

A Climbers' Guide to the El Rito Trad Cliffs

New Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Five miles north of the small New Mexico community of El Rito, tucked well up a side canyon in the Carson National Forest, lies a 100m high monolithic cliff that offers a lot to the traditional rock climber: lack of crowding, good access, interesting and solid rock, generally good protection, and that very rare commodity: high quality climbs at moderate difficulty levels. This is the perfect spot for a beginning climber to learn multi-pitch technique, with plenty of exposure to motivate mastering the art of placing protection. These are the "El Rito Trad" cliffs, to distinguish them from the more recently developed "Sport" crags closer to the town of El Rito.

Climbing has gone on at the Trad Cliffs since the 1970s by locals from the nearest sizeable towns of Los Alamos, Taos, and Santa Fe. The area is amazingly uncrowded due to its remoteness from major population centers; at time of publication of this guide in 2003, it is still fairly common to have the entire area to oneself on a weekend during the best seasons (late Spring through Fall.) Adding to its appeal is a beautiful setting in a transition zone between high desert and pine forest. The cliff is on public land, so trespassing and liability problems are nonexistent, although on several occasions during extreme fire conditions, the forest has been closed to all public access. At an elevation of 7800' and with a SW exposure, climbing is usually possible for all but the winter months. The only caveat to all these endorsements is the relatively primitive access road. Unsuspecting drivers in four-wheel-drive vehicles have forced the issue in wet conditions, only to discover later that a car hoist and chisel were the only way they could remove the gumbo mud from their undercarriages.

The rock at El Rito is aesthetic and eminently climbable. An erosional remnant of hard quartzite in an area typified by volcanics, the main cliff averages about 100m in height and is consistently steep but rarely vertical. The quartzite is laden with cobble stones, providing so many holds that climbing is possible almost anywhere. The routes listed here are simply suggestions of lines that you will probably find most pleasant due to availability of protection, continuous climbing on the best rock, and few vegetable hazards. Protection is generally good on the routes in this guide, but often unobvious. A rack that works well for me on every route in the guide is listed below. A generous supply of single and double runners is advised to minimize rope drag and to take advantage of natural protection.

HOW TO GET THERE

The village of El Rito is located about 50 miles north of Santa Fe. Turn north on Forest Road 44 (dirt) on the east edge of town. Drive 4.4 miles from the pavement, then drop down to the left on FR 44B. In wet conditions or without a high-clearance vehicle, park as soon as practical and hike the remaining half-mile of the road. If continuing to drive, do not pass a gate indicating private property! Park well off the road just downhill from the gate and hike up to the base of the cliffs, looming above to the east. In recent years a camping area has developed off the road to the right just before the gate. This was an untouched piece of forest before the first person drove up there, then somebody followed the tracks, and so on. There is now a fire ring and all the destruction that that brings. If you must have a fire on those 70-degree nights, bring your own wood, or at least don't rip the lowest limbs off the trees. Climbers are fond of spending hours debating the environmental impact of a bolt on the rock as they sit around a roaring fire a few feet away from their SUV at the end of a new road that wouldn't be there without 4-wheel drive.

GUIDE TO THE GUIDE

On the cliff diagram, suggested belay spots are indicated by a small red circle. In the detailed descriptions, the route name is followed by a difficulty rating in the Yosemite Decimal System (minus the 5.), a protection quality rating, and finally an overall quality rating in stars. Distances are approximate and are in meters (m).

| Protection Quality Ratings | |
|----------------------------|---|
| G+ | Excellent |
| G | Good |
| G- | Fair |
| PG | Parental Guidance suggested - expect runouts |
| R | Rasty - serious injury probable in case of fall |
| X | Xtra-rasty - death possible in case of fall |

| Suggested Rack | | | |
|------------------|-------------------|------------------|-----------------------------------|
| #3 Camalot (1) | #1/2 Camalot (1) | blue Alien (1) | wired Stoppers - #3 - #10 (1 ea.) |
| #2 Camalot (1) | red Alien (1) | purple Alien (1) | quickdraws (8) |
| #1 Camalot (1) | yellow Aliens (2) | medium hexes (2) | regular (24") slings (8) |
| #3/4 Camalot (1) | green Alien (1) | pink Tricam (1) | cordalette |

