

icSEP 2018
International Conference on Sport, Education & Psychology

**CONTEMPORARY TOP EUROPEAN DESTINATIONS TO PUSH
FORWARD THE FRONTIERS OF SPORT CLIMBING**

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Abstract

The aim of the research is to identify the contemporary trend in the specific form of sport tourism called climbing sport tourism. The research analysis works with data of the most difficult ascents realized by the world top 30 sport climbers. The data were collected from the ranking of 8a.nu, which is an open database where climbers around the world record their successful ascents. Over 59,000 users (active climbers) from all over the world are registered in this database. The ranking counts the data of 2000 best climbers and it is based on their 10 best rated ascents within the last 12 months. The analysis covered data from 220 climbing destinations and 375 different individual climbing journeys. Ascent evidence was taken in the time span of one year during the season of 2016 - 2017. A contemporary trend in travelling of elite sport climbers is to travel to major destinations, like Spain, France or Italy, that have the highest potential of climbing areas for the most difficult ascents. Margalef, Oliana and Siurana belong to climbing areas that are most visited by top sport climbers. All three are located in Catalonia. Catalonia can be seen as the most popular region where the elite sport climbers currently travel most often to achieve their maximum performance.

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Keywords: Rock climbing, sport, tourism, geography.



1. Introduction

1.1. Sport Climbing

Sport climbing is a form of rock climbing with pre-placed protection. This is in contrast to traditional climbing where climbers must place removable protection as they climb. Sport climbing emphasizes strength, endurance, gymnastic ability and technique, over adventure, risk and self-sufficiency.

A high level of protection of climbing routes allows climbers to concentrate fully on challenging the technical difficulties of the routes and reaching their maximum difficulty of climbs in conditions that are relatively safe (compared to other forms of climbing disciplines). This is in agreement with the authors Glowacz & Pohl (1999), Winter (2004) or Berry & Clure (2011). Similarly, Tefelner (2012) describes sport climbing as climbing primarily focused on "performance production" and climbing in order to achieve, or even overcome, personal bounds and limits. Advancing on absolute difficulty of climbs often requires, in addition to training, a long-term practice of a particular route and thus, a longer stay in the climbing area.

Therefore, elite climbers spend more time in the individual areas, compared to recreational climbers, who are not in training and they either ascend a route on the first attempt, or if they are not successful they move on to a next challenge.

1.2. Sport Climbing Areas

Sport climbing areas with suitable natural terrains can be found all over the world and in most European countries, which can be verified in climbing guides. Sporting climbing areas across Europe was detailed by Atchinson-Jones (2002) in a guide called "Europe - Sport Vertical". The guide contains 1456 areas. Groenewegen and Van den Berg (2006, 2008) produced a Rock Climbing Atlas in three parts corresponding to these regions - South Eastern Europe, Greece and the Middle East (2006) and South Western Europe and Morocco (2008). American areas were mapped by Toula (2003) in the publication called Rock and Road - An Atlas of North American Rock Climbing Areas. He included 2456 areas. Currently, one of major sources of information concerning emerging development and events in a given area is primarily the Internet, for example www.climb-europe.com or the Czech server www.lezec.cz. Printed and nowadays even electronic climbing guides for various areas of sport climbing can be obtained not only in brick and mortar shops but also in e-shops. For example, the German e-shop with climbing guides www.kletterfuehrer.net offers over 590 books mapping climbing areas all over the world (see Figure 01).

