

Lucas Laursen  
**Winter in the Picos de Europa**

The snow under my tentatively placed left boot gave way and I scampered back onto my perch. I leaned heavily on my ice axe with one hand and cheerlessly on the snow with my other hand. I pawed the snowy slope like a misguided rhinoceros charging up the wrong mountain. When I hazarded a look at my leg, I noted a dismaying gap between its boot and crampon.

This rhinoceros was scared and confused. Somewhere higher up the snow ramp where I nearly lost my crampon, Drew Marshall and Juan Vilatela were opening up our route. My rope trailed to Rachel Berkowitz, who waited in the shadow of the Torre de Santa Maria for me to reach a belay stance.

We were climbing the Corredor del Marques, a moderate five-pitch ramp that climbs diagonally to a snow-mushroomed summit that may be as close to a Patagonian peak as I will ever get. The route is a classic of the western massif of the Picos de Europa, a limestone mountain range which overlooks the Cantabrian Sea. We had come in search of Alpine adventures in a lesser-known range. I, at least, had found mine.

My climbing partners had joined me in Madrid the weekend before, where I'd moved into an apartment slightly larger than an expedition tent, and they gamely broke out their sleeping mats and bags for their first night of Spanish hospitality. The next morning, they excitedly photographed the snowcapped Sierra de Guadarrama, a mountain range that graces Madrid's north-western skyline. Juan, who had been to Spain before, regaled the others with tales of Asturian cider



Surprise! Asturian *gaitero* and friends

and fabada, a northern bean stew. But the real treat of the drive was discovering a reservoir guarded by a Matterhorn-like peak which didn't even merit mention in our guidebook. I could close my eyes. Then again, I was driving.

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Rachel Berkowitz nearing Los Argaos

Once arrived at the Covadonga Lakes we abandoned our hired car and strapped a week's worth of winter kit and food (we thought) on our backs for the hike to the Vegarredonda hut. We arrived at the self-catering stone hut at night, with nearly a meter of fresh snow on the ground. We woke up to a glorious morning so bright it took me a few minutes of squinting on the porch with my sunglasses on before I could face the snow and sun.

Our only worry was avalanche danger. In place of an avalanche beacon, Drew donned his leopard-print CUMC tights. No avalanches struck us on our hike to Los Argaos, a cluster of stone towers dividing our valley from the one overlooked by the Torre de Santa Maria. He and Juan scaled a pitch of steep and unprotectable snow while Rachel and I traipsed up a lower-angle gully to get a feel for the snow conditions. Straddling the saddle (visible above) we peeked at the distant route and made excited plans for the rest of our week. We aimed for a rock route on the Porru Bolu the next day, which also happened to be my birthday. The first surprise of the day was a park ranger skinning past the hut. A few quick words later I had lightened my load by one rope and several kilos of steel and joined him on a glorious ski tour. We skinned over a windy pass and into a sun-soaked valley with not another soul but a lot

of rebecos: chamois to the French. We lunched on a rock left in the wake of the valley's now-disappeared glacier. The second surprise of the day was the twilight arrival of four Asturians, one of whom bore an instrument recognizable anywhere the descendants of Celts still blow, finger and squeeze merry tunes from wailing sacks. The gaitero and his friends threw me my second CUMC-themed birthday party in as many years. With music still ringing in our ears and festive fumes on our breath early the next morning we threaded our way through the jous, or sinkholes, which shape the Picos. Juan and Drew bounded up the route and before I knew it, I was traversing a slope wearing one crampon. With some delicacy I crouched on my other leg and re-attached the crampon. With much less delicate language I informed Rachel and shuffled nervously off after Juan and Drew. Lucky for me, spring sprang the next day and looming gray clouds and mist softened the snow. After that, nobody obliged me to climb anymore and I returned to eating fabada and drinking cider in Madrid. Sometimes, though, my footing gets wobbly and my mind flashes back to that moment on the Torre de Santa Maria, and I give an involuntary snuffle as I paw the ground.



Colláu La Fragua at dawn

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Beyond Vegarredonda



Drew drawn toward the light