

Rowland's Journey to Xanadu.



Since the publication of the first Rock Fax guide and an article in which I described *Rowland's Magical Mystery Tour* on the sea cliff off Toix on the Costa Blanca, this climb has become a must for most climbers visiting the area. It has justly deserved that position due in many ways to the magnificent scenery and climbing quality which this climb has, the least of which is the dramatic initial abseil. What was once a hidden disused donkey track has now become a well marked footpath. When I first climbed *Rowland's Magical Mystery Tour* I'd always

Rowland on the start of the overhanging crack

intended exploring still further along this magnificent sea traverse, hoping that it would one day give up more of its secrets. An encouraging start, and a indication of what was to come, was when I made an exploratory climb one pitch further on than the last belay of the traversing pitch of *Mystery Tour*. This new and easy 25m 4a traverse over rippling juggy rock, leads you onto a perfect belay ledge overhung by a very impressive overhanging wall split by a superb crack line. Surely the site of a future route!! (watch this space). At the base of this wall is a small entrance to a cave. At first this looks like many of the other 'blind' caves which exist on these sea cliffs, but it isn't. Walking into the cave I discovered that this cave has a hole in its floor which allows you to abseil down onto more ledges just above the sea. This exploratory visit made sure I would return to explore still

further what looked like a terrific route and in November 1999 I did just that.



On entering the cave you realize that it gets its light from the reflection of the sea below, the sound of which is also amplified by the walls of the cave itself. Abseiling down through the narrow fissure in its floor gives one an airy feeling of being in a wonderland. The sounds of the sea lapping onto the rocks below echo up as you descend. A 25ft abseil brings you into a wide bay just above the sea and in the sun again. From here an easy 5a traverse on perfect rock leads into another wide bay with the most incredible lines going up to the top of the cliff. Surely my prayers had been answered. From where we stood the most obvious line was an awesome overhanging crack going the full length of the wall, this was to

Stepping off the stalactite

become *Kuala Khan* one of the largest, if not the largest, roof climb on the Costa Blanca and certainly one of the most impressive I have ever climbed. To its left is a more reasonable, but still awesome, line which leads to the base of a hanging stalactite, above this there seemed to be a crack. This line was eventually to become *Rowland's journey to Xanadu* 200m. (including the traverse of *Rowland's Magical Mystery Tour*). E4/5

.3.3.4b.5a.5a.5c.6a.5b+. (UK Grades).

From the stance in the last bay the climb now takes an obvious perfect, slightly overhanging, crack into the first of two caves. This is also the first pitch of *Kubla Khan*. From this first cave the climb now steps out onto the steep buttress on the left, following a tenuous line up a steep and wide arete (two ENPs Rock 3), to a small ledge. Bold hard climbing (one ENP) leads to another small belay ledge, from which again a hanging belay has to be made using three ENP's. The climbing is solid 5c E3 and on perfect rock. Perched below the overhanging headwall with nothing that seems climbable

outside E8/9, this belay is very impressive, the deep blue Mediterranean below and to the right is the stalagmite which had, from below, seemed so small. Its true dimensions are well over six feet in length. Hanging into space it adds to the feelings of exposure.

From the belay you now make an airy traverse right along the lip of the overhangs, all the time a feeling that the wall is pushing you out daring you to step into the abyss. At the end of this traverse you finally have to commit yourself to doing just that. You now have to step out onto the top of the stalactite and you finally get your first view of the crack you hoped was

