

Mini Guide to “El Potrero Chico”

Sport Climbing in Mexico

By Ethan Ladof

El Potrero is a great winter trip/getaway. Living in the States with a bad case of the winter blahs? Craving the warm sun on your face? Hungry for those summertime blue skies? Longing for some of the best sport climbing on the planet? Then you just can't beat a winter trip to Potrero!



“El Potrero Chico” Photo: Mike and Karen Neal

I've made El Potrero my winter destination since 2002 — this was my fourth trip. On my first visit, I was unfamiliar with the area, the climbing crags, the routes. By the end of my second trip, I had a feel for the lay of the land — area, accommodations, crags, best places to stay, a feel for the rock and route grades, when to chase the sun and when to seek the shade.

The Season and the Weather

The Potrero climbing season starts mid-December and lasts through mid-March with late February being the best. But hey, it's winter down there, too. Best advice: expect the unexpected. I've been there in February and froze my ass, and I've been there the same weeks a different year and been forced to seek the shade or else broil. On any given day/week during this time you may be bundled up in four layers of fleece or ducking into the shade to avoid getting a Yankee-Gringo sunburn. The extremes during those months might be 45 degrees and overcast to sunny and 90.



Good day at the main cliff

Photos: Ethan Ladof



Bad day at the main cliff

Trad vs. Sport

Potrero has over 300 bolted routes and perhaps 10 or 12 Trad routes in addition to a couple of mixed routes. I personally would not lead on trad gear here as the limestone can be brittle. The only climbing fatality that I know of at Potrero was on a trad route. But I digress. Potrero is sport climbing paradise. Nearly all the routes have been bolted in the last six years with 3/8 stainless steel bolts. From one pitch routes to twenty-three pitch routes and everything in between, this is the best sport climbing I've ever done.

Yes, I've been to Rumney, Redrocks, NRG — all great areas, but no comparison to Potrero. The MASSIVE, beautiful walls at Potrero are a magnificent site! When you first lay eyes on the cliff from 10 miles away, you will be impressed. But when you stand at the entrance to Potrero and look up at the soaring limestone cliffs and fins towering 2,400 feet above you, you'll be blown away.



Standing on top of "Super Nova" 10d — 8 pitches up and still dwarfed by El Potrero!

Photo: Jannette Pazer

Getting Around

El Potrero is located approximately 35 miles northwest of Monterrey, Mexico, outside of a town named Hidalgo. Monterrey is the third largest city in Mexico and has a modern airport. Monterrey has all the trappings of a big modern city (e.g., lots of chain stores, chain hotels). Potrero is located approximately 3 miles south of Hidalgo (population 20,000).

In Hidalgo you will find small stores, no large supermarkets, little Mom-and-Pop type businesses, friendly people, very much a blue collar town. There is a HUGE cement factory there. It used to employ lots of folks, but sadly, it is closed now. Anyhow, that is your nearest town. Hidalgo. More on the area and the people later.

How to Get There: Continental Airlines fly into Monterrey as do a couple of other airlines. You can expect to pay between \$500 to \$550 for round-trip airfare from the Northeast (e.g., Philly, Newark).

Getting Around: You can rent a car at the airport. All the big names are there: Hertz, Dollar, etc. I've never rented a car. Everything at Potrero is within walking distance. To get from the Monterrey airport to Potrero you have two choices: make arrangements with your host or take a taxi. Your best bet is to make arrangements for an airport pickup with wherever you are staying. All of the villas and campgrounds at Potrero will pick you up. When you make online reservations for your accommodations, you can request airport pick-up. If you opt for a taxi ride, you will find a stand in the main airport terminal. All the cab company's will be shouting and vying for your business. I've taken the cabs. It's fun! And, for your reference, I've jumped out of airplanes, been on small boats at sea during hurricanes, and climbed 2,500 vertical feet, but you want a true adrenaline rush, ride in a Mexican cab on the highway.

What It Costs: Expect to pay between 350 pesos to 500 pesos (\$35 to \$50) for a taxi. If you have a large group, expect to pay 700 pesos (\$70.00) for a full sized van. Do not pay more than that. Be firm. Simply tell the cab company, "Hidalgo, El Potrero Chico, por favor." I think they have dealt with enough climbers to know where you are going. I've never had a problem getting there. You may want to add "alto pista." This means you want them to take the toll road, and that will add 50 pesos (\$5) to your trip saving you about 20 minutes. The rates are the same if you arrange for airport pick-up with whomever you are staying with.

Money Exchange: Once you land in Monterrey, you can exchange your money there in the airport, or you can exchange it in the States at your departing airport. I always do the exchange thing in Monterrey. Normally, you'll get a 10 to 1 exchange rate, however it fluctuates a little. Using 10-to-1 makes the math easy — that is 10 pesos for a dollar.