HISTORY AND SUGGESTED USE POLICY

My wife Lynn and I began a systematic exploration of this crag in 1987. There were a few climbers in Los Alamos who had visited infrequently over the previous decade or so, and I was able to obtain a very crude map to the area, with a sketch showing a few lines. They were unnamed and ungraded. We climbed most of the logical lines over that summer, rating and naming them with the intention of publishing the first guide, which we made available in a few climbing shops. It came to be widely copied, but I never figured on getting rich from it, anyway, so when the Internet arrived I made it available to everyone.

Since that initial 'adoption' of the crag, we have continued to try to enhance the climbing experience. We cleared the worst brush at the base of some of the climbs, then built a logical trail system to avoid the proliferation of climbers' trails that is the inevitable result of increased visitation. In 2002 we decided to add a few fixed anchors after frustration over placing half our rack and wasting lots of time securing gear anchors at some of the most common belay spots. An additional motivation was the fact that El Rito has been used for decades as the "Graduation Climb" for the Los Alamos Mountaineers' Spring Climbing Class. Beginning climbers fall a lot, and even with relatively experienced leaders, the elaborate gear anchors were often of suspect quality. Creating safe anchors has a down-side, however. The "booty" left behind by leaders in over their heads, rapellers, and followers forgetting to remove the belay anchor, will now come to an end. The gear I've collected over the years has been a substantial addition to my rack.

In 2003 I decided to put in two new pitches where bolts would clearly be needed. I consulted with many fellow climbers, and the consensus was that, as long as the traditional nature of the area would not be compromised, and the routes were high quality, the area could use a few more difficult climbs. These pitches, called "Bring Me a Bucket" and "Weapons of Mass Construction" are both 5.9, a grade previously represented by only a single route, and are among the very best at the area. They are not sport routes. The bolts are fairly widely spaced, and are absent where decent gear placements are possible. Take a full rack up these routes, and enjoy.

I do not own this crag, but feel I have as much authority as anyone to **suggest** a use policy. It is intended to preserve the traditional climbing experience, even when that involves 'boldness' on some of the routes. There is a good, true "sport" area just down the road if one should wish the experience of climbing without a rack on short, fully safe yo-yo routes. (No disdain is intended here, I climb there frequently.)

- Don't add protection bolts to any existing route. If you want to create a new route involving bolts, place only high-quality bolts, and never near good gear placements.
- All routes should go over the top of the feature (no "yo-yo" sport routes to arbitrary anchors at half-rope length.)
- Avoid contrived routes a few meters from existing ones. Any new line should be logically independent.
- Don't add any more trails, but stay on and help maintain those that are already clearly in existence.
- Don't build any more fire rings or create new camping or parking spots.
- If you must have a fire, bring your own wood.
- Don't leave trash behind, and bury your crap deep and well away from the trails and crag.
- Don't leave slings behind on trees unless you have no choice - try traversing to one of the fixed anchors if you must rappel.

ROUTE DESCRIPTIONS

1: *Commie Pinkos 5.4, G-, ***

So named because this is as far left as you can get. Uphill (NW) of here, the cliff becomes broken and shorter, no longer presenting any multi-pitch possibilities. A pleasant route eminently suited for the beginning leader, this route starts at the uppermost of two large Ponderosa pines at the base of the rounded ridge forming the left edge of the main cliff. Climb up a short face to a flake on this ridge, then continue to the base of an obvious gully that leads up and right. A belay stance is available at 40m where the gully runs out onto the face. Cracks on the steep face above provide protection for face climbing on excellent holds.

