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BY DAVE COSTELLO
PHOTOS BY WES WALKER

CLIFF DWELLERS

STANDUP PADDLING + CLIMBING IN TEXAS



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The sun is gone. It's 7 p.m. on a Saturday, and I'm standing on the side of Interstate 90, 15 miles west of Del Rio, Texas, wearing a cowboy hat and bright orange board shorts. A border patrol agent in army fatigues is riffling through my drybag, awkwardly straddling the three 12'6" rental SUPs hanging out the back of our short-bed pickup.

THE NEAREST WATER IS AT THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER 30 MILES AWAY on Lake Amistad. A five-year drought has left the reservoir on the Rio Grande nearly bone-dry. The nearest surfable waves are 300 miles away in the Gulf of Mexico. I can't blame him for thinking that three dudes with boards in the desert look a little suspicious. We do. But we're not after waves. We're looking for rock.

I'd been tipped off that the climbing in the Lower Pecos River Canyon was first rate, and mostly untouched, since it could only be accessed by water—not to mention its close proximity to the Mexican border. So I called up two of my old climbing buddies, Wes Walker in Jacksonville, Fla., and Greg Petry in

Duluth, Minn., and convinced them to meet me in Austin at the end of March. The plan: Pick up rental boards, drive six hours to the boat ramp at the confluence of the Pecos and the Rio Grande, and paddle upstream for four days, camping and climbing until we're too tired to lift our paddles.

A second agent leads a drug-sniffing German shepherd around the vehicle on a short leash while a third, named "Carl", stands with his hands crossed in front of me, eyeing my nearly expired Minnesota driver's license. He's not smiling. Neither are my two longhaired cohorts, easily mistaken for drug-running hippies. Dark clouds are rolling in from the south.

The dog starts barking like he's found a solid brick of contraband. It's the second time we've been searched by U.S. Border Patrol today—counting the accidental entry into Mexico after missing our turn onto I-90.

"So, what brings two Minnesotans and guy from Florida to southern Texas to go surfing?" Carl asks. I decide to keep it simple: I'm working for a magazine that covers standup paddling. Carl, however, has never heard of SUP.

"We're paddling the Pecos River," I explain, watching as the drug dog climbs into the back of the pickup and tears out Wes's backpack stuffed with camera gear. "And those are standup boards—not surfboards. See the paddles? We're going to paddle them upriver from the confluence of the Rio Grande and go climbing."

"Are you sure you don't have any drugs in here?" interrupts the Border Patrol agent who's straining to hold the dog off of Wes's pack.

"Yes ... yes, sir," I hear Wes mumble, nervously. At 27, he's a good friend, climber, and photographer who I happily trust with my life, having teamed up on plenty of less well-thought out adventures than this. Right now, though, his nerves and dark complexion are making him resemble a terrorist.

THE AUTHOR ON AN UNNAMED, AND LIKELY UNCLIMBED
CLIFF FACE IN THE LOWER PECOS RIVER CANYON.





PECOS PAYLOAD: RIGGING DRYBAGS TO THE BOARDS, AND PADDLING BENEATH WILD GOATS.



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The furrows in Carl's leathery brow deepen. His unblinking eyes move from mine to Wes's, back to mine, and then over to Greg, a 31-year-old, lean, dark-haired climbing bum and outdoor educator who's been living out of his Honda Civic for the past eight years. He's an old friend and climbing partner from college.

"I didn't know people did that," Carl says, referring to SUP in general. The mood lightens.

"They do, but they don't here, really," I admit, waving my hand vaguely in the direction of Mexico. "A lot of people SUP though."

"S-U-*whut*?" he says.

THE LOWER PECOS RIVER CANYON IS A lonely 55-mile-long, 200-foot-deep hole in the earth a couple hundred miles west of San Antonio. The water is green and warm as it meanders slowly through the canyon's bright limestone cliffs, streaked white, black, red, and gold.

