

# Mountain mad

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Photographs: Michael Wolf

**Modern mountaineering evolved in the European Alps, taking well over 200 years to develop into the sport we know today. Within the European climbing community, more Germans than you might think are involved in spectacular first ascents, and the invention of new techniques and equipment.**

At the foot of a steep rock face, a man wearing a red safety helmet stares gloomily upwards at the summit of the Zugspitze, Germany's highest mountain. "How will I ever get up there!" he groans. His fears are unfounded – the ascent is not all that difficult, thanks to the steel ropes positioned along the route to the peak. A human chain of 200 climbers extends upwards along this route, heading for the golden cross at the top.

On fine summer weekends, encounters with other climbers on such fashionable routes in the German Alps are unavoidable. Toni Hiebeler, a mountaineer and writer from Munich had this to say about these alpine 'convoys': "I'm all in favour of as many people as possible using these

is the largest mountaineering association in the west.

When seven "mountain-mad" academics got together at the Munich inn, Zur Traube, in 1869 to start the D.A.V., the Alps were still nothing more than an obstacle to travellers bound for Italy. The founding fathers of German mountain-climbing had no idea that, 114 years later, their small group, with its declared aim of "exploring and opening up the Alps," would play a major role in the leisure industry. The figures are impressive: in 1983, the D.A.V. registered 1.1 million visitors and 630,000 overnight stays at the some 300 hostels it owns in Germany and Austria. The maintenance of huts and access routes alone costs the club, which still operates on a non-profit basis, DM 5 million (U.S. \$ 1.5 m) a year.

The club's funds, made up of membership fees, donations and money raised by the club itself, are not used solely for the benefit of tourists; they are also spent on safety research, expeditions, environmental projects and training climbers and guides.

In the 19th century herdsmen, resin collectors, even poachers and smugglers who knew their local mountains better than anyone else, guided the first Alpine tourists over ridges and rock faces up to the still unscaled peaks. When, in 1881, Johann Grill, a woodcutter and guide from Berchtesgaden, climbed the Bartholomäus face of the Watzmann for the first time, together with a

workers turned professional and established local guide associations – such as the one founded in Berchtesgaden in 1881 – with their own statutes, scale of fees and flag.

"At that time, the customer was king," says Franz Rasp, now a guide in Berchtesgaden. "A first ascent by a guide alone didn't count for anything, but with tourists it was regarded as a real achievement."

Like most of his 426 German colleagues, Rasp, president of the German and International Mountain Guide Associations, is unable to make a livelihood as a part-time guide. He says, "the climbing season, including ski tours, lasts only seven months a year at the very most – a situation that even the current mountaineering boom won't change."

The mountain guide of today regards himself more as a climbing instructor and less as a mere helping hand for beginners. Günther Sturm, head of the D.A.V.'s own climbing and skiing centre in Munich, explains: "During training, we not only aim to teach the pupil how to master safety and climbing techniques, but also how to think for himself, and improve his powers of judgement."

The training provided by the club for the next generation of guides is particularly thorough. Dieter Elsner, guide and instructor, makes extensive use of demonstration material when he holds his training courses. These take place in huts or cabins, each of which is equipped with a genera-

The test at the end of the course is a tough one, and those who aren't in top shape, have little hope of passing. Says Günther Sturm: "You can make lots of mistakes on the tennis court and get away with it. If you make one major error while mountain-climbing, it will be your last one!"

The first mountaineers of the last century to climb without guides were remarkable chiefly for their independence and their self-confidence. Like Hermann von Barth, who chalked up more than 100 'firsts' in the German and Austrian Alps between 1868 and 1873, they saw no point in merely following a guide. Von Barth, a notorious loner who always carried a cyanide capsule with him as a last resort, used to scare off would-be companions with the remark: "Anyone who comes with me had better face the fact that he is risking his life."

From this group of loners there evolved a new elite known as the 'extremes'. To describe them as fanatics may be an exaggeration, but it's not far off the mark. According to Fritz Schmidt, the 75-year-old doyen of German writers on mountaineering and himself one of the 'extremes' in his younger years: "The extreme climber of today still attempts to seek out new and difficult routes that test his courage, resourcefulness and stamina to the utmost."

All the Alpine peaks had been scaled in the period leading up to the World War I, and the 'extremes' began to look for increasingly difficult

with each member attached to the next by a rope made either of thick hemp or silk, it now became common practice for them to go out alone or, at most, in pairs. The procedure followed is still the same today: the leader goes ahead at the end of a rope that the second man uses to secure his partner. Once the entire length of rope is paid out, the leader seeks a safe position from which he, in turn, can secure the second climber as he moves upward. The two then alternate in this fashion until they reach the summit.

