

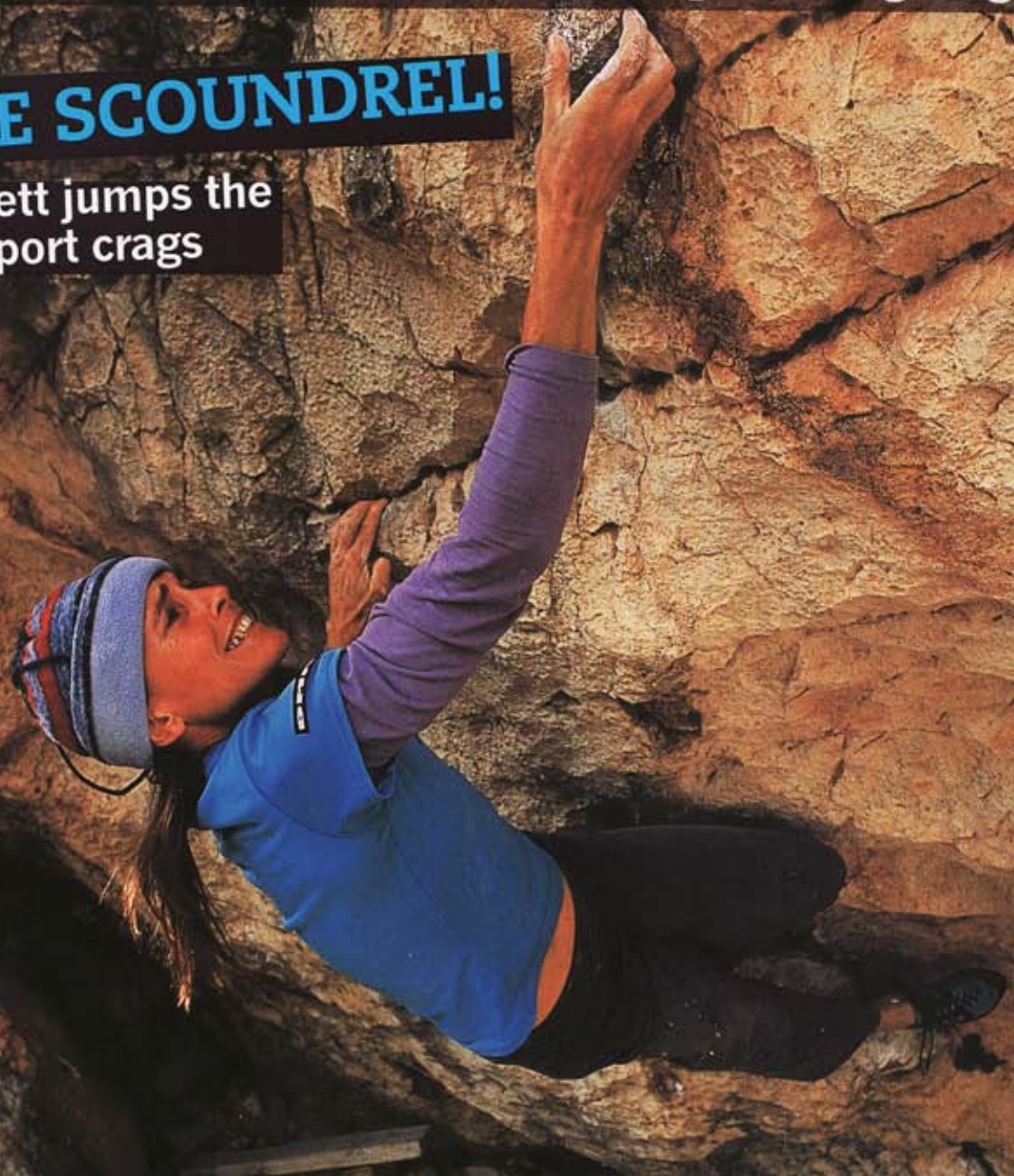
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# Silvia

