

The Socorro Climbing Area

The Socorro Climbing Area lies seven miles southwest of the city of Socorro on the south side of US Highway 60. This is a three season (winter) climbing area, where the best conditions extend from early October through mid-April. On average, there are only two or three snow-days each year in Socorro. January and February daytime temperatures are often in the fifties and sixties, offering great climbing on sunny faces. In the summer months this extremely arid Chihuahuan Desert environment usually becomes much too hot to climb in by mid-morning. Summertime high temperatures are regularly in the 90's and often exceed 100° Fahrenheit. But the biggest impediment to climbing in the warmer months is the *bugs*! Ever-present swarms of biting gnats nearly halt climbing by late spring, even though temperatures may remain pleasant through early June. The longer it goes without rain, the fewer gnats there are. But, a single rain shower will cause their eggs to hatch. The next day, the swarms will be back, often in visible black clouds. Unfortunately most commercially available insect repellents act as attractors for these small biting flies.

Climbing

Three words describe the climbing in Socorro: *varied*, *devious* and *mixed*. Within this area you will find a wide variety of slabs, vertical faces, steep overhangs, and even roof problems. The rock is remarkably competent and clean in most places, and you will seldom find routes that are loose or dirty. The walls and boulders are featured with slopers, blocks, pinches, cracks, edges, pockets, and huecos. Holds are often sharp! But the texture can be either rough or glassy, and alternate between positive and desperate. Often, you'll find all of these features on a single route. What you won't find are multi-pitch climbs, because there are only two lines—both in Box Canyon—that have more than one pitch.

The routes in Socorro are, above all, **devious**. Although there is plenty of easy climbing, steep jug-hauls and endurance routes are nearly nonexistent. Even the 5.7's will make beginning climbers think. Most routes are delicate balance problems, but many are steep and require powerful movements. Add to that the recent explosion of bouldering development, and Socorro now adds "gymnastic" to its long list of adjectives.

Socorro is also very much a **mixed** climbing area. The vast majority of routes put up in the last few years are well bolted sport climbs. However, the older ones, which constitute nearly half of all lead-climbs, require some natural protection. Bring a rack of small to medium stoppers and camming devices if you intend to do the mixed routes. This isn't really traditional climbing. With the exception of some short crack climbs, nearly every route has at least some bolts, and more often than not you will be clipping far more bolts than pro-placements. None the less, this is a great place to learn to place natural protection—just be careful. Socorro has seen more than its share of deck falls and injuries, usually as a result of improperly placed protection. More than one line of pro has zippered out, from the ground up, even before a fall. Because of the often meandering nature of many of the mixed climbs, it is imperative that you use runners of the proper length. Short sport climbing quick-draws will generally just not suffice.

Geology

The Socorro Climbing Area lies in an ancient volcanic field. The rock present in Box Canyon and nearby climbing formations is volcanic in its origin and represents material erupted from a large caldera (a collapsed volcano) within the volcanic field. Generally, the rock is termed rhyolite which describes its chemical composition and differentiates it from other extrusive igneous rocks such as andacite which is also present, but in smaller quantities, and basalt which is not present. Rhyolite has a large quantity of

alkalis present along with quartz. The quartz is not readily seen as large crystals because the original magma was extruded at or near the surface and thus cooled very quickly, which accounts for a very small grain size.