Accommodations and Where to Stay

As I've said, Potrero is about 3 miles outside of the town of Hidalgo, but a funny thing happened when Potrero became a "world-class" climbing destination. A whole community sprang up at the base of the cliff that caters just to climbers — so you have villas, houses, rooms, campgrounds, restaurant's, stores, and yes, even a café, who's sole business for 6 months out of the year is to accommodate you, the climber. And now, thanks to the miracle of the Internet, you can contact these places in advance of your trip and make arrangements, reservations, and even airport pick up before you go.

Long before Potrero became a climbing destination, it was a large county park with a large pool complex which still thrives today. The pool complex, I'm told, is busy as heck during the summer months. So, during the summer months the local business's cater to the locals. During the winter months they cater to the climbers. Works out pretty well for the local business owners. Again, I digress.

Here's a list of places to stay:

La Posada: (www.elpotrerrchico.com.mx) La Posada is brand new, built for climbers and very modern. They were the first to have TV!! Wow!! The rooms are small but nice: sleeps two with your own bathroom. Expect to pay \$25 (250 pesos) a night for a room and \$5 (50 pesos) for a campsite. It has a nice large communal kitchen if you wish to prepare your own meals and a restaurant which serves dinner, ice cream, beers and soda. They also have a small gift shop with postcards and T-shirts for sale. Take special note of the display case — I swear, there hangs a piece of my old climbing rope which I gave to a local some years ago.

La Pagoda: (www.quintalapagoda.com/home). La Pagoda is old school and really nice. It was originally built by the cement factory in the early '60s as a party and picnic place for its employees. It must have been the nicest, fanciest villa of its day. However, it's sort of rundown now, but it's where I always stay. The rooms used to cost \$7 a night, but the owner noticed all the other places were getting \$25 a night and he raised his rates to \$20 (200 pesos). Campsites are still \$5 (50 pesos) a night.

Homero's: (www.elpoterochico.com/) Homero's is the first and original spot for climbers. Back in the mid '90s this is where the first of the climbers stayed. Homero has been very helpful to the climbing community. Here you can rent a room in a house or camp. I don't know the room rates, but camping is \$5



Homero's Restaurant.
Photo: Connie Sumner

(50 pesos) a night. They also have a large roofed pavilion that many people camp in. Homero's has a restaurant which serves breakfast, dinner, beers and sodas.

Rancho Cerro Gordo:

(www.ranchopotrerochico.com) Ranch Cerro Gordo is really nice. This is the first place I ever stayed. It is primarily a campground though they have two "casitas" you can rent. The casitas are a small house. Not sure of the rates for casitas. I'm guessing about \$35 (350 pesos) a night. They have nice, though small, campsites with a great communal kitchen and pavilion. The pavilion has a dance floor and used to host some wild New Years Eve parties. They have a little store where you can buy beer, soda, T-shirts and guidebooks. Campsites are \$5 (50 pesos) a night.

Rancho Las Auroras:

(www.elpoterochico.com/futuresite/register.com) Rancho Las Auroras is very nice as well. They have a "large" house to rent, sleeps 4 or 5, at \$35

(350 pesos) a night. You can also rent a smaller house for \$25 (250 pesos) a night, or a campsite for...you guessed it...\$5 (50 pesos) a night. There is also a small restaurant here which serves only dinner. The restaurant used to be the only one for miles. The owner, Checo, and his wife work very hard cooking up a storm for the climbers at dinnertime. I think this is the best restaurant of the three in the area. Checo is a good man, and I always give him my business.

Gear and Clothing:

Potrero does not have gear stores so bring what you'll need. A suggestion: pack your helmet, harness and shoes in your carry on luggage. If your baggage winds up somewhere else at least you can climb on someone else's rope.

Gear: You'll need 20 quickdraws and a couple of 24 inch slings/runners. Some climbs have the first bolts set a little high or missing and a couple of climbs are run out, so a set of nuts are also valuable. I rarely placed nuts, but it was good to have a set along. I always take a bail biner or two, couple of locking biners, cordelette and daisy chain.

Ropes: 60 meter ropes are a must! **DO NOT BRING 55 METER ROPES.** All routes, all rappels are set up for 60 meter ropes and even they are dangerously short on some routes. You'll want two 60 meter ropes for the long multi-pitch routes as this will speed your descents — tying two 60's together you can rap a lot faster. A lot of people simul climb and simul rappel the long multi-pitch stuff, not me.