## Heaven-lent grace

In May 1990 **Silvia Fitzpatrick** arrives in the UK from Argentina. At just 24 she has already become the first woman to climb FitzRoy in Patagonia, and is reigning South American indoor climbing champion. Silvia is an incredibly talented climber, with tremendous drive and motivation, and destined to achieve great things. An horrific accident in 1991, however, will change her life forever. Doctors tell her she might never walk again, let alone climb, and her world falls apart. But against all odds, Silvia not only walks again but also resumes climbing, becoming British Indoor Champion, and eventually leading F8b. She talks to **Judith Spancken** about her remarkable journey.

Greeting me at Malaga airport, Silvia looks tired, after she tells me, her third day climbing, emphasised by a slight limp. Her slender frame is hidden under a pair of baggy jogging trousers and a jumper that seems at least 2 sizes too big. She apologises for making tomorrow a rest day.

"I used to climb every day. My hunger for rock was always stronger than my will to rest. Only over the last few months, when I've had a lot of time to climb here in Spain, have I actually learned that resting works."

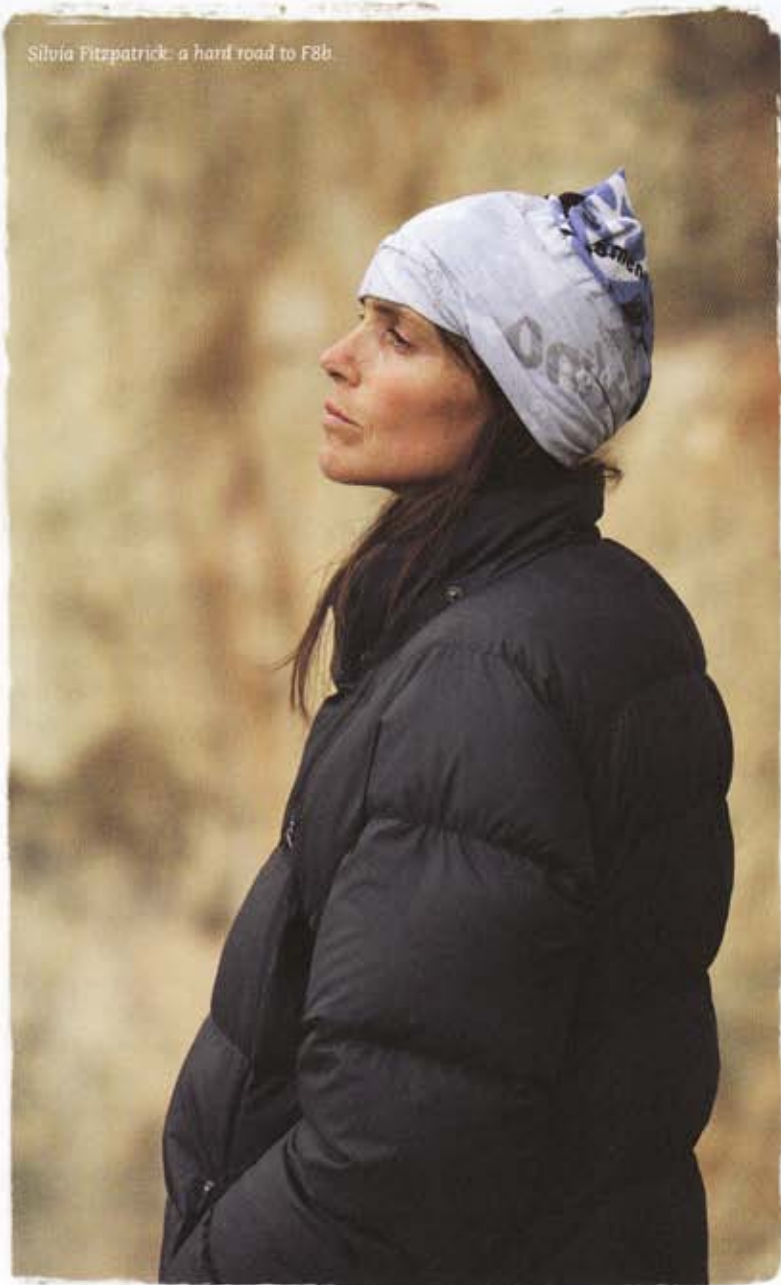
Not many people can claim to have learned to climb Patagonia, but soon after being introduced to climbing during her last year studying P.E. in Buenos Aires, Silvia spent two winter seasons in Patagonia where she was taught alpine climbing by her boyfriend at the time.