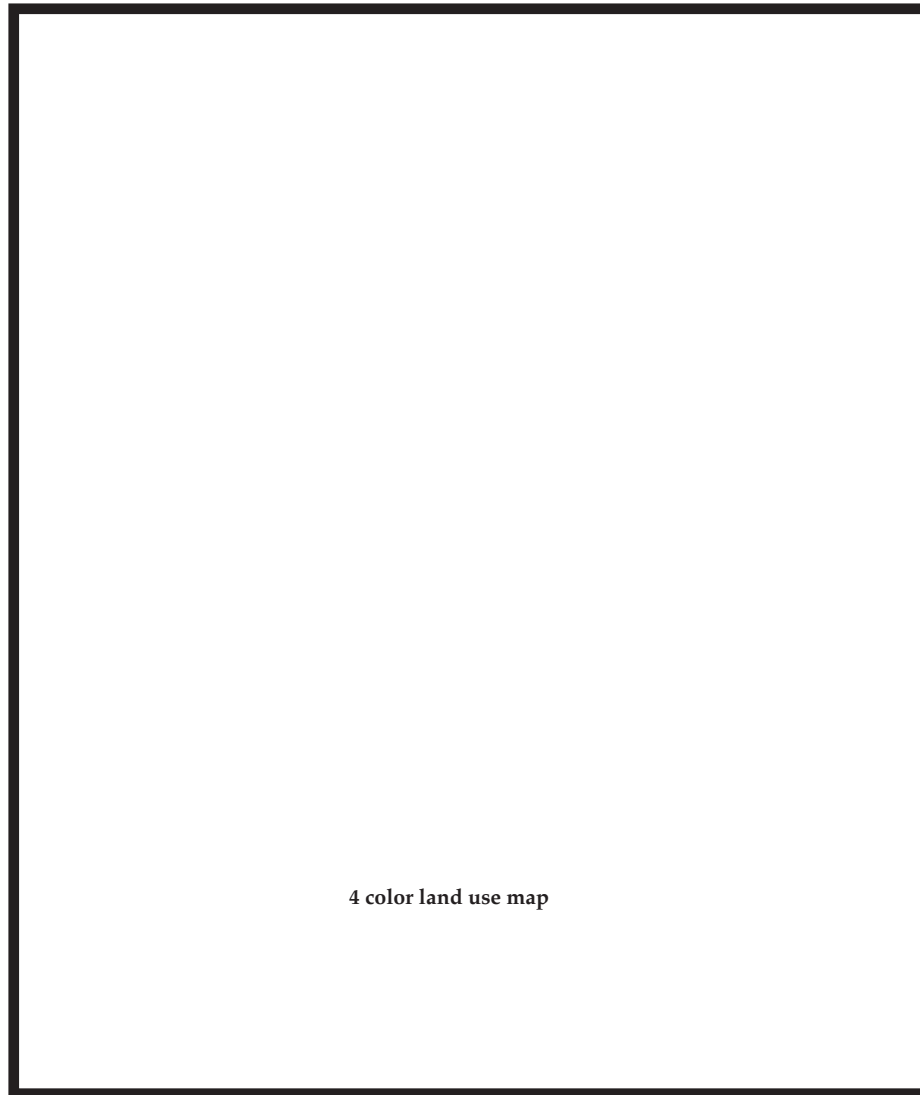
The city of Socorro developed as a mining and smelter town in the 1880's soon after the discovery of silver and silver-lead ores on Socorro Peak and in near by Magdalena. Activity in the area virtually halted after the silver crash of 1893, although some limited economic exploration of the area continues today. The Socorro district was also one of the largest producers of manganese in New Mexico, with production continuing into the 1970's. The strip mine scars just south of the Major Wall area are the result of this manganese mining. Mineral exploration rights in Box Canyon were withdrawn from public use with the designation of the Box Special Management Area in 1993.

Camping

In 1993 the federal government designated The Box Special Management Area (*see land use map, opposite*) in order to, "preserve the outdoor recreation, geologic and scenic qualities [of the area]." Since 1995 the resource management plan for the Socorro area has read, "Overnight camping, discharge of firearms, and wood fires are prohibited within The Box Special Management Area." Thus, **camping is not permitted anywhere in Box Canyon** (including the Waterfall parking area), or in the Spook Canyon area. Neither is camping permitted on state land (*blue*) nor on any private land in the surrounding area (*white*). **Camping is only permitted within BLM land (*yellow*) that is outside of The Box SMA.** Camping *is* permitted on the plain about 400 yards north of the Waterfall Parking Area, and in the Major Wall area (east of the road and north of the fence line). However, automobiles are restricted to designated (improved) roads only.

Camping, where permitted, is free. But, in this high desert environment, there is no water available and no firewood, so you must bring your own water and a gas stove and fuel for cooking. There is also virtually no shade, and you'll need a tent (or vehicle) that seals up completely since rattle snakes, scorpions, Black Widow spiders, and other kinds of poisonous wildlife are common. The *arroyos* periodically flash flood, so be careful where you pitch your tent.