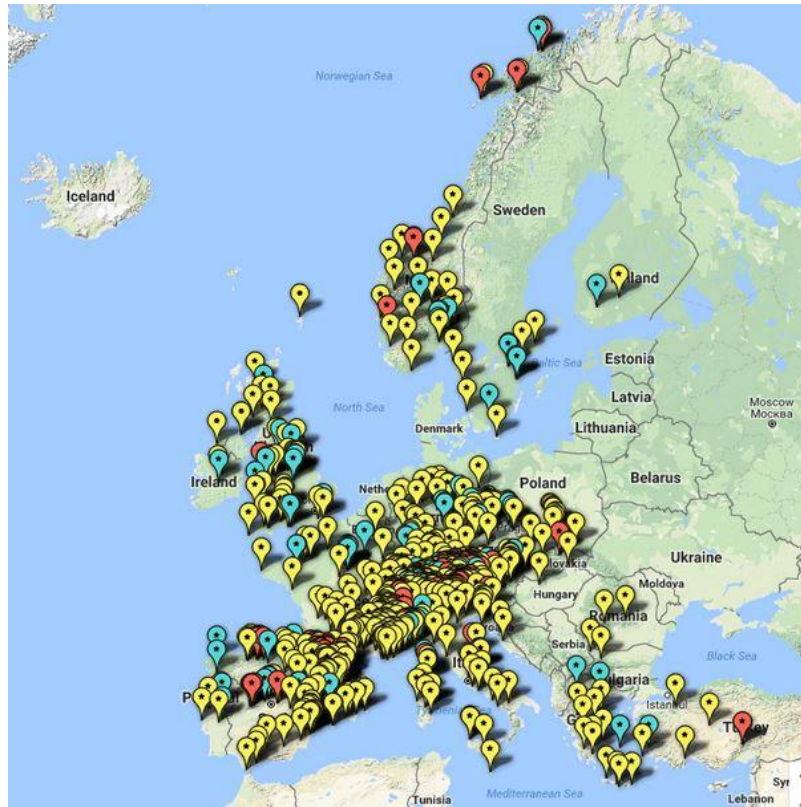


Figure 01. Rock climbing guidebooks in Europe by <http://www.kletterfuehrer.net/>

It is a good opportunity for climbers to plan a trip into areas that have optimal potential to realize their goals. It is essential for elite sport climbers to travel into areas that offer routes of the highest difficulty. There are different classification scales to determine the difficulty level. These are used for classification of difficulty of all the routes listed and described in climbing guides. This allows all climbers to compare their performance with that of elite climbers to push their limits and bounds of difficulty.

1.3. Traveling climbers

Lifestyle rock climbing and moving of the climbers around the world was investigated by Rickly (2016, 2017). Factors affecting climbers' motivation to visit a particular climbing destination were investigated in Albayrak & Caber (2016) and Ewert et al. (2013). Rickly-Boyd (2012, 2014) also focused on mobility, the climbing community and their climbing travels.

Albayrak & Caber (2016) took an example of climbing destination in the case of Turkish Geyikbayiri climbing area in Antalya and tried to assign the attributes of a climbing area. Frequency of sandstone towers ascents in Bohemia was investigated by Chaloupsky (2014). Rock climbing tourism destination and outbound travels of Czech climbers in European rocky areas was published by Chaloupsky & Chaloupska (2017). All this shows that climbing sport tourism is a viable area for research to push the frontiers of this new aspect of sport tourism.

2. Problem Statement

This study aimed to investigate which climbing areas are most visited by elite sport climbers as a way of systemizing competitive and top sports in tourism, current trends in sport tourism and their geographic interconnection in individual destinations.

3. Research Question

Which climbing areas are most visited by elite sport climbers?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of the research is to monitor the contemporary top sport climbers use and the potential of climbing areas for the most difficult ascents. Rock climbing destinations are spread worldwide and have different potential for individual types of climbers. This paper concerns elite climbers who travel to the selected destinations where they can climb the most difficult ascents.

5. Research Methods

The research worked with data of the most difficult ascents as realized by the world's top 30 sport climbers. The data were collected from the ranking of 8a.nu (an open database where climbers around the world record their successful ascents). Ascent evidence covered the time span of one year in the season of 2016 - 2017. The source is used by more than 59,000 climbers from all over the world and the total of ascents recorded in the database is more than 3.5 million. The ranking counts the data of 2000 best climbers and it is based on their 10 best rated ascents within the last 12 months. The evaluation considers the numerical value of their difficulty, style of ascent and number of attempts.