At that time, use was already being made – in isolated cases – of the piton, a heavy iron peg or spike with a movable ring at the end. It had its disadvantages, however, since the climber – having driven the spike into the ice or a crack in the rock – had to detach himself from the rope, thread it through the ring, then re-attach himself before proceeding on his way.

This complicated and dangerous operation was rendered superfluous by the carabiner, first employed by Otto Herzog in 1910. The carabiner is a snap link, a metal loop that can be snapped into a piton to hold a freely running rope. It made it possible for the leading climber to improve his hold by driving several pitons into the rock face. The discussion this sparked off in climbing circles is still going on today: "How many pitons can one use without appearing to be unsporting?"

Footwear then consisted of nailed boots, although some specialists preferred tight, light-

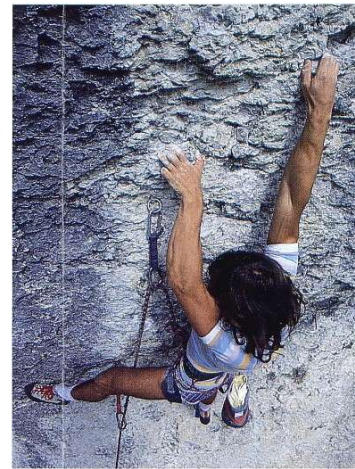
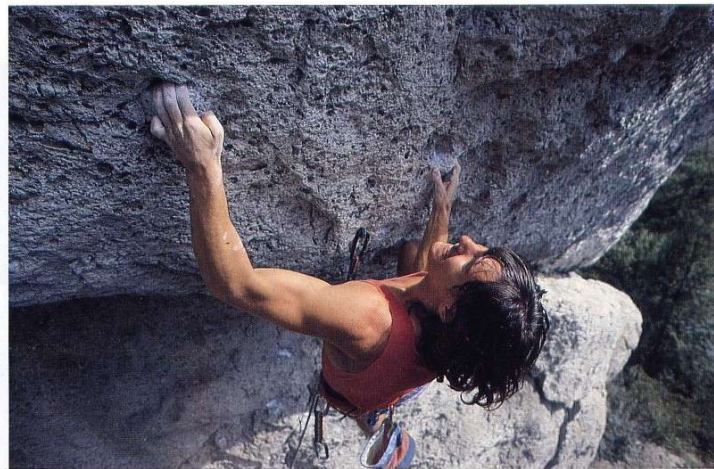
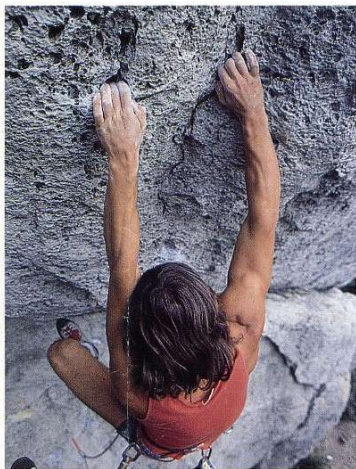
'prehistoric' forerunners. The projecting spikes at the front also relieve the climber of the troublesome task of cutting steps. "If the spikes are inserted correctly into the ice, they provide a foothold which is almost as secure as that obtained with climbing boots on rock surfaces," says Hermann Huber, manager of the largest European manufacturer and distributor of climbing equipment, Salewa, in Munich.

Huber, who launched the first cold-hammered, lightweight crampon several years ago, is himself an experienced mountaineer. He relies exclusively on the advice of the fellow-climbers among his staff when developing new products.

"Before someone in Germany buys a new rucksack," he says, "the old one must be literally falling apart. The market for climbing gear is a complex one. Mountaineers are pretty conservative people and they're more interested in what's practical than what's fashionable."

Climbing equipment, 'Made in Germany', is in big demand abroad. The exacting standards imposed by the D.A.V.'s safety committee and by German officials ensure a consistent level of high quality, and, as Huber points out, "That's good for the export trade."

Anyone buying a modern rock-climbing outfit needs experience and a certain degree of self-restraint, since the range of equipment available is both extensive and confusing. Besides clothing that breathes, waterproof outerwear and



routes; it means that the nearby valleys, where the climbing is just as good, are kept clear for those who want to enjoy peace and quiet."