I try to appreciate the view while hanging by two fingers from a small, sharp, vertical crack 20 feet above the water. I look down at Greg, who's holding onto a ledge at water level on his SUP. He's keeping track of my board and paddle. He looks small, and I decide I don't want to fall, even though I know it's inevitable at this point. We're deep-water soloing—climbing without a rope over

water—and even if I make it to the top of the cliff, I still have to jump back down. The system is simple: Paddle up to the wall, step off board and climb, jump or fall back into the river, repeat.

To continue upward, I have to make a long reach up to a relatively large three-inch ledge. I decide to make a desperate lunge, even though I have nowhere to put my feet on the otherwise smooth stone. My fingertips brush the edge of the hold, but I slide back down, and keep falling until I smack the surface of the water. Greg and Wes are still laughing when I come up, and then take their turns. They both easily top out as I keep their boards from floating away in the ever-increasing



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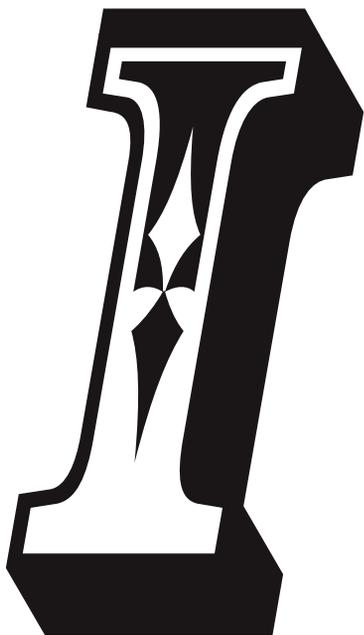
wind blowing up the canyon. Later, they politely assure me that “it was kinda hard ... V3 at least” (That’s like a chest-high wave or Class III whitewater for people who climb rocks.) I’m humbled. And a little sore. But I can’t keep the smile from my face, looking up the canyon and knowing this is all I have to do for the next four days.

GREG AND WES HAD NEVER MET ONE another, and once we arrived at the lonely boat ramp put-in, we spent the night in the parking lot watching lightning crash over the canyon. The thunderstorm that was approaching during our border search finally caught up with us, and we wound up making our supper of dried, bagged lasagna under a public restroom awning.

“THE SYSTEM IS SIMPLE: PADDLE UP TO THE WALL, STEP OFF BOARD AND CLIMB, JUMP OR FALL BACK INTO THE RIVER, REPEAT.”

“I’ve had meals in worse places,” Greg said, making the best of it, wearing sandals, board shorts, and a cowboy hat like Wes and I. He pointed to the damp concrete floor. “This is actually pretty clean.”

“Me too,” Wes agreed, digging with bare hands into a tin of sardines we’d brought. I pulled out a bag of wine. It was an odd, but genuine dirtbag-bonding moment. And I knew then that Wes and Greg were going to get along fine. All I was really worried about was a certain fish: a unique, and absolutely terrifying thing called the Alligator Gar, which we’d been told was quite harmless, despite its uncanny resemblance to an alligator and ability to grow up to 20 feet.



In the morning we made oatmeal and coffee, and then strapped our drybags to the noses of our boards. "Well, that's easy," Wes said to no one in particular after he set up his rig. "But I don't know if this thing's going to float." I slid my board into the water and felt its heavy load under the weight of the climbing gear, a 60-meter rope, a weeks worth of food, my camping kit, a bottle of Jameson, and a bag of wine. Maybe too heavy.

"What do we do if they don't float?" Greg asked.

"Well, I've never done this before either," I admitted. "But I say we leave some of the climbing gear behind before we ditch the booze, or the food."

I let the water take the full weight of the board and crossed my fingers, hoping I wouldn't have to dive in after it. I hopped on and quickly moved back two steps to counteract the weight of the strapped nose-load. The rails rode low in the water and the wide, stable composite rental board wobbled a bit more than it would for an Austin tourist. I wondered how my two friends with zero SUP experience would handle the task.