2: *Gnarly 5.5, PG, ****

Begin just downhill of the lower ponderosa (see route 1) on an indistinct buttress right of a roof, and wander up to easy ledges (30m, PG, 5.2). Belay by a gnarled juniper tree. There are many alternatives on the face above. The 5.5 rating is for a route that tends up and slightly right to intersect a right-facing dihedral at a reddish area. Step around the dihedral to find a good crack for protection, then continue straight up. This leads you to a belay at another picturesque juniper. **Variation:** rather than stepping around the corner into the dihedral, continue straight up the steep knobby wall to its left. This is only a little more difficult, but much more exciting due to the lack of protection.

2A: *Weapons of Mass Construction, 5.9, G-, ****

This pitch, new in 2003, climbs the relatively featureless face between the upper pitches of routes 2 and 3. It is made possible by the addition of 5 bolts, but don't treat it as a sport route! You'll want some small cams and nuts to supplement the bolts, or risk 50-foot falls. Most of the climbing is 5.8, but there is a crux section where the holds seem to shrink. One of the best pitches at El Rito, similar in nature to, but more difficult than the 2nd pitch of *Packrat Dihedral*.

3: The Big "E" 5.7, 6-, ***

Start about 4m. below the roots of the rotting log lying parallel to the base at the left side of the cliff face, where two limbs of a juniper grow straight up, looking like individual small trees. Climb a knobby face to arrive at a small ceiling. Diagonal up a small crack at its right edge for 20m or so until it seems prudent to continue straight up. You'll arrive at a belay on a ledge system at about 40m, but continue over short headwall to reach the double-bolt anchor on the next ledge. An excellent pitch. The next pitch ascends the left-facing dihedral to the left of the *Juniper Overhang*. This climb is quintessential El Rito: steep, continuous face climbing on excellent holds. Pro is sparse on the second pitch.

Juniper ledge is the large ledge in approximately the center of the cliff. There is a large symmetric Juniper growing from a crack just below. There are many ways to reach the ledge, five of which are documented here, and all of which have possible variations. There are also several well-defined routes to the top from the ledge (see diagram). Any of the lower pitches can be linked with any of the upper pitches via the ledge.

4: Juniper Overhang 5.9+, 6-, ***

Begin about halfway along the long rotten log. Climb a low-angle face and cracks to arrive at a small rectangular cutout with a bush at 25m. Climb over the ceiling of the cutout (5.7) and follow the exit crack up the smooth slab above, then wander up to a belay at the left end of Juniper Ledge. You will be at the base of the obvious right-facing dihedral of the Juniper Overhang, the major roof above Juniper Ledge. Climb the dihedral. Small active cams and a medium-sized wired wedge will be useful on this exciting pitch. Once over the roof, much easier climbing leads up and left, or you can continue straight up the smooth face for a greater challenge (5.8). The final belay ledge has a two-bolt anchor.

4A: Bring Me a Bucket 5.9, 6-, ***

This is a variation to the second pitch of *Juniper Overhang*. It is protected mostly by bolts, but bring your rack for intermediate protection. Follow the straight-up crack near the left end of Juniper ledge to a bush, then step left onto the face and clip the first bolt. Continue up the black water streak past two more bolts. A bolt just above the lip protects crux moves, then climb much easier rock up past two widely spaced bolts, the last of which protects the final 5.8 moves over a short headwall to a spacious ledge with a 2-bolt anchor, shared with route 4.

5a: Juniper Direct 5.6, 6

This is the most direct line to the big juniper tree discussed previously. Many variations are possible, but most leaders connect obvious cracks more or less straight up, encountering a spot of 5.6 about half-way up otherwise easier terrain. Considerable foliage conspires to make this one of the poorest pitches described in this guide. A 50m rope just makes it to the ledge. For the easiest upper pitch, climb left over the large flake blocking access to the left side of Juniper Ledge, then turn the first corner to climb a vertical dihedral. The dihedral neatly bypasses the formidable *Juniper Overhang* via a short crux chimney, then climb easy cracks a short distance to 4th class rock.

