

The Adventurist

MensHealth

ONE IMPOSSIBLE CHALLENGE. THREE DAYS TO TRAIN. GO

WORDS BY NEIL IRWIN



Vertical Limits

The towering crown of Italy, the Dolomites offer some of the grandest climbing in Europe – if you're good enough. We sent our man to test his indoor skills against the challenge of real alpine limestone. Chalk up



SCALE THE LIMITS
OF YOUR ATHLETIC
POTENTIAL

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ow do it one-handed." I've just made my way up one of the "easier" climbs during our refresher course, and Walter Zoerer, my guide from Canadian outdoor clothing brand Arc'teryx, is challenging me to do it again with one hand figuratively tied behind my back. I chalk up my hands (it's hard to chalk only one) and, with my left out of action, I begin to climb. Taking small nervous steps, I make my way upward.

It's always good to go over the basics when your life is literally hanging in the balance. I've had my share of spills on indoor walls in London. But outdoor, multi-pitch climbing – in which you make two or more stops up the rock face to clip yourself onto a new belay station – is a big jump. An indoor wall can teach you technique. A real wall, it quickly becomes apparent, will teach you about nerves.

My challenge is to go from indoor-wall hobbyist to outdoor multi-pitch intermediate in three days. Hopefully, I will be permitted to use two hands by then.

There are six of us: two guides and four climbers. Among the climbers, surprisingly, is John Irvine, one of Arc'teryx's head honchos. I ask him about the motivation behind the brand's new involvement in real-life, immersive experiences. "We've seen our product sold to people who aren't into the climbing sports, so we wanted to come up with programmes where our products are used for what they're made for." Completely understandable. And it's ideal, too, for those who want to test their *bodies* for what they were made to be used for.

Our main base is the Rifugio Cinque Torri, a two-hour drive from Venice in north-eastern Italy and only a stone's throw from the Austrian border. Here, life revolves around the mountains. We are housed in a hut that has been in use for over a century and is surrounded by more

than 100 climbing routes navigable for beginners and experts alike. The refuge, a humble building with dormitory-style rooms serving local cuisine, has been run by the same family since 1937, and boasts stunning views that would captivate even the most seasoned climber.

The Dolomites are steeped in modern history. Though the rock formations are millions of years old, the region is known for its *via ferratas* – fixed routes with steel cables, ladders and walkways that criss-cross various peaks. Many of them were built to aid the movement of troops in the First World War. Having to walk, clamber, duck and crawl our way across the terrain provides a sobering insight into the lives of those on the front line between Italy and Austria. Eagle-eyed climbers still occasionally find relics of the war.

MAKING THE GRADE

The next morning, after a solid breakfast, we are driven about 30 minutes from the hut. "It's mostly grade three, and grade four in some sections," says Zoerer.

Grades mean very little to me. I'm used to clambering up an indoor wall just to see if I can make it to the top and enjoy myself in the process. I've never taken any notice of grades. Reassuringly, Zoerer has confidence in my abilities.

Strapping myself into my harness, the fabric cinches around my waist and thighs: not too loose that I can move around freely, but thankfully not tight enough to cut off the circulation to my legs. Trusting the equipment is essential, I'm told. Without this trust, your mind can play tricks on you, making you more hesitant. When you're precariously dangling several hundred metres up a rock face, that can cause problems.

"That's good, Neil," I hear from above, as Zoerer pulls the rope taught while I'm struggling halfway through the pitch.

"Hundreds of metres high, any hesitation can be lethal"



YOU NEED TO GET A GRIP, PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY



YOUR LIFE IS LITERALLY IN YOUR HANDS

We're connected only by a 7mm-thick rope, 60m in length. The muscles in my hands are working in overdrive, screaming at me for a second of respite, as the rubber of my climbing shoes clings to the smallest outcrop of rock. This is all that stands between me and the ground below. I couldn't be further

"My focus is entirely on what's above me, not below"

outside my comfort zone. Oddly, though, I realise that I couldn't be happier. That said, it's comforting

to know I'm in good hands. Zoerer is humble and unassuming, but he has almost three decades of climbing experience under his belt, and he has led numerous expeditions to peaks in the Himalayas and the Karakoram. He intimately knows his stuff and this region of the Dolomites. It's this expertise that helps me feel slightly less cautious about putting my life in his hands.