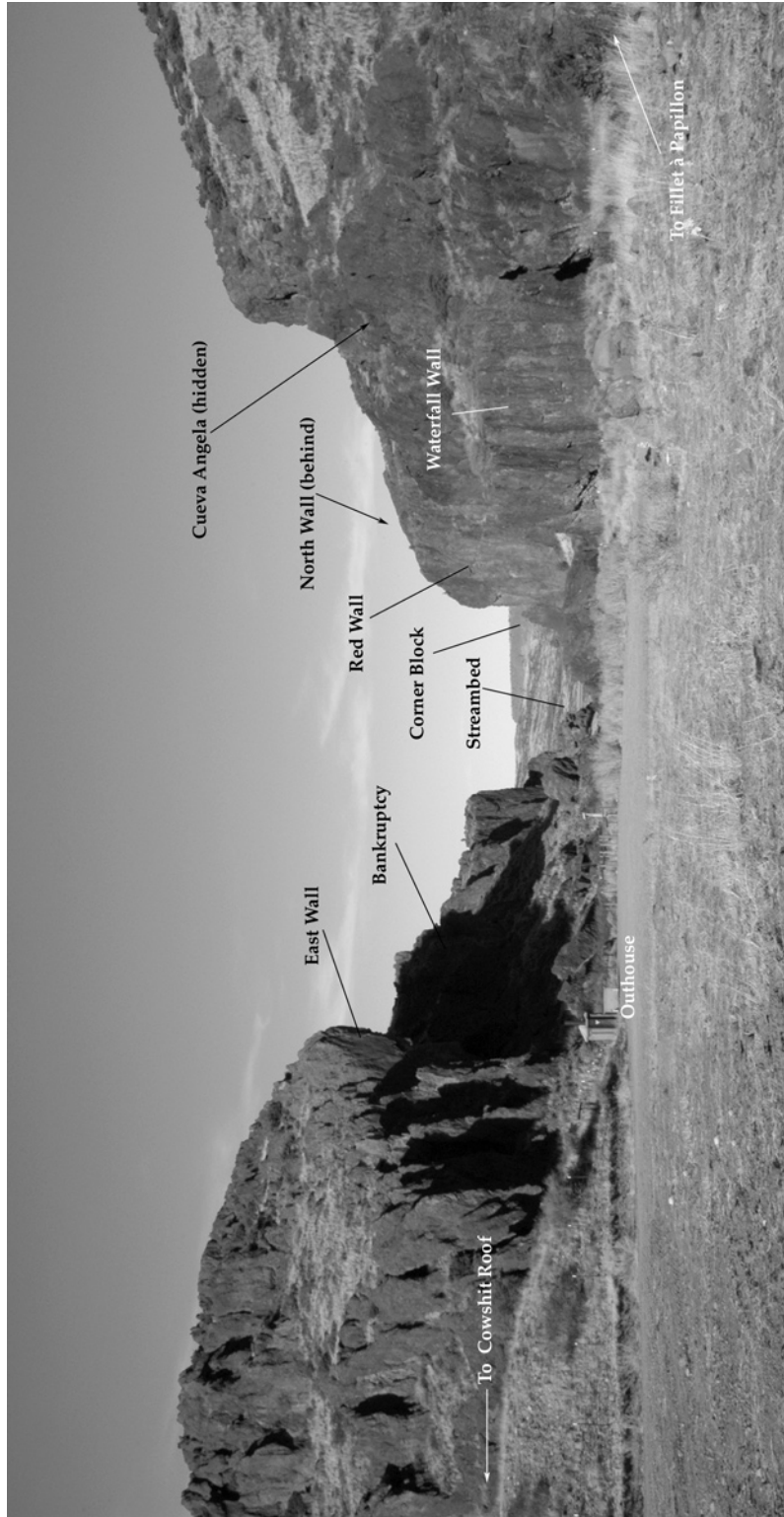
Camping at the crag in Socorro is not recommended. But, there is a commercial campground in town (near the south exit to I-25), or you might try Water Canyon –15 miles west on Highway 60 at the base of the Magdalena Mountains. There isn't any water in Water Canyon either, but there are free campsites with covered picnic tables and bar-b-que grills, in a shady environment. However, Water Canyon stays relatively cold in winter.