5b: El Faralito 5.4, G+, **

This route is named in honor of the restaurant in El Rito owned by the Trujillos, a mandatory stop for chile addicts. Right of Juniper Direct is another crack, this one single, that has a small slender pine at about 40m. The lower part of this crack is quite easy, and the upper part well-protected 5.4. Belay at the right edge of Juniper Ledge (2-bolt anchor.) Choose an upper pitch from routes 5A or 6A. A 50m rope just reaches Juniper Ledge!

6a: Chile Verde 5.6, PG, ***

This fine route begins 6m. left of the more easily located "Refritos". A crack with a tiny tree at about 6m. leads straight up to a small roof. Climb the small water streak above the roof past another small roof on excellent rock to join route 5B at a small slender pine. Continue up to a belay (2 bolts) on the right end of Juniper ledge (full 50m pitch). Directly above is a left-facing dihedral that leads up and over a fun roof (5.6), then up cracks and gullies to a 2-bolt belay very near the true top.

6b: Refritos 5.6, R, **

One of the more identifiable features on the cliff is this long black lichen streak formed along a small occasional watercourse about half-way between the major roofs of *Juniper Overhang* and *Techo al Derecho*. The knobby face and color give the impression of refritos (refried beans). Climb directly up the streaks, passing a roof 2/3 of the way up, and continue to Juniper Ledge (2-bolt belay, full 50m pitch!). This pitch is poorly protected, but well worth doing if you're very comfortable at the grade. At the top of the pitch you might be tempted to move out right rather than continuing up the dihedral above (route 6A). It's been done, but it's not worth it, due to very poor quality rock.

7: Guillotine 5.6+, G, **

Start 3m. right of the large juniper at the base of "Refritos", in a shallow depression in the face. Climb up and slightly right through a shallow dihedral with a bush at its base. Generally easier climbing leads up good cracks into the guillotine cave, a dark slot with an ominous flake precariously jammed. With a 60m. rope you can continue up and left over easy ground to belay on a ledge. With a 50m. rope, belay behind the guillotine flake, then scramble up to the ledge and reset the belay so you can reach the top in one more rope length. From the ledge climb straight up toward a large red flake, passing between it and a "lollipop" shaped tree on steep but moderate rock. Continue up cracks to a 2-bolt anchor shared with route 6A. An excellent pitch that makes up for the brush on pitch 1.

8: Techo al Derecho 5.8, (R) **

Begin at the base of the left side of the huge cutout forming most of the right half of the cliff. 4th class rock leads 20m. to a belay alcove. Moderate but poorly protected cracks lead up and right, staying just below the dihedral, to the obvious crack just below the left end of the big roof, then pull the roof to a belay in the crack above. The bottom section of this pitch is not recommended unless you are very comfortable at the grade. A better protected option is to use the first pitch of route 11, then do the short but unprotected traverse to join this route below the roof. For the second pitch, choose one of three alternatives:

(a) Continue up the crack. This is the easiest way (5.0), but contains little quality climbing and many "vegetable moves".

(b) * Move left onto the low-angle face past two small junipers to belay at a large tree at the top (5.2).

(c) *** Traverse to the right above the overhang, then pick a route up the face to the tree at the top. This pitch is highly exposed and continuous at 5.6 to 5.7+, and is the best pitch at El Rito. Appearance notwithstanding, protection is plentiful.

9: *Moanin' 5.7, R*

Scramble up 3rd class rock to the floor of the large dark ugly depression in the middle of the face below the roof. In the back of the depression is a shallow 5.7 gully featuring unstable shattered rock and poor protection that leads to the much better face above. Continue up to join route 8. Better yet, climb something else.

10: *Techo Directo 5.11-, G-, ***

Rick Smith led this on-sight after one of the Los Alamos Mountaineers' climbing school classes. The route goes directly over the big roof near its center. Approach from left of center, using any of several alternatives for the first pitch. The first ascent came directly up the center of the slabs at 5.9, but one could also use the first pitch of routes 8 or 11.

Small active cams provide at least psychological protection for the right-traversing roof moves. If you pick the right spot, you will end up in a nice crack on the monolithic face above which takes you to the top at about 5.7.

