

“Trail Mix” - Rock Climb by Dave Cooper

“Captain America” – 5.10a – one pitch – Moderate Sport Climb –

Penitente Canyon

Penitente Canyon is home to some of the finest sport climbing Colorado has to offer. Located on the west side of the San Luis Valley, the mild climate allows climbing when many other areas are too cold. As winter draws near, consider a day or two in this secluded spot.

The climbs tend to be steep, short and hard, on walls of volcanic tuff. The huecos, characteristic of this rock, offer strenuous, fun climbing on generally well-protected, bolted routes. Some fine trad. lines can also be found here.

While most of the routes in Penitente and the surrounding canyons are in the 5.11 – 5.12 range, there are enough moderate routes to make a trip to this magical area worthwhile.

The BLM maintains trails in this area which offer enjoyable hikes for those not interested in the technical climbing.

Approach: From the Denver area take US285 south, over Poncha Pass to Saguache. From the intersection of highway 114 and US285 in Saguache, continue south on US285 for 17.7 miles. Turn right on “G” road (signed to La Garita and Penitente Canyon) and proceed 5.5 miles to La Garita. 0.6 miles beyond La Garita there is a Y-intersection. Take the left fork on a good dirt road. After a further 0.9 miles turn right on the dirt road which leads into Penitente Canyon, reaching the trailhead parking area in 1.0 miles. From the parking area, walk into the canyon for 500 yards. The climb “Captain America” will be directly to your right.

History:

The canyon is believed to have been occupied by Native Americans 200 years ago, evidenced by rock art and stone structures. In the 1700’s Spanish settlers moved into the area. The canyon is named for the Bothers Penitente, a religious group. Folk art in the area reflects this influence. Route development started in the 1980’s.

Gear: For Captain America, there are 3 bolts plus anchor chains, but bring your trad. rack for some of the fine trad. lines.

Amenities: Camping is available in and near the canyon, for \$5 per night. The best sites are the few located just before the trailhead. The La Garita cash store offers supplies and meals. Casa de Madera, in Del Norte, is the closest climbing store.

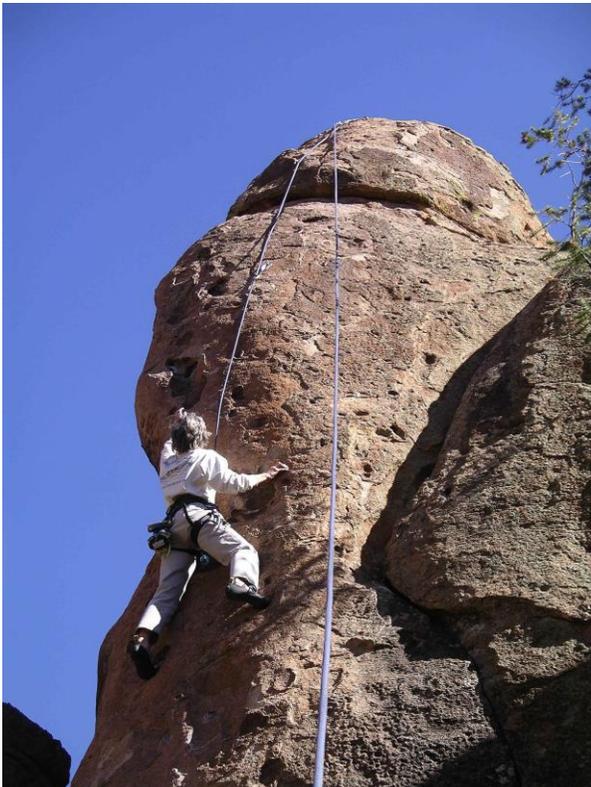


Penitente Canyon, showing "The Virgin", an example of the folk art to be found here. The beautiful arete to the right is "Bullet the Blue Sky", 5.12c/d.



Captain America is the left-hand route. The route highlighted to the right is "The Serpent", 5.8

A fine example of the climbing in this area is "Captain America", one of the most popular routes (and, in my opinion, at the upper end of the "moderate" range!)



The route heads up the prow of a steep, pocketed tower. Start by climbing up a low angle slab to the base of the tower. Consider moving your belay up to this point, since the crux is low down on the route, by the first bolt.

Ginni cleaning the route

Continue up past two more bolts to chain anchors – upgraded from the original anchor. The climbing is steep, but the huecos offer positive holds. As you near the top, use sharp edges.

There are a number of other moderate routes in the main canyon that I would recommend.

