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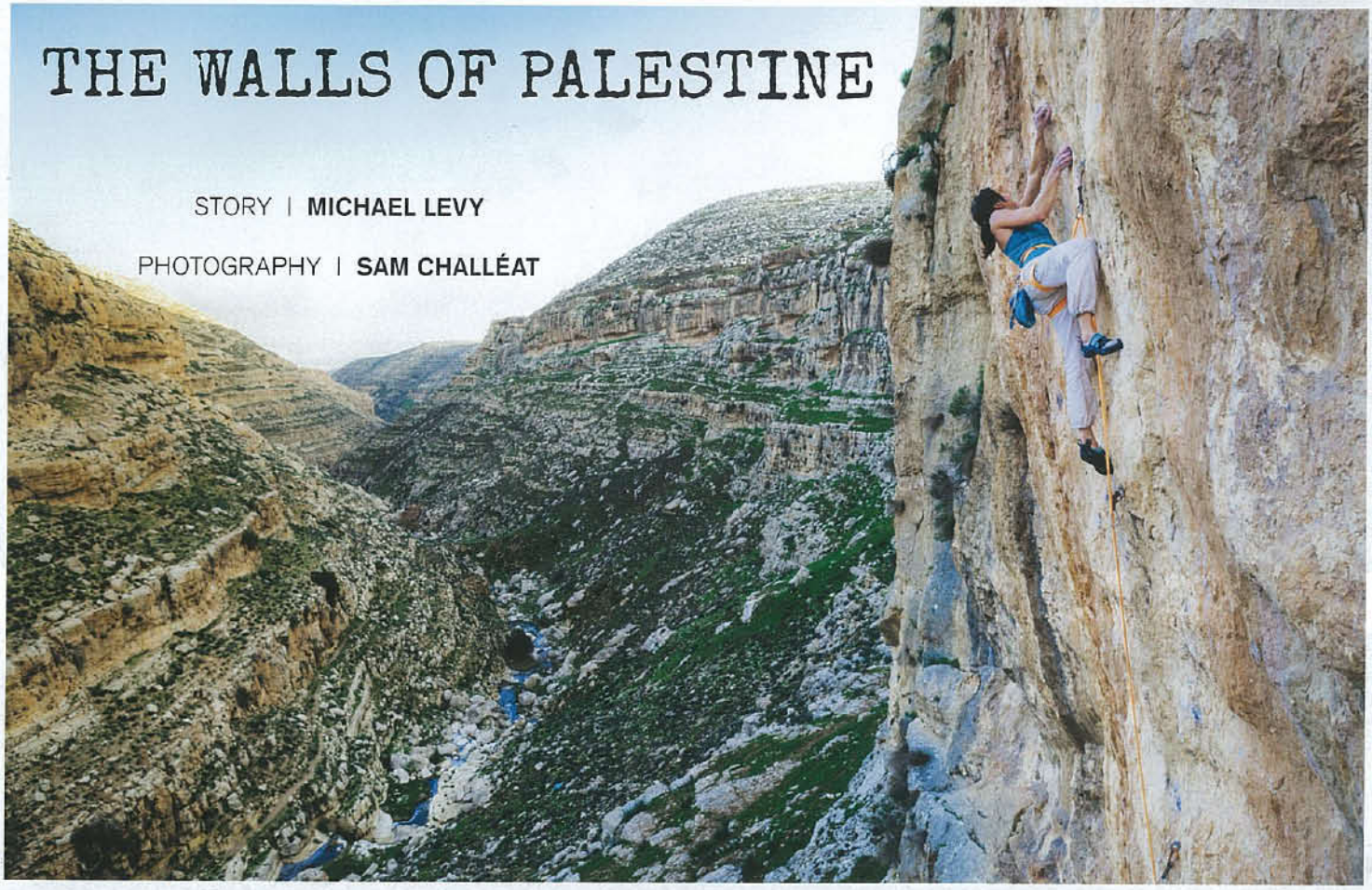
THE WALLS OF PALESTINE

STORY | **MICHAEL LEVY**

PHOTOGRAPHY | **SAM CHALLÉAT**



Walls hold a lot of significance in Palestine, and so do rocks for that matter. While the former is a sign of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, rocks have recently become symbols of resistance. It may or may not have crossed their minds, but when Tim Burns and Will Harris got the quixotic idea a few years ago to start a rock climbing company in the West Bank, they were unwittingly combining two of the most powerful and potent ideas — rocks and walls — in the Palestinian consciousness.

During college, Tim and Will both spent a semester studying in Amman, Jordan, and it was on an extracurricular trip to the West Bank that they got it into their heads that a climbing gym in Palestine would be a cool project.

"One thing led to another," Tim says. "We went back to the States, graduated college, and decided we wouldn't look for jobs and would move to Palestine to try and start this."

They lined up business partners back Stateside, but it turns out that even with robust support, building a climbing gym in a foreign territory is not without its difficulties.

Hitting obstacle after obstacle — real estate prices, government bureaucracy, and building materials — the two instead decided to create the Palestinian climbing scene on real rock first and worry about the gym later. They realised that if they could "prove that people actually want to climb in Palestine" then they would have a much easier time getting the gym project underway.