11: *Packrat Dihedral 5.6, G, ***

This seems to be the most popular route at El Rito, not perhaps because of its quality, but because it is such an obvious feature. It bypasses the huge roof on its right edge. Climb directly up the long dihedral, or on the faces to the right or left. With a 50m rope, the leader can barely reach a belay just below the roof (2-bolt anchor.) Start the second pitch by working out on the face to the right, then choose from two main alternatives: Diagonal right up an obvious crack system to the top (brushy, 5.3), or move back left onto the monolithic face above the overhang and wander upward (many variations, 5.6). The second pitch is excellent.

Right of Packrat Dihedral, the wall degenerates into broken brushy rock. However, there is some quality climbing here that is missed by most visitors. The following four routes are suggestions for single-pitch routes on the most monolithic rock. They are not shown on the diagram. Descent is via the East Gully for all these.

12: *Shiitake: 5.7, G, ***

Locate the mushroom-shaped roof about 25m up the wall, 30m right of *Packrat Dihedral*.

Center: Climb the crack that leads through the center of the mushroom. Continue straight up the crack/chimney to a large pine.

Right: Leave the crack just under the roof and climb its right edge. A crack extends above, providing good protection and exciting climbing. Stay left on the face to reach a large pine, rather than exiting to the brush-choked gully on the right.

13: Pedernal Cracks 5.6, G+, **

Midway between routes 12 and 14 are a group of large cracks splitting an otherwise smooth monolithic slab. A fine moderate climb goes straight up these cracks, using mostly the smaller center crack for protection and climbing on the numerous face holds.

14: Shoes for Industry 5.8+, G+, *

This route climbs the small triangular roof 20m right of *Shiitake* (bright yellow lichen patch below). Climb the face of the red slab directly below the roof, then over it (crux, painful on the fingers) to easier rock above. Stay left in the upper part to keep the climb interesting.

15: Cave Woman 5.3, G+, ***

15m. right of route 14 is a crack leading to an obvious rectangular cave (Not the huge cave to the left; the one you are seeking is only about 2m. square). Climb to the cave, then exit right to cracks and face leading straight to the top. An excellent beginner's route.

DESCENT ROUTES

The Trail Descent:

By far the easiest option - after completing your route, continue to the true summit where you can pick up a trail that drops down to the north, then contours round the west end of the cliff, then back to the base of the climbs.

The East Gully Descent:

This descent is sometimes used for routes on the right (east) end of the wall. It is described here from the top of the crag; if you are descending from the single-pitch routes 13-15, you'll intersect it much lower. Walk east along the summit ridge until the cliff edge gives way to a large open talus slope with a tall dead snag out in the center. Walk down along the wall on the right edge (as you face down) of the talus field. When you arrive at a large vertical slab heavily streaked with colorful lichens, move left a few meters and scramble down a steep gully to the valley floor. This is very direct, but you'll find a few 3rd class sections in the gully, and considerable cactus located where you'd like to put a hand. Beginning climbers might not enjoy this descent, and it is doubtful it saves any time over the *Trail Descent* except for routes 13-15.

The Dreaded Talus Chute:

Shortly after the wall loses its monolithic nature on the West end, a chute of extremely unstable talus descends directly to the valley floor. This is shorter than the *Trail Descent*, but it is unpleasant and dangerous. It is only documented here to warn you to avoid it.

Rappel descents:

In 2002 and 2003, double-bolt anchors were added to the most commonly used belay spots where safe gear anchors were known to be very time-consuming to arrange. With double 50m. ropes, these can be used to rappel the entire wall. However, hiking down the trail is probably faster, and definitely safer. There are two possible rap lines: (1) Route 6, where both pitches have fixed anchors, and (2) from the top of route 4 to the first pitch anchor of route 3, or to the left end of Juniper Ledge, then scramble over to the right side to use the anchor there. There is currently no way to rappel the entire wall with a single rope without leaving slings and gear.

El Rito Trad Cliff Routes
 by Gary Clark
 May 25, 2003