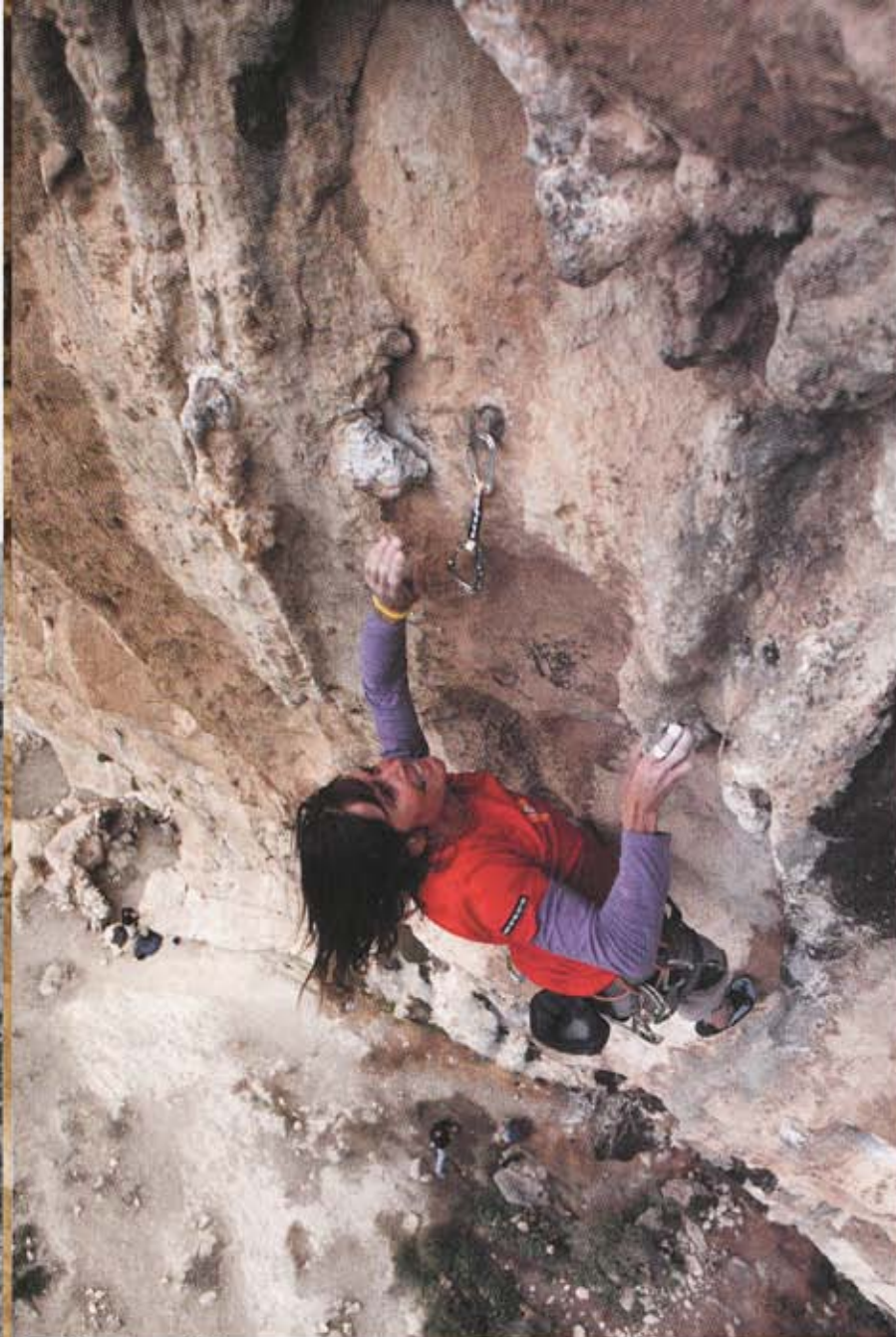
"I loved living in those tree huts surrounded by snow, waiting for the right moment to go up FitzRoy or Cerro Torre."