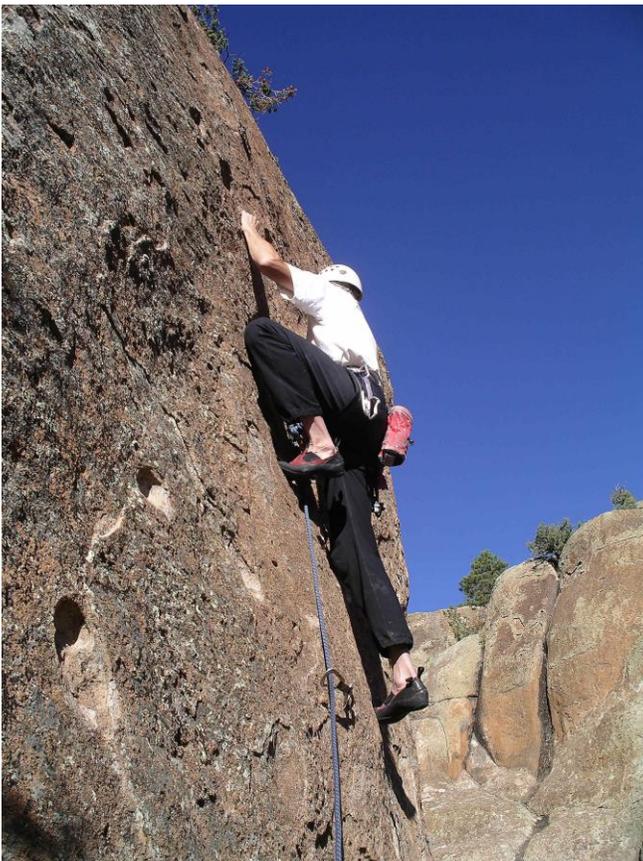
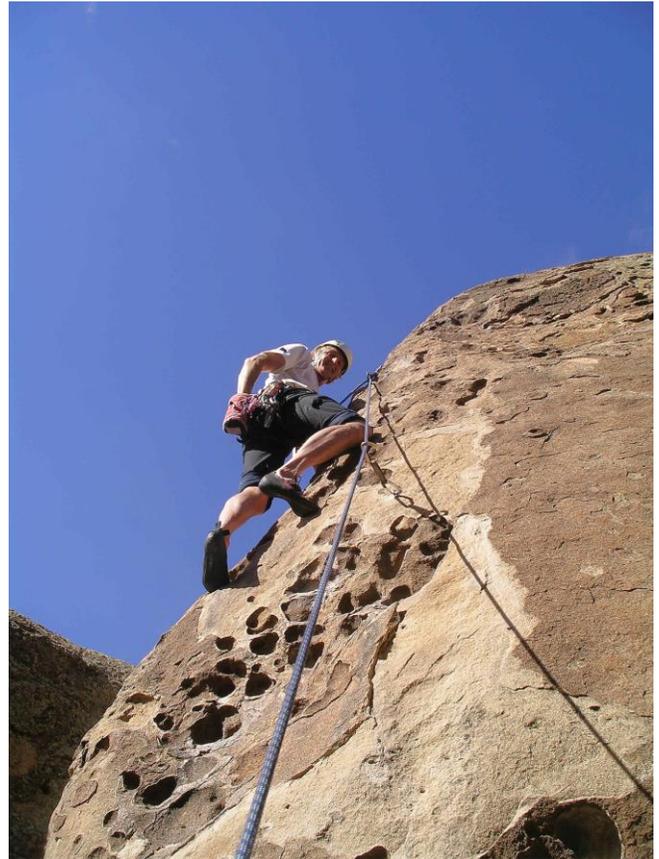
"The Serpent", 5.8 is a very nice bolted route. The ground at the base of this route has eroded considerably, making a direct start more difficult. Consider bouldering up the direct start to clip the first bolt, then climbing the right edge of the face, a few feet to the right.

In the side canyon directly beyond “Captain America” is another popular moderate, “How the West Was Won”, 5.9.

Another hueco-pulling fest, this short, steep climb is of high quality. Since the first bolt is 15 feet off the ground and the initial climbing is non-trivial (especially for shorter people), consider stick-clipping this first bolt. Either rappel or walk off down the slot to the right of the climb.

The author on "How the West was Won" - photo by Ginni Greer

Further up the main canyon, on the opposite side, is a short, fun warmup climb (it gets morning sun) called “Ms Cool”, 5.9.



The author on Ms. Cool - photo by Ginni Greer

Take a look at “Santa Cruise” an excellent trad. 5.8, a little up canyon from the “Virgin Wall”.

On a day when this main canyon is busy, consider hiking over to “The Rock Garden” or Witches Canyon, where you will find many more fine routes, including more in the moderate category.

For more details, see Bob D’Antonio’s guidebook “Rock Climbing the San Luis Valley”.

