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Why Does No One Climb the Palisades?

Just north of New York City, a glacier-exposed cliff tempts a climber

Michael Levy



MOTORING ALONG THE HENRY HUDSON PARKWAY ON THE WESTERN edge of Manhattan, the driver with a wandering eye can't help but notice the prominent escarpment across the river. Running below the George Washington Bridge on the New Jersey side, this 200-foot-high band of brown rock starts at Jersey City and stretches north twenty miles to Nyack. Fans of the musical *Hamilton* might know the cliffs as the site of the infamous duel between the play's eponymous hero and Aaron Burr. But I, a rock climber, can think of only one thing: *Is there climbing there?*

From afar, the cliff looks perfect for it. Vertical stripes all along it are the type of cracks that climbers use to place their safety gear. The cliff angle appears varied, meaning there would be potential for beginner, intermediate, and expert climbs alike. And it's so close to New York City—it would be the closest roped outdoor rock climbing for Gothamites beyond the scant offerings in Central Park.

Climbing as a leisure activity has a long history in the Hudson River Valley. The Shawangunks, 70 miles north of the city, in New Paltz, New York, have attracted climbers since the 1930s, when German expatriate Fritz Wiessner established the first climbs. With the rise of climbing gyms during the last twenty years—and no fewer than four new ones opened in New York City in 2021, including the two largest to date—more climbers than ever venture out into nature for the real thing. A resource such as the Palisades would make outdoor climbing that much more accessible for city-dwellers.

But I had gotten ahead of myself.

"There's no history of climbing here," Christina Fehre, director of trails and outdoor programs for the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, told me in a phone call, nor does the Palisades Interstate Park Commission currently allow rock climbing at the Palisades. Fehre had dashed my dreams before my head hit the metaphorical pillow. "It's all very loose stuff," she said about the rock. "Any crack in the Palisades structure is basically because the rock is breaking off." As it turns out, when you stand below, you can see that the rock is anything but perfect. Teetering blocks the size of microwaves abound, endangering would-be climbers and hikers on the river-level hiking trails in equal measure. And kitchen appliance-sized blocks are only the beginning: In May 2012, a gigantic swath of rock the entire height of the cliff and weighing more than 20,000 tons came crashing to the ground in an earth-shaking

The 200-foot-high cliffs of the Palisades rise over the Hudson River on the New Jersey side, north of the George Washington Bridge. BILL MENKE

moment. Another major rockfall occurred in July 1938; many thought the resulting sixteen-story rock scar had more than a passing resemblance to Adolph Hitler, mustache and all, earning it the nickname of “Hitler Face.” (In March 1947, 23 months after Hitler took his own life, yet another rockfall erased Hitler Face forever.)

Bill Menke, a geologist at Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory and a professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences at the school, explained that the instability of the Palisades rock has to do with how it formed 201 million years ago. Instead of lava erupting onto the surface, in a Hollywood disaster movie way, the Palisades were created by a spectacular underground eruption that forced its way into an already existing layer of rock, what’s known as a volcanic intrusion.

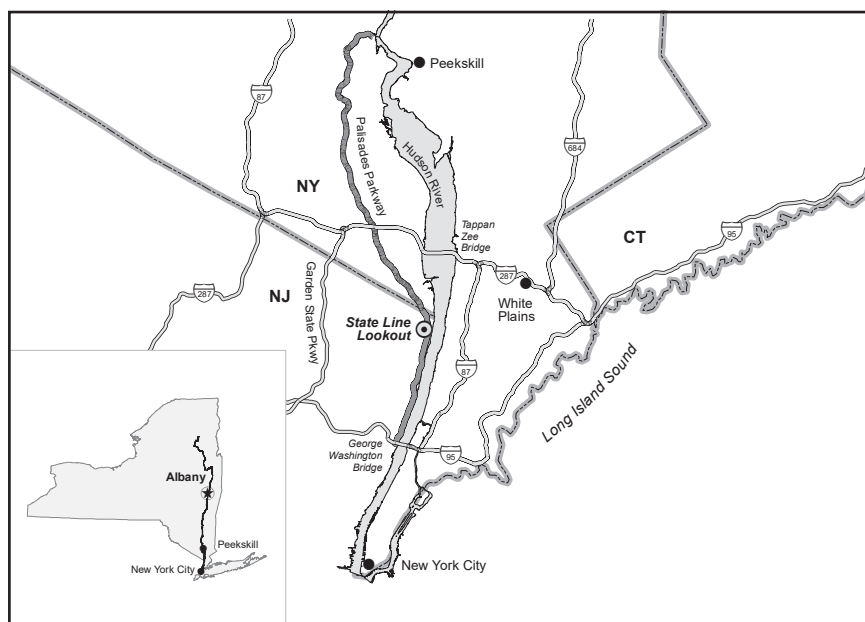
Menke compared the process to baking a jelly donut. Said Menke, “You first make the donut”—a preexisting band of sedimentary rock in the case of the Palisades—“and then you squirt the jelly”—the lava—“into the donut to make a layer.” The cliff band paralleling the Hudson River is the edge of that jelly layer, a cross-section exposed and sharpened by a massive glacier 15,000 years ago at the end of the last ice age.

The looseness of the rock is a direct result of the below-ground cooling process. Lava that cools above ground hardens quickly, but when it cools beneath the surface, the process is slower, and the resulting rock is coarser and more friable.

Based on this, that the Palisades never became a world-class rock-climbing destination isn’t surprising. Climbers prefer solid rock: It’s safer, more enjoyable.