As I climb, my mind is totally clear. My entire focus, drive and determination is set upon getting up this section of the wall in one piece. I don't consider what's below me, just what's above, and I'm immersed in the challenge of staying connected to the rock face. It's a state that I can't say I've truly experienced before and certainly not in a climbing gym, which usually involves incessant background music and the hustle of other climbers. I'm enjoying being in this clear and present state of mind, despite the lactic acid building up in my quads and toes as they scratch around to find the next available hold.

The Gear to Grab Hold of

Even on guided multi-pitch trips, it pays to come prepared. These are some key kit considerations before taking on your first vertical expedition



LAYER UP

Proton LT Hoody £210 arcteryx.com
Climbing will get you sweating. But should the weather turn, you need layers. This hoody is durable and breathable. Leave it on all day.



CHOW DOWN

Lärabar £2.50 for 3 sainsbury.co.uk
Multi-pitch climbs can last hours. You need 80-100g of carbs every 60 minutes. These are raw and unprocessed, so easy to stomach.



HARD TOP

Petzl Sirocco £79 amazon.co.uk
With the chance of rock or ice falling from above, or your head smacking into the wall if you slip, a helmet is a life-saving necessity.

DISCOVER THE
TRUE MEANING OF
A NATURAL HIGH

Each metre of the wall has to be taken at its own pace. There are no colour-coded holds to guide you along a route. It's all about the senses, each limb placement strategically crucial to the ascent. I test various cracks to see if they'll take my weight, trying to read the wall through fingers and toes to find the path of least resistance. It's no wonder that professional climbers are among the most athletic people on Earth: they have to combine power and strength with remarkable agility and flexibility.

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP

Despite my serene state of mind, my legs are beginning to shake as my toes start to slip off the footholds, which are the size of bottle caps. A couple of potential handholds are just out of my reach, but they're the only ones I think I can grab. I steel myself, then stretch out my arm at full length. My biceps, triceps, core and quads are all telling me that they need a break, yet I fight the urge to relax, toiling

in my determination to make it work. I clutch onto the holds for dear life.

Zoerer greets me at the summit with a smile and a high five. "Great, Neil! You made it!" he says. I'm exhausted but ecstatic. I've earned these views. As I soak in the surrounding peaks, I find the apprehension I felt at the beginning of the climb has been left at the bottom. The scratched, tired limbs are all worth it, and I have a new-found appreciation for both professional and hobbyist climbers.

As we shuffle, shimmy and scale back down the *via ferrata*, Pauli Trenkwalder, another Arc'teryx guide, hands me a bullet he found during an ascent. "The *via ferratas* we have here in the Dolomites tell a long history. One hundred years ago, it had a totally different atmosphere." To me, it's astonishing that these narrow pathways, some of which are vulnerably exposed, were still in use. Anywhere else, they would have been made safer with copious amounts of framework and red tape. I feel privileged to be able to explore just a small piece of this region's history.

**"My muscles
are exhausted,
but I clutch on
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After a long day in the mountains, I sit down back at the hut with my guides and we drink some beer. The sun starts to set and the light hits the jagged backdrop in front of us. It's pleasing to know that these aren't the kind of guides who disappear at the end of the day. They make time for you, sharing some of their thoughts and experiences.

"For me, it's hard to put it into words. You just have to bring someone up to one of those summits, sitting up there, just feeling it," says Zoerer. "There's a specific emotion when you're up there: the light, the colours and all those pillars. They touch me inside." His passion for climbing is infectious. The brief experience I've tasted has left me craving more.

I will go back to my indoor walls in London with renewed energy. But now, each ascent will be training for my next adventure, rather than just a diversion on a rainy Tuesday night. If Zoerer and the Dolomites have taught me anything, it's that there is real beauty to be found in pushing yourself to your limits. **MB**