Helmets: I'm not going into that lecture, but I'll tell you, rock fall is VERY common at Potrero. I don't mean inattentive climbers knocking pebbles off — I mean good size stuff coming down all by itself. **DO NOT CLIMB UNDER PARTIES DOING LONG MULTIPITCH.** I consider a helmet a must at Potrero, and you should, too.

Clothing & Such: Even though day time temps reach the 70's and 80's, remember it's winter time down there, too. Temperatures in the mountains, as you know can change rapidly. I've had the temperatures drop 40 degrees in 40 minutes. Once, my partner and I were 13 pitches up, climbing in tank tops when a front blew in. We had small packs with fleece jackets and water proof shells in them — and it's damn good thing we did. We would have been hosed up there without them. You'll be glad you brought three different layers of fleece with you. At night, temps can drop into the low 40's or high 30's, and none of the houses down there have heating. And do yourself a favor, BRING A NICE, WARM SLEEPING BAG.



The Guide Book for 2005

Guidebooks

Routes are going up there constantly. Each year the guidebook is revised. Magic Ed and Tami keep the guide book up to date. Getting a guidebook used to be a hassle, but now that Tami has opened Tami's Café right there, in the center of the climbing community, you need only stick your head and there and purchase one. There is a guidebook out there called "Mexican Rock" which may have been good 10 years ago but is now so outdated as to be totally useless. Buy your guidebook when you get there, at Tami's café, heck it's only 12 bucks.

Water, Food and Supplies

Water: Well, you know what they say about the water in Mexico...and it's true. But fortunately for us, all the water in the little climbing community at the base of Potrero comes from a spring up in the canyon. This water is safe to drink right from the tap. I would not drink the water anywhere else, say in Monterrey or Hidalgo. I have never had any problem with the water at Potrero, but I will tell you the water in Monterrey made me ill. Also beware of produce (e.g., apples, lettuce) that may have been washed

with tainted water.

Before I depart for Mexico, I always go see my doctor who writes me a prescription for Cipro just in case. Cipro is used to treat Anthrax and knocks the hell out of Montezumas Revenge as well. For those more daring, pack a box of Immodium. It's sure to take the edge off the Mexican-ass flu.

Meals: I always bring from home instant oatmeal, a case of Cliffbars, instant protein shake packets (the kind bodybuilders use available at GNC, known as MRP), coffee in the little bags like tea bags, and trail mix.

Breakfast for me is always oatmeal, a protein shake, and coffee. Lunch at the crag is Cliffbars and trail mix with water. Works for me. Of course, you can always go to Homero's for breakfast if they are open, or you can cook your own breakfast. None of the restaurants serve lunch.



*Market Day in Hidalgo.
Photo: Jannette Pazer*

We usually have dinner at one of the three local restaurants. Here, you'll get a home cooked meal for 30 or 40 pesos (\$3 to \$4).

Food Supplies: There is a little grocery store in town, three miles from the crag. On my way in from the airport, I always have my driver stop here so I can pick up some milk and eggs maybe some cheese and bread. On Tuesdays, the open-air town market shuts down about 6 blocks in Hidalgo. Market Day is cool! All the locals set up shop in the streets — lots of local culture and food is very cheap. This is when I stock up on the bulk of my food supplies. Here you can purchase fruits, veggies, eggs, homemade cheese, and all sorts of other stuff like paper towels, toilet paper, trinkets, and gifts for the folks back home. Take a backpack with you for Market Day to hold all of your purchases. You can arrange for a ride to and from town, hitchhike or walk.

The Crag

Do you have a rectangular table? About five feet long and three feet wide? Good. Sit at the table. Now take a paperback book and put it at the bottom left side of your table. So that it's right down there in the corner with two of its edges aligned to two edges of the table. The table represents the cliff. The book represents the DEVELOPED area of the cliff, up to 15 pitches. The rest of your table.....that's all the virgin territory on the cliff!

Virtually all of the over 300 climbs are on the left flank of the cliff, in a canyon. This is the east side of the cliff. Here in the canyon is the park I spoke of, with the swimming pool complex. And back in the canyon are a number of walls all of which have routes on them. Lots of walls!! Yeah and lots of great routes!! There are 19 different walls and smaller canyons back there with 300 routes on them from one to twenty three pitches and everything in between.

Some walls have moderate routes on them, The Super Mini Wall, 18 routes all one pitch. Some walls have stiffer routes up to seven pitches, the ever popular Mota Wall. Another wall is for the hardcore, the overhanging Outrage Wall, 20 routes, most of them 11d or harder. Well you get the idea. Something for everyone.

But the most amazing thing is the untapped potential. The main cliff may be 3% developed. But when you start looking around, over there, on that mountain, a 600 foot cliff, never touched. Back there, in the south east end of the canyon, a five mile, 600 foot cliff, never touched. Well...it's just sort of mind boggling.