The fact is that the Alps, the playground of Europe, have become overcrowded. Gone are the days when mountaineering was confined to a privileged few. Nowadays it is an integral part of the West German sports and leisure scene.

"Whether we like it or not, climbing has been transformed into a kind of mass movement for tourists," says Fritz März, president of the German Alpine Club (D.A.V.) which, with 441,000 members,

'client' from Vienna, he opened up an Alpine route that was to attain legendary fame. The east face of Berchtesgaden's local mountain soon became known as the German killer face after a number of spectacular accidents occurred on it. To date, at least 80 climbers have lost their lives trying to scale the 2,100-metre face.

It was the early guides, too, who organized something like an early form of mountain rescue service when, using primitive equipment, they brought the first casualties down from the slopes. As the stream of tourists increased, these casual

tor-powered overhead projector. The daily nine-hour period of practical training – "We go out in all kinds of weather" – is followed by three hours of theory in the evening, covering such subjects as meteorology, accident prevention and types of equipment.

Elsner leaves his pupils in no doubt as to what awaits them. "The dangers you will encounter in the mountains are the same as a hundred years ago," he tells them. "Anyone who goes climbing without protective headgear is just asking for trouble."

ascents. High, sheer rock faces were considered the ultimate challenge. Men like Otto Herzog, Hans Dülfer and other Germans competed with their European fellow-climbers in the search for new routes. As these routes became more difficult, there were changes in both climbing techniques and equipment. Athletic elegance became the keyword. To have reached the summit was no longer sufficient – it was *how* it was reached that mattered.

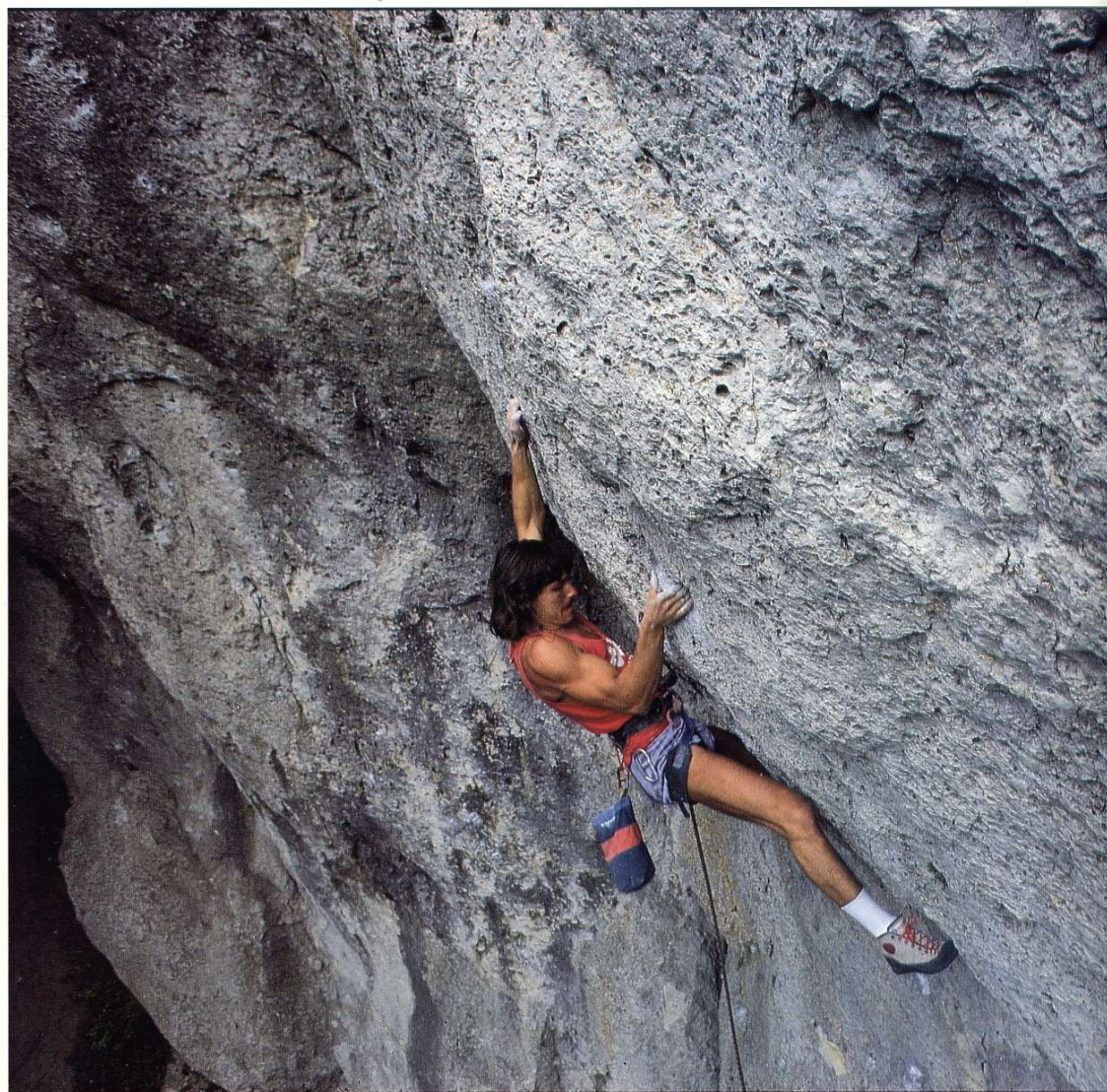
Although it was usual in the early period of mountaineering for climbers to set out in a group