Then came a phone call from the UK, inviting her to join 'Climb the World', a project to film a symbolic ascent of the Eigerwand by climbers representing every continent. "Of course I accepted. At that time chances to travel were limited and I saw it as an opportunity to visit Europe. I left Argentina not knowing I would never return to live there again."

As it happened 'Climb the World' was postponed for a year and Silvia found herself in the UK with her money having run out in the first week, due to an abysmal exchange rate. Life was not easy: to make ends meet she delivered newspapers, cleaned houses and learned how to cook chip butties around Sheffield. Silvia soon realised that the damp British winters were not for her and left for Spain, hitching from crag to

Silvia Fitzpatrick: a hard road to F8b





◀ Silvia on **El Oraculo** (F8b), Makinodromo, El Chorro.

▶ Silvia enjoying the evening sun on **Pesadillas en la Roca** (F7c) at sector Tajo de la Estacion, Loja.

All photography: Judith Spancken.

and out of hospital for treatment. Silvia was told she may never walk again. She recalls it as a most horrific time, but is grateful for everything that happened to her in the UK following her accident and for the people she met.

Having decided to stay in Britain, Silvia focused on getting back on her feet, literally. Once on crutches, she started working in the Foundry cafe, surely torture I ask, not being able to climb herself? But she explains: "climbing had been my life and working in the Foundry was a way for me to be close to it all."

One day a friend suggested to her she should try to climb the beginners slab "a staircase full of jugs," Silvia remembers with a smile. "When I reached the top I started crying. For me it was a very symbolic moment. It was the moment I realised I would go back to it."

Initially the focus was on learning how to climb again indoors, before moving on to top-roping sport routes outside. With one leg now shorter, severe nerve damage in her right foot, body and mind still healing, she had to develop her own technique and style.

Silvia bursts out laughing thinking back to the day she followed the encouragement of friends and entered the British Team trials.

"I limped to the bottom of the route but ended up winning." However, she insists it was mainly down to luck and the low turn-out.

In 1993 Silvia climbed **Roof Warrior** (F8a) in the Peak District; in 1994 **Lourdes** (F8a) at El Chorro and in 1995, just 4 years after the accident, made the first female ascent of **Ancora in piu** (F8a+), in the Dolomites.

Starting to trad climb again was, however, – Silvia shakes her head – traumatic. Near the top of her first climb she became completely paralysed, legs shaking. "All the memories came flooding back, they were still too fresh. At this point I hated trad climbing, hated it with all my soul. I swore to never do it again." But she did and has since ticked numerous hard trad routes in Pembroke and North Wales including **Mammoth Direct** (E6 6b) at Gogarth.

Silvia's recent ascent of **El Oraculo** (F8b), at the Makinodromo in El Chorro, was an important step: "It has taken me a long time, but finally I've not just regained the level I climbed at before the accident, but actually gone beyond it."

How can somebody keep up motivation for so many years I wonder?

"It's the intricacies I love about climbing. Feeling myself improve on a route when working it, reading a route well on-sight. The challenge of solving the puzzle."

Silvia shakes her head when asked whether she worries about reaching the day when she won't improve. "No, not really." She is constantly learning and can happily lower her standard on rock-types that don't suit her. "I learned to make up for the lack of my right foot by doing lots of little foot movements. Anything where I have to push a lot on my feet – especially my right foot, is very difficult for me," she pauses and suddenly bursts out with something unexpected: "There is one thing I really hate about climbing. The dependency on a partner. I used to solo long routes before my accident. I was fearless, a bit arrogant and over-confident."