Yes something for everyone. Short climbs, long climbs. Hard climbs, easy climbs. You are bound to find a few classics you'll never forget. I could recommend lots of routes, but I'll list just one. "Aguja Celo Ray" A two pitch classic, put up in the early sixties by a local man. For me...the finest line at Potrero.

The People

The people of Potrero are kind, helpful and most pleasant. Compared to you and me, they haven't much. But they are generous none the less. The folks around the crag are far more tolerant of the climbers than the townspeople, I think. The folks around the cliff are used to climbers. To the businesses around the cliff, the climbers represent some income during the otherwise quiet winter months.



*Street Scene in Hidalgo with El Potrero 3 miles to the South.
Photo: Ethan Ladof*

I'm not here to lecture the reader on diplomacy, but I will take a moment to remind the reader that you are a guest in a foreign country. The people of Hidalgo are very, very gracious to share their park, El Potrero, with us, a bunch of foreigners. I mean...lets turn the tables. If large groups of foreigners who did not speak your language came and wintered at your crag for months at a time, would you, the townspeople, welcome them, treat them warmly, be patient and friendly with them? Let's hope so.

I am convinced that wherever you go, if you treat people with dignity and respect, if you smile a great deal, and if you are aware of their customs, everyone will get along just fine. I've spoken with some locals to try and get a feel for what they think of the climbers — if they mind sharing their park with us, if they will continue to be warm and gracious. A few items leapt out at me. We need to remember that these folks do not have a lot of the things we take for granted — e.g., health insurance, home owners insurance, pensions, 401(k)s, money for vacations , or

tuition monies to send their children to college. Well, the list goes on and on. And so, while I am down there, I try very, very hard not to be the "rich" American. I never "barter" with these folks. If I pay a little more for an item, so be it. I have far more "fun" money than they. I tip generously, though not outrageously. One day a local gave us a ride to market, waited while we shopped, and then drove us home. When I asked how much money he would like, he simply said none and continued to refuse. I eventually gave him enough to cover gas and buy himself a dinner. You get the idea.

Local customs: I would like to divulge a few local customs as well. Around the cliff things are a little relaxed, **but in town you should be aware local people are offended by men who are shirtless, woman who are showing a lot of skin, profanity, and pot smoking or drug use.** The working class folk of

Hidalgo feel only the scum of the earth smoke pot or take drugs. Please be aware of a few unspoken customs so that the people of Hidalgo continue to welcome us.

Safety: Finally, I'll warn you of the children. The children when they are with adults are fine. Like youth anywhere, they can get into a little mischief when no adults are present.

If you are doing a multi-pitch, say over 3 pitches, put all your belongings in your pack and hang the pack at least 4 bolts up. This will let other climbers know you are occupying the route and they should not climb below you. Most importantly, this will keep the kids from being tempted. My friend, Brian, was climbing there in 2000. He was 4 pitches up when he looked down to find some kids going through his pack. He yelled down to them. They yelled back the only English they knew, "F—k you!"

Also, children may approach you in groups. Smile, make nice, be polite. They may point to your gear, your cameras, etc. Unless you speak fluent Spanish, be careful about handing over anything for them to examine. Most of the time, they think you are giving it to them. It can be hard to get back!

Please remember, we are guests at El Potrero—let us not wear out our welcome.

Then and Now

I've seen a lot of changes since my first visit to Potrero in 2002 — and we are only talking 4 years here. On my first trip, if you wanted to call home, you walked 3 miles, one way, to a pay phone and hoped you got an operator who spoke English. There was no cell phone coverage, no TV's, no Internet access. The road into the canyon was unpaved; the park was run down, in desperate need of repair. Guidebooks were hard to find. Now, all that has changed — for better or worse. You now have cell phone coverage at the base of the cliff. If not, you can stop in Tami's café and use the phone. Here you will find laptops, wireless Internet, guidebooks, and coffee!! Also, the park has been spruced up, the roads paved and the washed out bridge replaced. Most of the villas and campgrounds now have TV's.

So....I guess things have "improved" a great deal in the last couple of years. I kind of liked it the old way. It felt more like a foreign country. But hey...it's all good, right?

More Beta and Contact Information

You want route descriptions, personal journals, and tons of great photos? No problem! Go to www.cliffmama.com and click the side that says "cliff." When that page opens, click the index "Potrero Chico, Mexico." Enjoy!! And don't forget to sign cliffmama's guestbook!!

If you have any further questions about El Potrero, I would be happy to help. Send me an e-mail eladof@verizon.net.