Land use map the of Socorro Climbing Area including Box SMA and surroundings
(courtesy of BLM)

Climbing Locations and Parking

The Socorro Climbing Area consists primarily of four main groupings, each of which is sufficiently distant from the others to merit driving. Divided by parking areas, they are: Box Canyon, Minor Wall, Las Hermanas Area, and Spook Canyon. Las Hermanas Area includes Major and Alcohol Walls



Box Canyon as seen from the Waterfall parking area

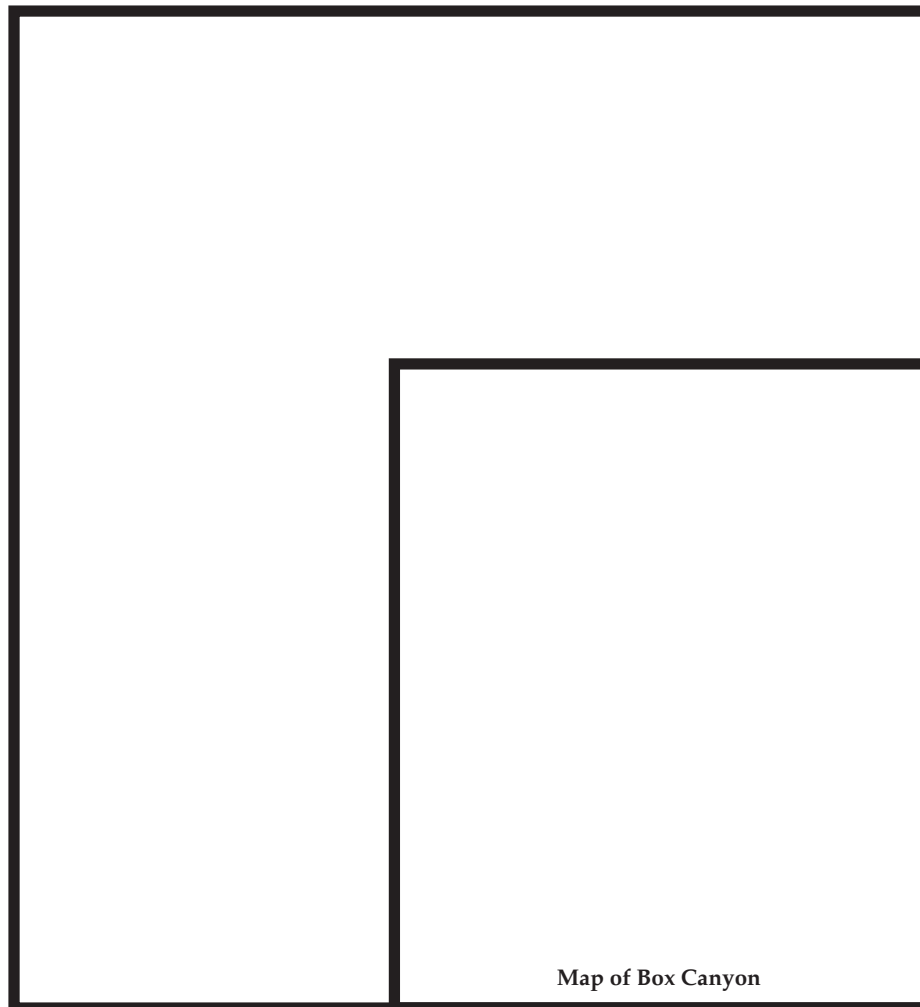
Box Canyon

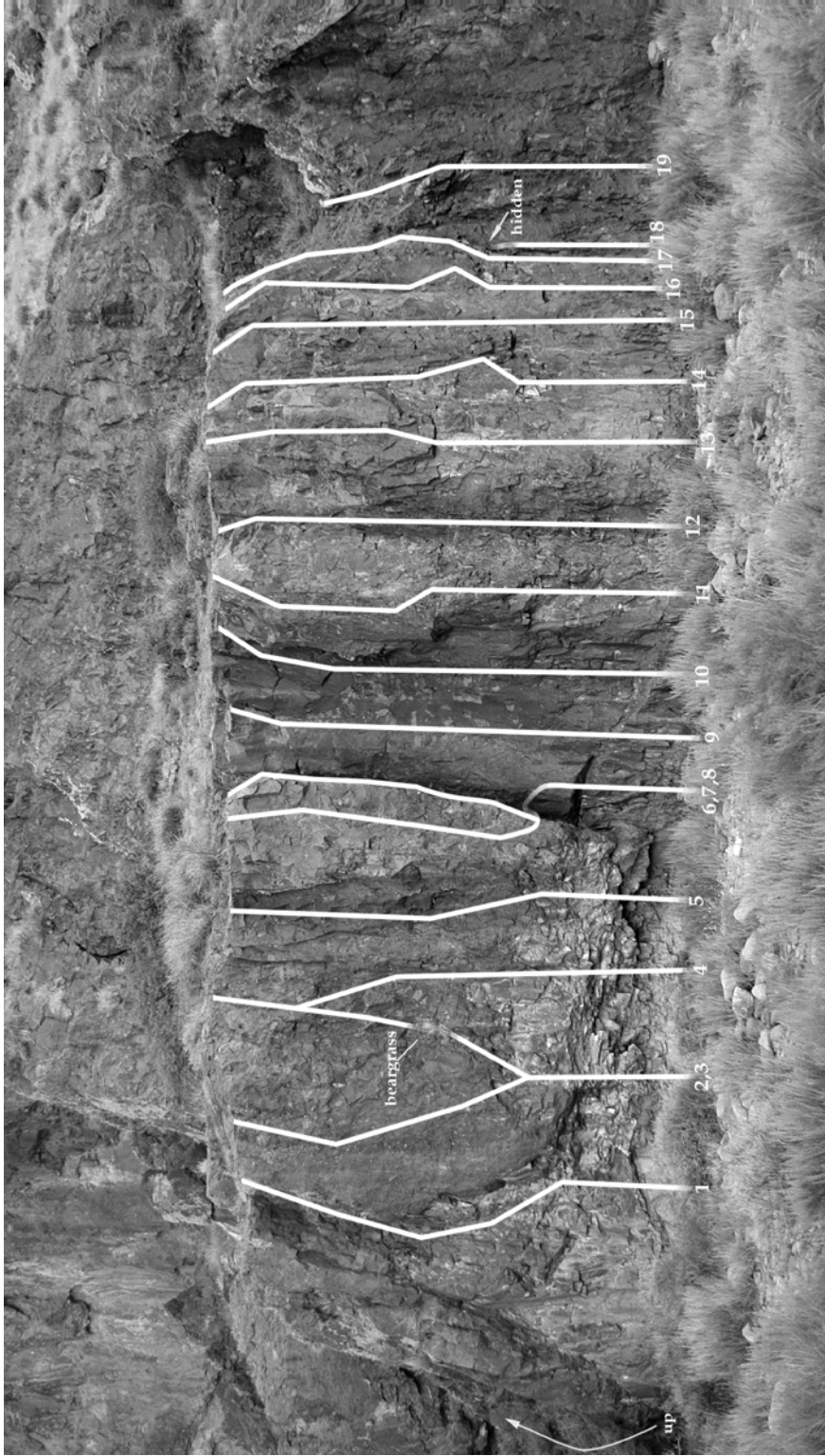
There is something in Box Canyon for every one. Classic climbs abound making this the best place to begin for one's introduction to the Socorro Climbing Area. Every style of climbing exists including bouldering, sport, traditional and nail-up aid climbing. However, there are very few multi-pitch climbs, with the tallest being about a pitch and a half, down the canyon on Redwall. A 50m rope will suffice for every route present.

The bouldering is ubiquitous and not to be missed. Waterfall Wall is the primary top-rope destination. Sewn up sport routes are dominant on Fillet à Papillon Wall, but not elsewhere in the canyon. Most routes tend to be mixed pro and bolts. Bring a standard rack of nuts and cams, but you will rarely need anything very large.

Be aware that the tendency here has been to leave older lines as they were originally put up, thus many bolts and fixed pins remain that may no longer be safe to use. If bolt spacing seems run out, it probably means there is natural pro placement in between.

Socorro





Waterfall Wall

Waterfall Wall

All of these routes are top-rope problems. Each is equipped with a 3 bolt anchor which is easily accessible from the top of the wall. Bring lots of webbing. 20 foot slings are ideal in order to eliminate rope drag over the sharp edge at the top of each route. The wall averages about 30 feet in height. Some of these are leadable, but most bolts on the face have only historical value. The top of the wall is easily accessed via a short 5th class scramble on the left (north) side of the wall, or an easier walk-up far to the right of the *Beginner's Route*.