Greg, who's paddled a sea kayak over 1,200 miles around Lake Superior, caught onto standup paddling with a load fast. I watched him figure out his brace and turn strokes fine without any coaching from me on the calm water. The only time he faltered was when a gust of wind blew off his cowboy hat and he jumped in after it.

Wes, however, immediately fell off. "This is kinda tricky," he said, pulling himself back onto his board, fully loaded with camera gear. With pointers, he hobbled his way upstream, if not in a straight line. It



THE CAVE THE TEAM CALLED HOME.



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didn't help that he couldn't take his eyes off the canyon walls.

Ospreys circled overhead as we watched wild goats the size of small dogs grazing on the shrubs along the cliffs. The only sound was the wind, which had been steadily increasing all morning, thankfully at our backs. I kept my eyes open for Alligator Gar, although I didn't know what to do if I actually saw one stalking me. I asked Greg what he'd do. "Scream, like a little girl," he said. "Loudly."

NOW THE WIND IS RAGING, pushing two-foot-high whitecaps up the canyon. The continuous 40 mph gust hurtles us upriver faster than we can paddle. We look for a place to pull off, but we're entirely cliffed in. I begin to worry—there's no chance we can paddle back.

Eventually, we find a small, protected

cove with a rocky slope where we can hunker down. Crouching behind some boulders, I begin preparing lunch. Greg approaches me holding a cactus, gingerly, so as not to stab himself.

"Have you ever had prickly pear?" he asks.

"You mean, eat it?" Wes says in disbelief.

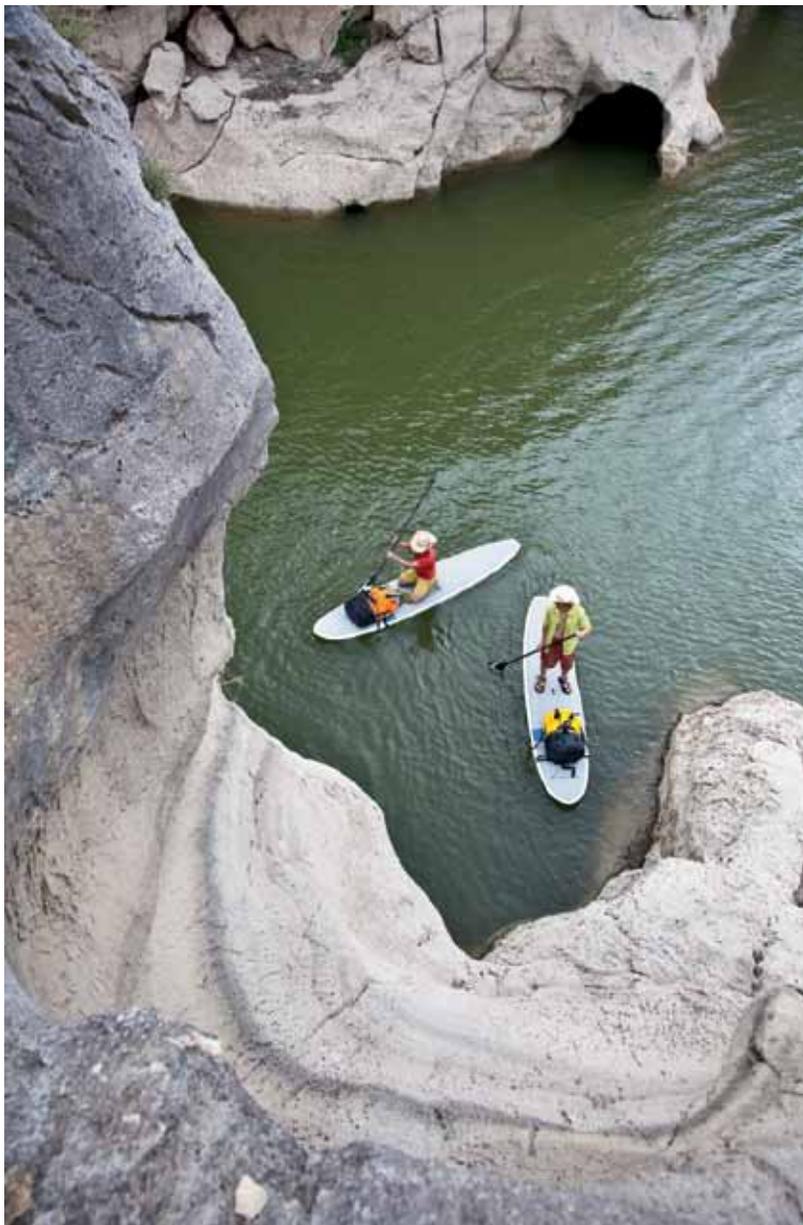
"Yeah, I just need a lighter to burn off these spikes. It's really good in salads," Greg assures us. I'm skeptical, but it's surprisingly tangy and sweet.