weight canvas shoes with felt or braided-cord soles similar to the *scarpetti* worn by herdsmen in the Dolomites. Other items of equipment included the alpenstock and the ice-axe with a very long wooden shaft, with which 3,000 to 4,000 steps were cut on extended ice-climbing tours. Crampons had been in use for centuries; the first ones stemmed from the Bronze Age. They were also worn by farmers during haymaking in steep alpine pastures.

Modern crampons are no longer forged, but punched and therefore weigh far less than their

good, strong footwear, other particularly important items of equipment are the safety helmet, the rope harness for chest and seat, and the climbing rope. Pitons, clamps, carabiners and a wide variety of rope slings complete the basic equipment. Ropes and slings are no longer made of hemp but of synthetic fibre. A modern rope can withstand several falls, since – unlike the old hemp ropes – it absorbs the force of the fall dynamically, acting like a rubber band. The range of footwear covers heavy boots made of leather and light plastic for combined ice and rock climbing,





special plimsoll-type boots with smooth soles for difficult rock climbing, lightweight, pliable walking boots and combinations of all three. Guide Dieter Elsner says, "Very few people still wear dangerous normal walking shoes in the mountains nowadays. Instead, they tend to choose boots that are too heavy and, consequently, too tiring."

In the years just prior to World War I, the closely knit network of new access routes and shelters led to the first tourist boom in the Alps. Mountain railways were under construction or had already been completed, and guide ropes on

such peaks as the Zugspitze and the Watzmann facilitated the ascent. This led to complaints that things were being made too easy for climbers. Old-timers bemoaned the fact that mountaineering was no longer linked, as it originally was, with the study and exploration of nature. They accused the young 'extremes' of lacking respect for the mountains. The latter ignored such criticism and, in turn, inveighed against the tourists whom they regarded as "unsporting and indolent."

World War I put a stop to all this. Even alpine regions became involved in the hostilities; then,

when the war ended, the economic crisis, unemployment and travel restrictions brought the once thriving mountain tourist trade to a complete standstill. Only real enthusiasts were prepared to get out their bicycles and ride – sometimes several hundred kilometres – to their beloved mountains. But the German 'cycling climbers', most of whom were out of work, set new standards in mountaineering.

The last unscaled ice and rock faces were conquered in the 1920s and '30s. In the western Alps, the north faces of the Matterhorn, Eiger and