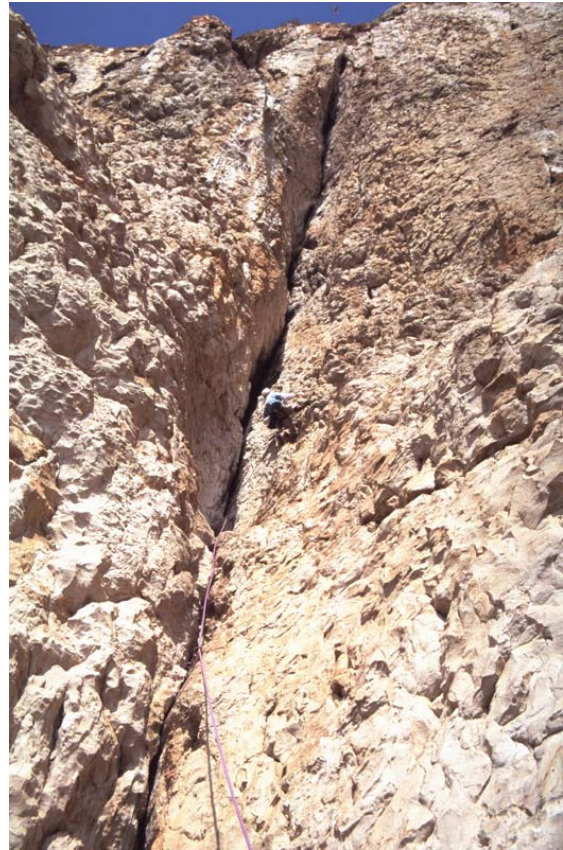


there. This crack is overhanging throughout its length (about 8-9m) it both invites and repulses you. You want to climb it but can you? It's one of those truly committing moments. The whole wall is now pushing you outwards forcing you to use your arms knowing you only have so much strength in them. The first moves (one ENP) are face climbing on small holds to reach the actual crack, these moves see your feet swinging in space searching for anything to plant them on. On this first contact with the crack you then realise that its not going to be a piece of cake. The crack is slightly flared and doesn't give a full finger jam. Another pull up and you desperately need to place a nut, it seems yards away from the ENP,

The scoop belay on Rowlands Magical Mystery Tour

can you afford to stop and waste that energy? F---k it, Make a lung for the next jam, which thank god is a little better but still nothing to call home about. At least you have your foot on a good edge which allows you to squeeze a nut into the crack and clip in. A brilliant nut! The pressure slackens now but you still have a long way to go and the energy bank is running dry. Reaching up you get a superb finger lock and hang from it to

sort your next foothold out. Pulling up on this the jams run out completely and you are forced to use small pockets on the side wall. There is now no time to fiddle around with nuts. Although you know that a fall from here is unlikely to hurt, it's so overhanging, you would end up dangling in space anyway. But the fear is still there. Being in this exposed position forces you to reach into yourself and bring out that extra bag of goodies and you start enjoy the committment. Suddenly your flying upwards as the jams get better and better until the last moves, when, suddenly it all becomes finger work again in small pockets, a nightmare in the making, but the adrenaline is flowing and you know your at the top of the difficulties. One last effort and you are onto easy ground leading into the cave and solid belays. You're totally pumped but happy, gazing out and down into the clear blue green sea below. The colours are more vibrant, the sound more audible, and everything seems so worth while . Watching Mark climb this pitch makes me realize how overhanging it was and you relive all those magic moves again. The next pitches could so easily have become an anti-climax, but that doesn't happen. Climbing easily through the roof of the cave the positions again get exposed. A step left and you are now looking up the top wall which is just off vertical. The climbing is 5b on perfect rock with protection coming just when you need it. A final overhang at



The start of the big crack

the top adds that little extra before you finally reach flat ground and belays. What a route!! Another classic for the Costa Blanca, but only for those who appreciate adventure. This is not just one of the clip up jobs which many climbers come here for. It's long, committing and in some places a serious route. Because of these factors you are guaranteed to have a climb which will last in your memory for a very long time.

When you read this article the traverse of 'Rowlands Magical mystery Tour will have been pushed on still further, and although I still don't know at what grade the next exit will be, I do know for sure it will be an adventure.

There are scores of areas within the Costa Blanca where climbers who enjoy adventure climbing can use their skills to the full, so next time you decide to have a winter sun holiday don't forget your 'trad' gear .