

# BREAKING NEWS



Fernandez grinning below his 5.15c creation, *Chilam Balam*. See Exposed this issue for a photo of him on the route.

DAVID MURILLA

## Burden of Proof

Spaniard stirs the pot with a new 270-foot 5.15c

The Spanish climber Bernabé Fernández sparked controversy this summer by giving his new route *Chilam Balam* at Villanueva del Rosario near Malaga, Spain, the unprecedented grade of 5.15c. In keeping with its massive grade, *Chilam Balam* is a monstrous

route, totally natural, radically overhanging—and climbed in a single 270-foot pitch. Fernández worked on the route for four years, and finally redpointed it on July 4, a day of 90-degree temperatures.

Fernández, 28, is an outstanding climber. In 1992 he established Spain's first 5.14b, *Hara-kiri*, at the age of 17. Two years later he gave the country its first 5.14c, *Mojave*. He's also no stranger to controversy. In 1996 he used four bolt-on holds to make the "first ascent" of *Orujo* (5.14d). A couple of years later he dispensed with three of the bolt-ons and proposed a new grade of 5.15a. Top Spanish climbers Daniel Andradá, Pablo Barbero, and Ramon Julian have attempted *Orujo* without success.

Despite Fernández's obvious ability, some climbers are skeptical of *Chilam Balam*'s 5.15c rating. Germany's Alexander Huber wrote a letter expressing his disbelief (see sidebar), and the popular European climbing web site [www.8a.nu](http://www.8a.nu) opined: "It's now up to

Fernández to offer the climbing world some kind of proof, showing he's really miles ahead of everyone else. Normally a climber should be able to on-sight routes around three [letter] grades easier than his redpoint level. Considering the amount of work he's put into this route, in Fernández's case four grades is maybe more fair, but still, no one has been remotely close to on-sighting [5.14c] ... Can he do it?"

The challenge isn't likely to be answered. The weekend after his ascent, the climbers' refuge at Villanueva threw a huge party at which Fernández announced his retirement from high-standard climbing.

### Huber asks for answers

*Alex Huber, one of Europe's leading climbers, immediately questioned Fernández's ascent of Chilam Balam. Following is an excerpt of a letter Huber sent to the Spanish climbing magazine Desnivel, which he asked the editors to forward to Fernández.*

"The climbing world is faced with a problem that has occurred many times before: potential overgrading. 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. I would be lying if I said that I believed in the correctness of the grade 9b+ [5.15c]."

"I hope I don't sound jealous or unfair. I am not. I am trying to avoid what has happened so many times before—a climber who lost his credibility in the climbing world is a damage for our sport. Rather than insulting Bernabé, I am giving him a fair and honest chance, because I am letting him know my opinion about his proposal. Informing him about my doubts gives him the opportunity to answer and to consolidate his credibility."

— Alex Huber

EXPOSED



5.15+

Spanish ace Bernabé Fernández proposed the unheard-of grade of 5.15c for his latest route, *Chilam Balam*, at Spain's Villanueva del Rosario. Although Fernández is one of the country's strongest climbers, his route has sparked controversy in Europe. See Breaking News on page 26 for the full story.

Photo by David Munilla