

New world standard? Bernabé Fernández taking a ribbing on *Chilam-Balam*.

Andalusia Dreaming

9b+ in Spain?

On July 4, Bernabé Fernández claimed the first ascent of *Chilam-Balam* near Málaga, Spain, proposing the grade of 9b+ (5.15c), two full grades above Chris Sharma's acclaimed *Realization* at Ceuse, France, and Ramón Julián Puigblanc's recent *La Rambla Direct* at Siurana, Spain.

Named after an ancient Mayan story, *Chilam-Balam* is a traversing, 270-foot super-pitch of overhanging stamina climbing on tufas and colonettes with several bouldering cruxes. Fernández spent three years working the 22-bolt line, using static lines and three-foot-long quickdraws to reduce rope drag and fall potential from the radically overhanging route.

Not surprisingly, the proposed grade has sparked an onslaught of online controversy around the world. "I cannot take Bernabé's proposal seriously as I can't see any references that would demonstrate his skills of climbing at such a high level — far above the rest of the world," writes German Alexander Huber on the European spray-tracking website www.8a.nu.

New angle on the woman thing

Bereziartu goes steep

On 17 July at Baltzola Cave near Bilbao in the Basque Country of northern Spain, Josune Bereziartu made the third ascent of *Na-Nai*, given 8c+ (5.14c) and thought by some to be high in the grade. Though perhaps not quite as hard as the notoriously technical *Bain de Sang* (9a) at Saint Loup, Switzerland, which Bereziartu climbed last year, *Na-Nai* is completely different in character, a 45-degree-overhanging 30-move power-endurance route.

The route begins with a 10-meter 8c section of off-balance dynamic moves on sloping sidepulls to a fair rest, followed by another crux, about V10, that ends with a cut-loose dynamic. "This route is a style very hard for me," says Bereziartu. "Dynamic, and really more power than endurance."

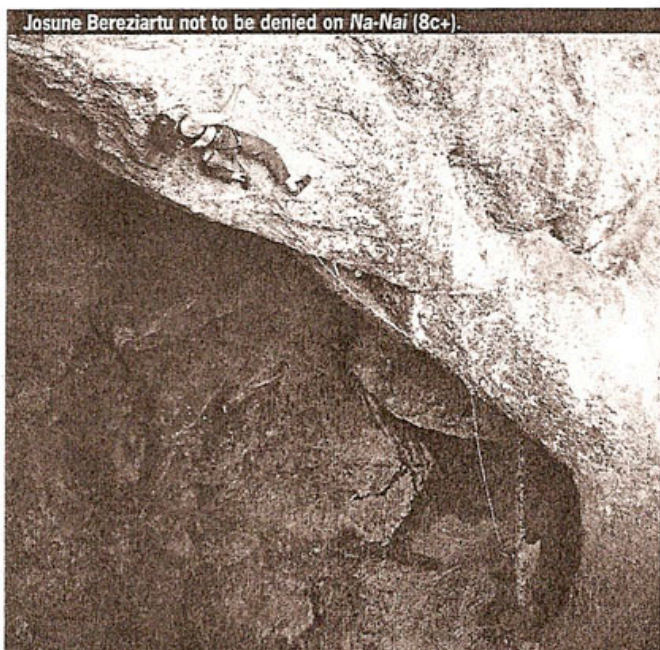
When the Spanish climbing media asked Fernández to climb on the route in their presence, he declined, stating that if people doubted his claims, they could try the route themselves. "We explained to Fernández that he was claiming the most difficult ascent in the world, and that it had to be clear to all of the climbing community that he had climbed the route," says Dario Rodriguez, editor at *Desnivel Magazine*. "But Fernández still refused."

At least some top Spanish climbers are willing to give Fernández the benefit of the doubt. "I come from the old climbing world and have always been taught to respect the climber and his ascent," says Josune Bereziartu. "I have no proof to confirm Fernández's ascent, but I must believe him. Otherwise, all the history of climbing becomes invalid."

Fernández, who climbed his first 8a at age 14 and established *Hari Kiri*, Spain's first 8c, is no stranger to controversy. He rarely leaves his home sector in southern Spain to climb, avoiding the more high-profile climbing areas and climbers. He used several bolted-on holds on his route *Orujo*, 9a (5.14d). (It is interesting to ponder why Fernández's bolt-on holds were so controversial, while standard-setting routes from Mount Charleston to Buoux have gone uncontested in spite of their equally artificial qualities.)

As for grade claims, the "old climbing world" may need to give way to the new. Sponsorship dollars encourage top climbers not only to climb harder, but also to claim high grades for their climbs, and ascents like *Chilam-Balam* will provoke ever-greater debate and demands for verification. In the end however, says Bereziartu, Fernández's new grade is "a proposition — just that. In the worst case, Fernandez could be very wrong, but as a climber, he has all my respect."

— Bill Launder



Josune Bereziartu not to be denied on *Na-Nai* (8c+).

DAVID MARILLA

RIKARDO OTEGI