The image of Silvia as a young woman, soloing up big rock faces, feeling free, comes easily to my mind. That wild side of her still shows. Her energy, the need to be moving, her long dark

crag. She made a living erecting scaffolding for big concerts in Barcelona and later working in **refugios**, including Siurana and Cavallers in the Pyrenees. She soon made the first female ascent of **Lolita** (F8a+) in the Pyrenees and the first ascent of her own **Fanatic Patrick** (F8a), the nickname the Spanish climbers had given her.

"I was well known for climbing until my fingers bled and using super glue and finger tape to keep going."

'Climb for the world' did eventually take place in September 1991. Silvia climbed the North Face of The Eiger with Jim Bridwell, which she describes as an "eventful ascent full of rock falls from which I keep a few scars."

Despite it bringing up memories best forgotten, we start talking about the accident.

"I can only blame myself for what happened. At the time I was climbing really well, I felt confident and was maybe a little arrogant. I was also not familiar with British climbing and did not take it seriously enough."

At Stoney Middleton during a revisit to the UK, her belay at the top of a route fails when her weight comes onto it. The last piece of gear rips and the rest of the runners are too low to stop her. The impact breaks Silvia's pelvis in several places, fractures other bones and causes severe internal injuries. Months recovering in hospital are followed by a year spent in

Silvia on **El Oraculo** (F8b), Makinodromo, El Chorro.

hair often flying loose, her enthusiastic, expressive way of talking, all add to an untamed aura.

But Silvia had to learn the hard way and is now much more cautious. "The fear of hurting myself again is always with me, but somehow I get on with it, some days better than others."

In contradiction to her outburst, she emphasises how much she loves sharing the climbing experience with a partner, the talking and socialising at the crag, discussing moves and routes. I discover Silvia's passion for beaches when asking if there is anything else that fulfils her as much as climbing or provides her a break from it. "I love the combination of sun, surf and movement." When not near a beach she tries to fulfil her longing for running, one thing she has not been able to do since her accident, with long walks and mountain biking.

Coming from a big and lively family herself I wonder about her decision not to have children. Silvia takes her time to answer, choosing her words carefully.

"I think deep inside me I was always clear about not wanting children. Of course I am worried I might have regrets later, looking back on my life realising I have only focused on fulfilling my own happiness, not leaving anybody behind. I do have a lot of loving energy inside me but I don't feel there is anything missing in my life."

Having recently bought a house in a small village in Andalusia with partner Simon, Silvia plans to divide her time between their home in North Wales, where she works as a language teacher and climbing instructor, and Spain.

Coping with British weather has always been a struggle for her: "I just need the sunshine. Sun is life to me and it is one of the main reasons why I wanted to come to Spain." There is also the ease of connecting with Spanish people and speaking her own language.

Silvia is keen to show me the area around the village and suggests we walk to a nearby bouldering area. Within a minute we have left the village and are soon following a track that winds its way through olive groves. Silvia points out several cliffs on the way, some developed, some with potential for new routes. After about 30 minutes we reach a boulder field set on a beautiful plateau surrounded by hills and small mountains.

"I am 42. I feel that time is running through my hands like sand. I want to stop it, there is so much I want to do." There is a restlessness about Silvia, a drive, channelled towards climbing but also towards life in general. I see a woman who knows what makes her happy and who is not willing to sacrifice her happiness easily. A woman bursting with enthusiasm and energy, with a love of life and the people close to her.

Her dreams for the near future include hard routes in Spain and Europe and trips to the States, one of the big climbing areas she has yet to visit. I have no doubt, having spent a few days getting to know her better, she will achieve her dreams. □



▼ Silvia relaxes after a day's climbing in her soon to be renovated house near Villanueva del Rosario.