1. **Nerd Magnet 5.9 ★★**
In the trough at the far left end of the wall. Named for the prettiest girl to ever attend New Mexico Tech.
2. **Rough Caress 5.12 ★★**
V2 roof problem to 2 bolts above on a very thin face. TR recommended.
3. **Battle Arms 5.11 TR ★★**
A variation which starts under the roof with Rough Caress, then moves to the right, finishing on Tough Country. Be careful not to damage the beargrass.
4. **Tough Country 5.11- TR ★★★**
This is really a sharp V2 boulder problem which moves up to a 5.7 face.
5. **1986 5.11+ TR ★★**
Start just to the left of the arête, under the roof. Do a V3 move and continue up the 5.7+ face.
6. **Thumb Nail 5.8+ TR ★★★**
Start on the right-hand side of the arête, inside the cracked dihedral. Move left around the arête using the thumbnail undercling. Continue up the 5.7+ face, to finish near the dihedral.
7. **Highway 60 5.12 ★★**
Use the same start as Thumb Nail, but move straight up the steep face through 3 bolts without using the chimney, to the anchors on the face.
8. **The Chimney 5.6+ natural pro or TR ★**
This is a flaring off-width, with pro way back inside a mungy crack.
9. **Little Red Wall 5.11 ★★**
This two bolt slab defines "greasy" rock climbing. The rating assumes that you go straight up the middle, through a glassy friction problem, to the top.
10. **Black Hole 5.7 TR ★★**
11. **Crazy Sally 5.10+ TR ★★**
This is the overhang problem which moves up to the right side of the arête.
12. **Diamond Clutch 5.7+ TR ★★**
13. **Big Horn 5.10+ TR ★★**
Ignore the one high bolt and top-rope over the horn to the face on the left.
14. **Nasty Sally 5.10 TR ★★★**
The crux overhang has the most interesting moves on the wall.
15. **Barite 5.7 ★★★**
Socorro's 5.7 reference and the first climb for a generation of beginning climbers.
16. **Little Overhang 5.8 TR ★★★**
17. **Banana Split 5.11 TR ★★**
Go up to the banana shaped arête and work your way over it with one hand on each side of the bulge, splitting the banana.
18. **Waterfall 5.6 TR ★★**
Partially hidden from view. It is best to TR, but it does take pro in the crack.
19. **Beginner's Route 5.2-5.5 TR ★**
This route is almost too easy for even first time climbers. Pick your own line.



Waterfall Area Bouldering looking southeast from East Wall

Waterfall Area Bouldering

Some of the easier problems in this area are classics. In general they are good problems with fun moves, level landings, and are neither too sharp or technical. In addition to bouldering on the Battle Arms roof, check out problems on Swine, Ultimate and 5.12 boulders in the immediate vicinity of Waterfall Wall. Uphill and left of Waterfall is Cueva Angela, a great bouldering cave for horizontal climbing on hot days or for staying out of the rain. 200 yards away on the plain to the south are the Gimme Boulders, with mixed difficulty for every level up to V5.

As everywhere, crash pads and spotters are a requirement, but most landings in this area tend to be on level ground. The biggest natural hazard is usually Cholla cactus, which is a sinister plant, always trying to catch an excruciatingly painful ride on unwary passersby. Also be aware of *Toritos*, a flat star shaped weed with small thorny seeds that disperse like caltrops and stick into crashpads, shoes, hands, and pets alike.



Waterfall Wall - Right Side Bouldering

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Bouldering on Waterfall Wall

Many difficult variations grace the **Battle Arms** overhang, all in the V2-V3 range. Problems sit start and move up through the roof. Turn the lip and then drop from the jug of your choosing. Hours of power building await on these open-handed blocky holds. You can even find the occasional knee bar.

Additional problems are found on the far end of the wall, right of the *Beginner's Route*. Beware of loose holds if you attempt to top out.

1. **Battle Arms Traverse V3 15' ★★★**
This is a classic roof traverse. Start on the left end of the roof below *Rough Caress* and traverse right to the bottom of *Thumbnail*.
2. **Waterfall Traverse V0 40' ★★**
Traverse from *Waterfall* to *Black Hole* or the reverse.

Right Side of Waterfall Wall

3. **Left Diagonal V1 30' ★**
Follow the obvious left leaning diagonal and top out at the notch.
5. **handprint V1 12' ★★**
Standing at the bottom of this face, the cuerno (horn) is obvious. Go straight up.
4. **Pica Roja V1 10' ★★**
Start below and left of the black stain with the cactus at the top. At the very top, move sharply right to avoid the cactus. Be careful not to trample the beargrass.
6. **Pica Negra V0 10' ★★**
Out on the right side corner with a steep start, this problem moves up and right. It is a little loose at the top, but otherwise is a cool problem on big holds.