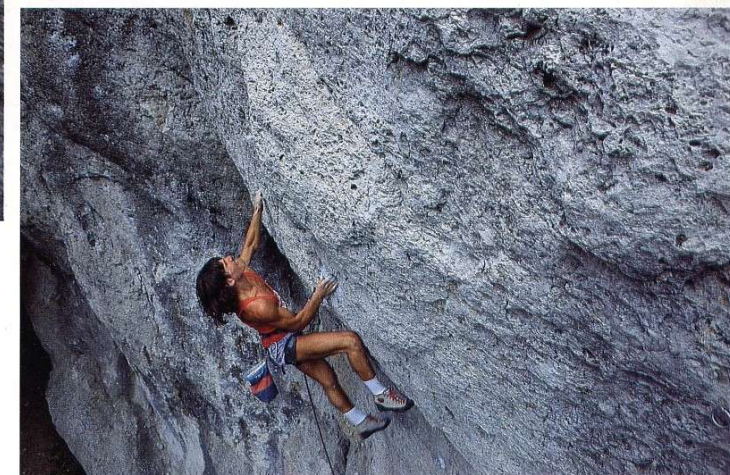
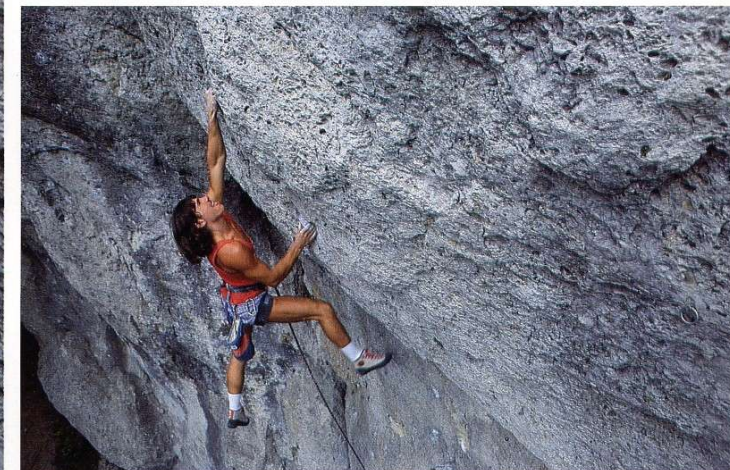
Nowadays, free climbers can be found on just about any steep rock face in the Federal Republic. In superb condition, with enormous strength in their arms and hands, they reject virtually all climbing aids. The exception to the rule is the bag of magnesia powder to prevent their hands from slipping. The rope is strictly for safety purposes.

Grandes Jorasses were besieged by hordes of climbers from different nations. All three faces were climbed by German teams between 1931 and 1938. Franz and Toni Schmid did not even have crampons when they scaled the north face of the Matterhorn in 1931. Anderl Heckmaier, who made the first ascent of the Eiger north face in 1938 together with Ludwig Vörg, had travelled to the Bernese Alps from Munich on his bicycle.

Ice-face specialists such as Willo Welzenbach, the first man to use ice pitons, and Hans Ertl made a name for themselves by breaking new ground. At that time, books by the so-called 'mountaineer-philosophers' – Oskar Meyer, Guido Lammer and Leo Maduschka – were devoured eagerly by young climbers. With almost religious fervour, these writers preached that the mountain was "the focal point of the universe." To them, climbing was a romantic-heroic ego trip.

The first Alpine rescue service, established in Munich in the 1920s, had its hands full. Time and again, it had to go to the aid of climbers in distress – would-be heroes who, in most cases, were more dead than alive by the time they were brought down from the mountains. Ludwig Gramminger, a 78-year-old former member of the Munich team and inventor of innumerable rescue aids, looks back to this period with mixed feelings: "It wasn't just that our own lives were often in danger; what annoyed me was that some of those we rescued didn't even bother to thank us."

Nowadays, every major tourist region in the Alps has its own mountain rescue service, with volunteer members who are on call all the time – at home or at work. The constant rise in the number of accidents each year underlines the continuing importance of these services: in 1984, about 500 rescue operations were carried out





and 64 fatal accidents were registered in West Germany alone. In the entire Alpine region, however, the total number of deaths came to almost 1,000. Piet Schubert, the D.A.V.'s safety expert, made a study of mountaineering accidents, establishing that 67 percent are still caused by lack of experience, ignorance, over-confidence and lack of physical fitness. Only 15 percent are due to natural causes such as avalanches, rockfalls, crevasses and sudden drops in temperature and atmospheric pressure. Schubert says, "We must intensify and improve our training program and, above all, provide some form of instruction for non-members, since they are most accident-prone."

In view of the increasing number of liability and compensation cases resulting from climbing accidents, Schubert fears that the authorities may one day hit upon the idea of a special licence for mountaineers. "That," he says, "would be the worst possible solution."

"Basically speaking, the risks I face in the Himalayas are far greater than here in the Alps, but they don't really worry me more on that account," says Michael Dacher, a 52-year-old mountaineer who in recent years has climbed nearly as many 8,000-metre peaks as Reinhold Messner, the record-holder in this category. "My age is no handicap when climbing," Dacher adds, "I only regret that no one took me to Nepal when I was at my best between 30 and 40."

The only thing Dacher really fears is "climbing with someone who is less experienced than I am, since I'd be scared stiff that he might have an accident." Dacher has two children, neither of whom has followed in their father's footsteps. "Thank heavens for that," he says, "I couldn't bear to sit around quietly at home if I knew they were out there in the mountains."

