspect of the adventure that I will remember with most joy. Maybe not. Maybe it will be the example of generosity and kindness shown to two, and later four, strangers by that marvellous group of people at the Observatory. They would not even accept our proffered payment for the gasoline. Maybe, someday, I will be able, in my turn, to provide such help to a foreign adventurer in my mountains. I certainly hope so.

One ironic footnote needs telling. Alfredo, "the foreman", had written his name and address on a piece of paper for I had promised to send him the pink slip for the Citation when I reached home. At the time I did not look closely at the paper. A few days later I fished it out of my pouch in order to fulfil my pledge only to discover that his name was Alfredo Meling, and therefore a member of the family that owned the entire area. Perhaps I had chosen to give my car to the richest person at the Observatory. I hope not.

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Christopher E. Brennen*