"What other stuff can we eat out here?" I ask.

The wind, while fun at our backs traveling upriver, presents a real problem. "If it keeps up like this, we might not be able to paddle out of this canyon," I point out. We look at our topo map and see that just a few miles upstream a

promising side-canyon looks like it might have water, and plenty of cliffs to explore and climb. We make that our destination for the day, even though we don't know where we'll be able to camp inside the steep walls.

Then it happens. As Greg and I are paddling side-by-side, surfing the wind bumps upriver, I see something out of the corner of my eye. It's longer than our SUPs. I watch as a long, toothed snout snaps up a smaller fish from just beneath the surface of the water, before the monstrous form darts back down to the darkness. On cue, Greg screams. Loudly. Like a little girl. We've seen our first Alligator Gar. "Oh man, just wait 'til I have some of that whiskey," Greg tells me as we pull into the side-canyon, out of the wind. "That's going to be one hell of a fish story."



*“I SAY WE LEAVE
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ING GEAR BEHIND
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THE BOOZE, OR THE
FOOD.”*

As Wes rounds the corner behind us, I hear him begin to shout with excitement. “This is perfect! This rock is so cool! You guys, don’t move ... let me get my camera.” The side-canyon is only 100 feet across at its widest, winnowing to slots where there’s barely enough room to float our boards through. The walls are a ghostly white, and worn into Dr. Seuss-like overhangs, columns, spires and caves—all glowing gold in the diminishing light.

We pull our boards into a cave with walls so sheer, there are no beaches. A massive flock of swallows erupts from the entrance, their nests plastered across the roof of the 50-by-20-foot cavern. “It’s official,” Wes says. “We’re cavemen now.” This, as he picks up a dried and decaying baby Gar carcass and spikes it on a small, dead tree in front of our new home,

bearing an unsettling resemblance to the beach from *Lord of the Flies*.

Like clockwork, another thunderstorm rolls through the canyon, and we watch the lightning illuminate the cliffs around us as we make supper and drink whiskey, talking about life while taking turns playing the harmonica. I make a mental note that the wind dies at around 10 p.m. If the wind keeps up, we might have to make a break for the boat ramp in the middle of the night.

The next morning, I wake to the sound of the swallows, hop on my SUP and paddle alone as deep as I can back into the canyon. The water is calm, and when I can go no farther, I sit down on my board, legs dangling in the cool water and stare up at the narrow strip of blue sky above me. “Why can’t I do this every day?” I wonder.

We spend the morning paddling around the canyon, taking turns holding one another’s boards and climbing whatever random cliff walls look appealing. By 2 p.m., we’re all fast asleep back in the cave. I wake up in the dirt, drool pooling beneath me. It’s almost 5. I feel guilty about sleeping away the day, but Wes quickly corrects me. “Working and playing hard is important,” he reminds me. “But so is resting.” I realize it’s the first time I’ve napped in a year. “Besides,” he adds, “it’s freaking hot out in the middle of the day.”