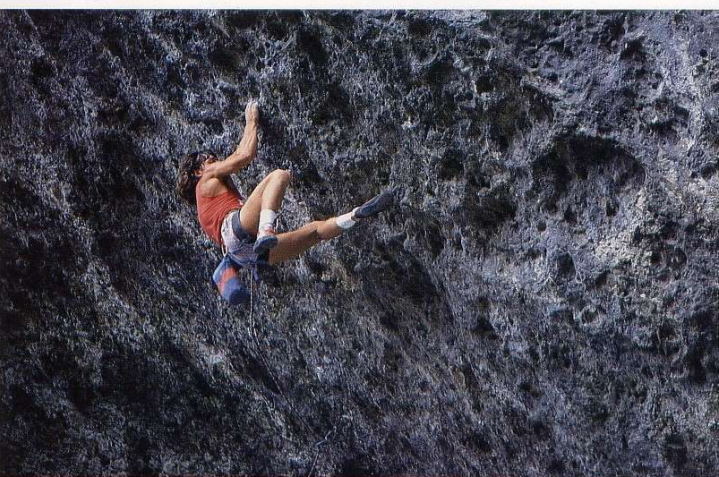
Mountaineering abroad has a long-standing tradition in Germany. As far back as 1801, the Prussian explorer Alexander von Humboldt attempted to scale Mt. Chimborazo (6,257 metres) in the Andes. He reached a height of

5,350 metres, which remained a mountain-climbing record for the next 30 years. At that time, Chimborazo was believed to be the world's highest peak. This is not entirely wrong, if the height of the mountain is based on the distance from the summit to the central point of the earth and not to sea level, since the globe is thicker at the Equator.

Shortly before and after World War II, German mountaineers were particularly active in the Himalayas, with several expeditions attempting – and failing – to climb K2, Kanchenjunga and Nanga Parbat. In 1939, however, Fritz Wiesner became the first man to reach a height of 8,400 m on K2 without the aid of oxygen. After World War II, competition from foreign climbers became keener both in the Alps and in the mountain ranges outside Europe. At the same time, climbers began imposing tougher demands on themselves by seeking out the most direct (and thus most difficult) route – known as the *Direttissima* – and making ascents in winter. Dietrich Hasse and a group of friends scaled the direct north face of the Grosse Zinne in the Dolomites in 1958. Three years later Toni Hiebeler, with two parties, climbed the Eiger north face. Both ascents were carried out in winter, a first.

Initially, the major problems posed by such routes could only be overcome with artificial aids, such as pitons and step-ladders. This method revived the age-old discussion as to whether a climber should use aids of this kind or not.

In the early 1970s, a new form of mountaineering made its appearance in Germany: free-climbing. Its adherents, who totally reject every kind of artificial aid, can be found nowadays on any steep rock face – even if it's only five metres high. The free climber is solely interested in the difficulties to be overcome; the route itself is of secondary importance. Mountaineers of the old school are critical and sceptical. "They're turning the mountain into a gymnasium" is a common complaint. Even the critics have to admit, however, that free climbers now can master sections



Among mountain climbers, there have always been those who have pushed themselves to the limit – and they have always had their critics. The 19th century's Hermann von Barth, who recorded more than 100 'firsts' always carried a cyanide capsule as a last resort.



of a face which could be tackled 10 years ago only with pitons and ladders.

"I'm not really a mountaineer," says Wolfgang Güllich, one of the best German free climbers, "I'm more of a mountain gymnast." The routes chosen by Güllich are short but so problematic that he has to make a thorough study of them, sometimes weeks in advance.

Drivers and pedestrians stop and stare whenever the 23-year-old sports student works his way along the underside of a five-metre-wide rock spur on the Ekel route high above the Tru-

bachtal in Franconia. Moving smoothly at times, clinging like a limpet at others, he appears to defy the law of gravity. Such climbing is impossible without systematic physical training. Arms and hands, in particular, must be strong enough to enable the climber to support or stabilize the entire weight of his body with his finger tips alone, if necessary.

Using an old toothbrush, Güllich removes dust and magnesia remnants from critical points in the rock face. Apart from the toothbrush, magnesia – which keeps the hands dry to

prevent slips – is the only artificial aid regarded by free climbers as permissible. Ropes and such items as pitons, clamps or rope slings may not be employed, not even for resting; they are there solely for safety purposes. As Wolfgang Güllich puts it, "Safety – yes, cheating – no."