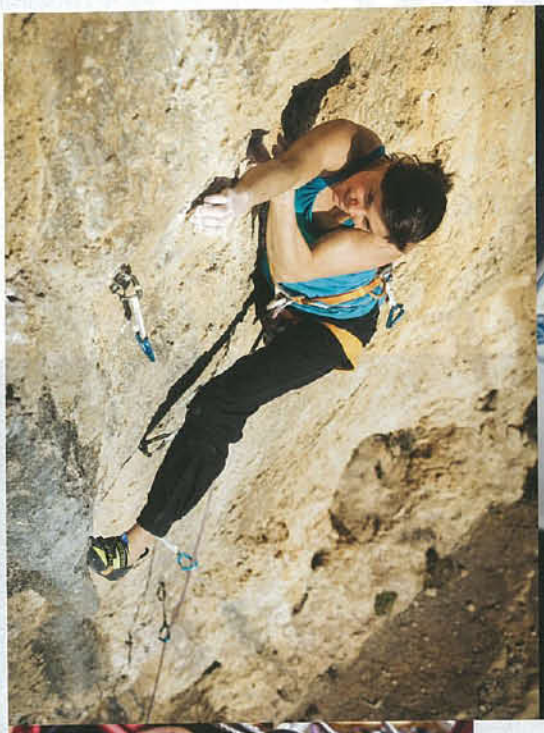
The existing climbing in the Palestinian territories was minimal. One cliff, Ein Farrah, had a selection of climbs, but there were access issues for Palestinian climbers. So, armed with a lone drill and a smattering of bolts, Tim and Will opened a handful of routes themselves.

One cliff to turned into two, two into three, and in no time the number of new routes in Palestine was approaching a hundred. Using the name Wadi Climbing (wadi means "valley" in Arabic), Tim and Will began running trips for local Palestinians, outfitting the participants with donated shoes and harnesses.

In a world with ever-present boundaries — walls both shutting them out and keeping them in — it is no wonder that young Palestinians started signing up for Wadi Climbing's trips in greater and greater numbers. To this point, in just a couple years of operations, Wadi Climbing has had over 1,400 participants. And perhaps even more notable is that, despite existing in a heavily patriarchal society, 45% of their participants have been women. Scaling the cliffs that dot the hillside is about more than climbing: it is about empowerment.

Shadan is a 26 year old marketing consultant from Ramallah, Palestine, who started climbing with Wadi Climbing. "Climbing is definitely empowering," she says. "In general, the feelings of living under occupation are helplessness, anger and fear. And it feels like there's nothing you can do about it. Throwing rocks will never help." But with climbing, Shadan says that "Even when everything else feels helpless, you know you can climb that route."

Leading Swiss climber Nina Caprez witnessed this empowerment herself on an impromptu climbing trip to



FACING PAGE: Top Swiss climber Nina Caprez spent some time climbing in Palestine in 2016. As she says, "It was tough to see what everyday life was like [for Palestinians]. I saw a lot of things. Every single Palestinian climber had this huge backpack of sad history with them."

THIS PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Nina Caprez enjoying prime limestone at Yabrud, Palestine. | A map of walls: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is a region divided by the seemingly unsolvable conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. Climbing, though, provides hope amid the walls and razor wire. | Peace Steps: along with more substantial sponsorship commitments, Nina Caprez is an (unofficial) ambassador for Palestinian Hand Crafts.
ALL SAM CHALLEAT

Palestine. After attending a climbing event in an Israeli settlement at the invitation of an Israeli climbing club, Caprez insisted on visiting the Palestinian areas of the West Bank, she says, "To see everything with my own eyes". What she found troubled her. "It was tough to see what everyday life was like in Palestine. I saw a lot of things. Every single Palestinian climber had this huge backpack of sad history with them."

And, at first, Caprez found it difficult to find meaning in her presence there, simply going climbing amidst the hardship and injustice she saw all around her. But after going out to the crags, climbing with Bedouin kids, and visiting Israeli settlers, she saw things differently.

"I realised how much climbing meant to the kids," she says. "For a few small moments, a few hours when we were just rock climbing, there was no difference between Israelis and Palestinians, no battles, no more anger. We were all just the same."

Palestine is unlikely to become a destination at the top of globe-trotting climbers' wishlists. But though it may never be a world class location like Thailand or Spain, the rock is definitely not bad. Nina Caprez found herself lapping the existing routes at Yabrud and thoroughly enjoying the rock.

"They are small cliffs, but the rock quality is good" she says. And, beyond the rock, Palestinian culture is full of life, the people are warm and welcoming, the food is delicious, and the political situation is engrossing regardless of one's opinions. At the very least, as Tim Burns says, "Any climber who comes here to visit will have a really interesting experience."

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> - Nina Caprez

The West Bank may not boast the breathtaking sinkhole formations to the north in Lebanon's Tannourine, or the permanent sunset hues of Jordan's Wadi Rum to the west, or the soaring granite domes of the Egyptian Sinai. It may not have the dramatic flair of any of its immediate neighbours, but it has a beauty all its own.

The little outcrops of rough-hewn limestone – just like the scrappy and delightful Bedouin kids learning to smear, stem, crimp and dyno all over them – have a hell of a lot of heart. And so, perhaps unsurprisingly, there now exists a small and vibrant climbing community in the West Bank. There is a brat-pack of young Bedouin with their own gear who are quickly becoming the country's strongest climbers. There are some mega-projects at the cliffs: at the time of writing, there are a couple of lines that will definitely be 8a or harder: climbing in Palestine has truly begun.

And in April, 2016, Wadi Climbing finally opened the first climbing wall in Palestine. In the first weeks, the gym had signed up 18 members; they now have far more than that. With a place to train in and cliffs to climb at outside, Palestinian youths will soon be scaling the hardest walls, surmounting the largest obstacles, and defying all possibilities and expectations.

"I can see the excitement in people's eyes when they're climbing", says Shadan from Ramallah. "I think climbing in Palestine will keep growing." There can be little doubt the future of rock climbing in Palestine is bright, whatever the future holds. ■