EACH DAY IS, IN MANY WAYS, a repetition of the one before: Wake up, paddle, climb, eat, and sleep. The weather stays constant. Wind all day, an evening thunderstorm, just before dark, followed by a star-filled Texas night. We’re safe



*40 FEET UP, HE TURNS AROUND TO LOOK AT THE INCOMING STORM.
'THIS IS AWESOME!' HE YELLS.*

from the wind in our little backwater, and have more than enough to explore, so we don't venture out into the exposed main river channel.

On our final day, Wes tells me he wants to check out a climb on the main channel he saw when we first paddled in. It's still windy, so paddling there isn't an option. We scramble to the top of the cliff and walk over to where we think it is. Looking down from the top, I estimate we're about 50 feet above the water over a fairly steep overhang. "Man, I wish this wind would die, just for 15 minutes so we could climb this thing," he tells me. "It looks amazing!" I point out a huge cave above us on the next cliff band. "In the meantime, you want to go check that out?" I ask.

THE APPROACH IS STEEPER THAN IT looked below. I'm in sandals 150 feet up on a cactus-covered wall, but the

climbing's easy, so we continue. It's an enormous 500-foot-wide, 100-foot-deep amphitheater. We sit in the middle, looking out at the view.

"I think this whole SUPing-to-climb thing could really catch on," Wes tells me. "It's simple, and you can get to places like this." He holds open his hands, as if to show me the world.

We watch the evening's lightning show from the safety of our cave, eating the last of our cheese and crackers and bagged wine. For once, no one's making a sound. We know our trip is coming to an end. We'll have to wake up at 3 a.m., paddle back downstream before the wind picks up, and drive back through the border patrol checkpoints, moving on with our "real" lives.

Suddenly, I notice a rainbow across the canyon. The wind has stopped. The evening sky is now dark on the horizon, but the sun is shining. The water is calm.