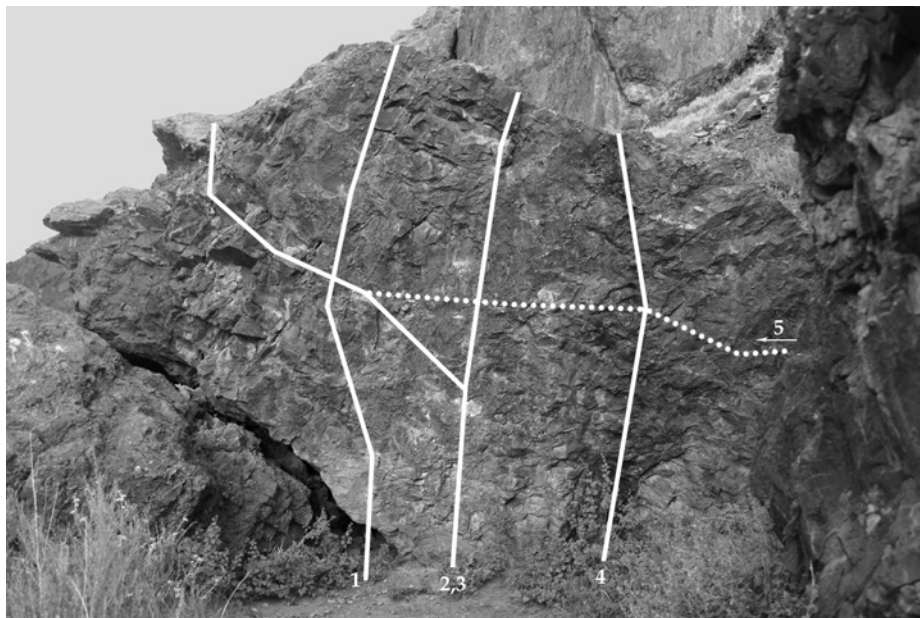


Swine Boulder

Swine Boulder

Swine Boulder is the first boulder immediately north of Waterfall Wall. It is named for the old "Swine" graffiti which has been removed. These are all very easy problems on big holds. It is not very sharp and is a good starting point for beginning boulderers or for warming up.

1. **Swine Traverse V0 15' ★★★**
This is the obvious hand-high line. Usually done l-r, try both directions for a different crux move.
2. **Left Topout V0- 10' ★**
Very easy, but somewhat slopy at the top.
3. **Northern Swine Overhang V0 13' ★★**
The tallest of the group, and almost as good as its neighbors to the right.
4. **Middle Swine Overhang V0 12' ★★★**
Probably the best of the middle three problems
5. **Big Hueco Overhang V0- 10' ★★★**
This jug-haul is easier than it looks and stays positive at the top.
6. **Little Pocket Problem V0- 9' ★★**
Hit the deep positive three fingerpocket and top out.
7. **Easy Swine Sitdown V0- 7' ★★**
Without the sit-start, a tall person can reach the top holds on the lip. This is also the best way down.
8. **Variation - Tanja's Traverse V1 16' ★★**
This is a scrunch problem with tricky footwork. Usually done r-l.



Ultimate Boulder

Socorro

Ultimate Boulder

Don't miss this classic face with it's many variations.

1. **Africa V2+ XX' ★**
Sit start on the left side of the face. Continue straight up on crimpers.
2. **Left Line V0- XX' ★★**
Start low in the middle of the face. Move left and up the arête to top out.
3. **Middle Line V0 XX' ★★★★★**
This is *the* Ultimate Boulder Problem. Although there are right, left and center static variations, get a good spotter, a fat crash pad, and do the dyno to the bucket straight up the middle of the face. It's not nearly as far as it looks, and it's super fun!
4. **Far Right Line V0+ XX' ★**
Start over the rock at the base (hidden by weeds in the photo), move up to the flake and top out.
5. **Variation - Utilactic V0+ XX' ★**
Traverse left over the bad landing, across the face, to finish on the *Left Line*.
6. **Variation - Around the World, Ultimately V1 XX' ★**
Traverse the upper lip linking the left line with the far right line, down-climbing to get off.