A database of sport climbing was created for research purposes and the frequency of visits by elite climbers was recorded. Individual climbing areas were localized and assigned to individual countries. The world climbing extra-class was represented by a sample of the top thirty climbers according to the world ranking. All the respondents demonstrate the highest possible level of current sport climbing performances. Among the respondents, there is also the current world champion in sport climbing on artificial wall. He ascended the most difficult rock climbing route of the world with the highest classification, which is also the highest of the 8a.nu ranking. The minimum difficulty of grade 8b and maximum of 9c of the French classification scale were counted in the ranking for all the respondents. In the ranking of the thirty best-rated climbers, there are only Europeans. Most respondents are French (7), followed by Spanish (6) and Italians (5). The Poles are represented 3x, the British and the Germans 2x. The Czech Republic, Slovenia, Austria, Switzerland and Russia had 1 representation from each country.

6. Findings

The analysis covered 220 climbing destinations where the selected top climbers travelled to attempt their most difficult ascents, and the total number of individual journeys by individual climbers.

6.1. The most visited climbing areas by elite sport climbers

Table 01. The most visited climbing areas by elite sport climbers (4 visits and more)

Rank	Crags	Country	Visits	Rank	Crags	Country	Visits
1.	Margalef	Spain	15	11.	Chulilla	Spain	5
2.	Oliana	Spain	13	12.	Villanueva del Rosario	Spain	5
3.	Siurana	Spain	13	13.	Buoux	France	4
4.	Cuenca	Spain	8	14.	Céüse	France	4
5.	Rodellar	Spain	8	15.	Entraygues	France	4
6.	St. Léger	France	8	16.	La Pedriza	Spain	4
7.	Bielsa	Spain	7	17.	Osp/Misja Peč	Slovenia	4
8.	Santa Linya	Spain	7	18.	Terradets	Spain	4
9.	Arco	Italy	6	19.	Tournoux	France	4
10.	Frankenjura	Germany	6				



Figure 02. The most visited climbing areas by elite sport climbers in Europe:

1 – Margalef, 2 – Oliana, 3 – Siurana, 4 – Cuenca, 5 – Rodellar, 6 – St. Léger, 7 – Bielsa, 8 – Santa Linya, 9 – Arco, 10 – Frankenjura.

Most climbers did their climbing in the region of Margalef (15 visits), Oliana (13 visits) and Siurana (13 visits) in Spain. This was followed by other Spanish regions of Cuenca, Rodellar and French St. Léger (8 visits), while Bielsa and Santa Linya had 7 visits. Arco in Italy and Frankenjura in Germany recorded 6 visits.

6.2. The most visited climbing areas according to country by top sport climbers

Table 02. The most visited climbing areas according to country by top sport climbers

Rank	Country	Visits in Climbing Areas
1.	Spain	148
2.	France	96
3.	Italy	48
4.	Switzerland	23
5.	Austria	12
6. - 7.	Greece	8
6. - 7.	Slovenia	8
8. - 9.	United Kingdom	7
8. - 9.	USA	7
10.	Germany	6
11.	Poland	4
12.	Norway	3
13.	Croatia	2
14. - 16.	Czech Republic	1
14. - 16.	China	1
14. - 16.	Slovakia	1

The biggest numbers of the visited climbing areas (within one country) were recorded in Spain (148), followed by France (96) and Italy (48). At least one visit of elite sport climbers was recorded in 16 different countries. 14 countries were European, while outside Europe, only the USA and China were represented.

6.3. Discussion

It is necessary to emphasize that the selected respondents belong to the top level in sports climbing and the conclusions cannot be generalized in terms of all climbers. Differences in the style of travelling in the climbing areas can be found in the countries with a high climbing potential, such as Spain, France, Italy, compared to other European countries.