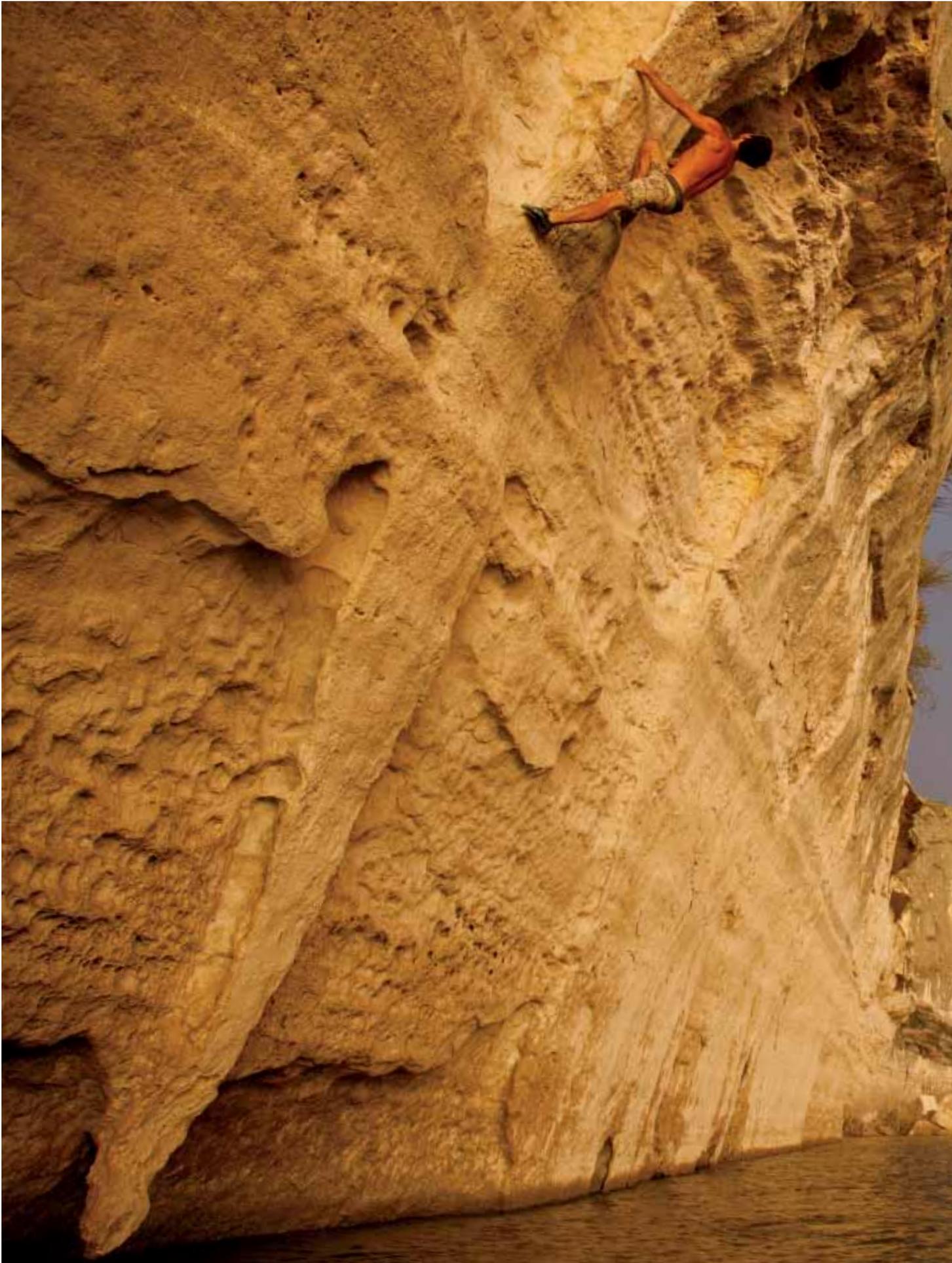
We immediately hop on our boards and paddle frantically out to the main channel, hoping to have enough time for Wes's route—before it gets dark or the storm circles back on itself. I hop on first and make it about a quarter of the way up the wall and come crashing back into the water. Greg falls in the same spot. I can see more lightning approaching on the horizon.

"We gotta go, guys," Greg says, looking out at the ominous sky approaching us.

"Go ahead," Wes says, handing me his camera. "I just gotta climb this first"

We watch as he hops off his board and scrambles smoothly past the section that stumped Greg and me. He gets to a ledge near the top—about 40 feet up—and turns around for a moment to look at the incoming storm.

"This is amazing!" he yells, and keeps climbing. He tops out and says, "Wow ... this is high," as if he hadn't noticed before.



A person wearing a wide-brimmed hat and shorts is standing on a white stand-up paddleboard (SUP) on a body of water. The person is holding a black paddle and is in the middle of a stroke. The background features a large, light-colored rocky cliff face that extends into the distance. The sky is a mix of blue and orange, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The water is calm and reflects the light from the sky.

Greg is already paddling back to the side-canyon. Lightning crashes above us, and the wind begins to howl through the main channel just as Wes and I round the corner back into protected waters. Wes looks over at me. "That was so worth it," he says, contently.

We drink the last of our whiskey, cheering our first of many successful SUP-climbing trips to come, discussing similar expeditions on Lakes Powell and Tahoe. A few hours later at 3 a.m., we wake up before the swallows to pack in the dark. The water is like glass beneath the stars as we paddle out of the side-canyon, back onto the Pecos. We hardly speak during the two-hour paddle to the boat ramp.

"I love watching the world wake up like this," Greg finally says. He points over the canyon rim with his paddle as an orange burst of light appears to the east. I feel the wind pick up—a soft howl—and enjoy, for a few more minutes, the feel of my paddle in the water, my feet on my board, and the hard-won dirt beneath my fingernails. ■