Three countries with the highest number of areas visited by elite climbers, Spain (148), France (96) and Italy (48), are characterized mostly by limestone terrains with overhanging profiles of sport routes. Most of the visited areas are also limestone. An exception is Norway's Flatanger (granite) and Austrian Zillertal (granite and gneiss). Flatanger is a new area where the world's most difficult climbing routes currently exist. For example, the first route of the difficulty of 9c called Silence, was done in 2017. Due to suitable climatic conditions, Spain, France and Italy can also offer opportunity for a year-round climbing. Climbers follow the current weather conditions and move either to where there is sun in winter or vice versa, to shady areas or higher altitudes in summer.

Climbing areas visited outside Europe were represented by the United States (7 visits and 6 different areas) and China (1 visit). The Red River Gorge in Kentucky was quoted twice, which supports Rickly (2017) who considers the area to be the currently most often visited sport climbing area in the USA. A

reason for the small number of non-European areas may be the fact that all the respondents are Europeans and do not go to other continents in order to overcome their maximum difficulty climbs because it would require a long-term stay in the destination.

Collecting data from climbing logbooks and their statistical processing is only in the beginning. The published statistics of Czech climbers' outbound climbs (Chaloupsky & Chaloupska, 2017) show that the world climbers prefer different destinations than average climbers of the given country. The difference is evident even in climbing opportunities. When climbers live in a country with good climbing conditions, they can climb "at home" – e. g. in Spain, France and Italy. It is also beneficial when climbers can possibly perform climbing in the neighboring countries and do not have to travel to distant countries – e. g. Czechs, Poles, British, and Russians. American climbers often engage in more traditional climbing, which is popular in the USA due to suitable terrains and a long tradition. Here in Europe, however, a more demanding technique of protection does not allow achieving absolute performance. No American climber was ranked within the top thirty in the ranking of 8a.nu. Critically, it is important to note that not all the top climbers of the world record their performances on the climbing server of 8a.nu.

7. Conclusion

The aim of the research is to monitor the contemporary top sport climbers' use and the potential of climbing areas for the most difficult ascents. The contemporary trend in travelling of elite sport climbers is traveling to Spain, France or Italy like the major destinations with the highest of climbing areas for the most difficult ascents. Most travels were recorded in the region of Margalef, Oliana and Siurana in Spain. They are followed by other Spanish regions of Cuenca, Rodellar and French St. Léger, Spanish Bielsa, and Santa Linya. Arco in Italy and Frankenjura in Germany are also worth mentioning. The biggest numbers of the visited climbing areas (within one country) were recorded in Spain, followed by France and Italy.

All three of the most visited climbing areas (Margalef, Oliana and Siurana) are located in Catalonia. Catalonia can be seen as the most popular region where the elite sport climbers currently travel most often to achieve their maximum performance.

Newly published climbing guides in 2017 reflect the contemporary popularity of this Spanish region. Ribera, Lara, Ribera & Galvez (2017) described more than 1000 climbing routes in the area of Margalef. Concerning the same area, Palau & Ayupova (2017) even introduced 1400 routes. Margalef appears together with the area of Siurana in the selection of O'Donovan & Andrada (2017) called Tarragona Climbs. The area of Oliana is described in the guide Lleida Climbs by the same authors (O'Donovan & Andrada, 2013). Over 1500 climbing routes in Siurana were also documented by Brasc & Campillo (2013).

Differences in the style of travelling in the climbing areas can be found in the countries with a high climbing potential, such as Spain, France, and Italy, compared to other European countries, which may be a subject to a further study.

It is necessary to emphasize that the selected respondents belong to the top level in sport climbing and the conclusions cannot be generalized in terms of all climbers.

Acknowledgments

The paper was supported by the Internal Grant Project of the Faculty of Informatics and Management, University of Hradec Kralove in the Czech Republic 1907/2018.

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