But something still didn’t add up: How could no climbers have at least tested the waters? In my vast experience climbing—from sandstone in Utah to limestone in Vietnam to granite in Peru—climbers are like moths to open flames: if there’s rock, even if it’s the consistency of kitty litter, they’re going to climb it, no matter the personal peril. And as ominous and fascist as the cliffs sounded, they really didn’t look as fearsome as some I’ve climbed.

Trawling through long-inactive online rock-climbing forums from the mid-2000s, I found hints that maybe—*just* maybe—Fehre was wrong about climbing in the Palisades. In one thread from a defunct forum on a site called SuperTopo.com, several users posted accounts of surreptitious climbing at the Palisades in the 1970s and 1980s. After some sleuthing, including bounce-back emails from more than one dead account, I tracked down a couple of these old-timers.



The State Line Lookout just off the Palisades Parkway offers access to hikers—but not rock climbers—who want to explore the cliffs of the Palisades. From that spot, climber Michael Levy hiked down to the bottom of the cliffs to examine the rock. LARRY GARLAND/AMC

“We would enter via these rest stop pullovers—they’re kind of like scenic overlooks—on the Palisades Parkway,” Scott Ghiz, a lifelong rock climber, told me about the bandit climbing scene at the Palisades during the early 1980s. “Then we’d hop the guardrail, keep an eye out for cops, and scramble down a gully from the highway for 100 or 200 feet.” From there, they’d climb out on the cliff faces.

Because the rock stands right below the Palisades Parkway, climbers faced pitfalls beyond the less-than-stellar rock quality. Ghiz recalled brushing broken glass and discarded diapers thrown from the highway above off the rock as he climbed.

That climbing on the Palisades was illegal only spurred them on. “We had our own little cabal,” Ghiz said.

Even with all the detritus and loose rock, Ghiz said the Palisades were “pleasant to climb on. It’s good rock. If it had [climbing] traffic and actually got cleaned up, it’d be a great place to climb.” Ghiz also said he saw clear evidence of much earlier climbing at the Palisades. He and his friends saw old, rusted pitons—climbing safety gear not unlike metal railroad spikes—driven

into the cliff in various places. There *was* a history of climbing there, despite what Fehre had told me.

Precisely when these early traces of climbing are from, and who is responsible for them, is a mystery. A *Saturday Evening Post* article from February 1956, about technical rock climbing in the United States, notes, “If regulations did not forbid it, New York mountaineers would do their climbing on the Palisades, which rise majestically just across the Hudson in New Jersey. Too many loose rocks, rolling down on strollers along the riverside, caused the authorities of Palisades Interstate Park to close the area to rock climbers years ago.” The pitons could be relics from Wiessner—the progenitor of rock climbing on the Shawangunk Ridge and one of just a handful of proficient technical rock climbers in the Northeast in that era. Climbers who post on online forums favor that theory, although it’s impossible to verify.

So: What explains the disconnect between Ghiz, who thinks the Palisades are climbable, and Fehre, who thinks they aren’t?

Part of it has to do with the sensibilities underpinning the creation of Palisades Interstate Park. Before 1900, some stretches of the cliff band were heavily quarried for building materials, as were parts of the sandstone layer (remember—the donut itself), visible today in the brownstones all across the city. To preserve the cliff and its surroundings, Teddy Roosevelt, then governor of New York, and Foster M. Voorhees, then governor of New Jersey, formed the Palisades Interstate Park Commission. A series of walking paths were built within the boundaries.

“There are pictures of women walking in little shoes on the trail,” Fehre says. Vestiges of this upper-crust undercurrent—of gentlemen and ladies out for an afternoon stroll—remain today.

Dave Rosenstein, a founding board member of the Access Fund, the leading rock-climbing access advocacy organization in the United States, believes there is an “institutional resistance” to climbing, a historically counter-culture activity, in New York and New Jersey. “The Palisades Interstate Park Commission has a history of banning climbing,” he said. “There feels like there’s an agency bias against it. You can work on it park by park, but even that’s a challenge.” In 1996, Rosenstein and the nascent Access Fund won a protracted four-year-long battle and campaign to open Minnewaska State Park—another New Jersey location under the auspices of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission—to rock climbing.

At present, bicycling, hiking, and kayaking are all sanctioned activities within the Palisades. Mountain biking is in the process of being approved

as a trail system is built. But the head of the commission told me technical climbing is a nonstarter.

“Climbing in the New Jersey Palisades is not something we are interested in exploring, so I don’t know how much we have to say,” Josh Laird, the executive director of the Palisades Interstate Park Commission, wrote in an email, highlighting the intransigence of which Rosenstein spoke. “Simply put, the cliffs are fragile and not suited for climbing, especially with other options in the region.”

To a climber like me, this flat refusal is puzzling. Although the Palisades’ rock is unstable, massive rockfalls such as those in 2012, 1938, and 1947 happen only every several decades, Menke said. In a place like Yosemite National Park, California, where the National Park Service allows and regulates climbing, major rockfalls happen every year.

Menke noted, “There are definitely places you can find that wouldn’t endanger others.” He bases this on his ample experience hiking the cliff base and kayaking the Palisades’ shoreline.

Ghiz agreed. “It’d definitely be safe. When we were there, there was no one below you”—no other hikers or recreationists below them, he means. “It was a steep dirt hill with trees.”

Laird of the park commission also cited the delicate ecosystem as an argument against climbing. Sensitive species such as the peregrine falcon and the federally protected Allegheny woodrat call the cliffs of the Palisades home. But this argument is thin. Land managers have closed heavy-use cliffs during nesting season in locations across the country, from the Flatirons in Colorado to the granite bluffs in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. These closures satisfy conservationists, land managers, and climbers.

Of course, it’s understandable that the park would seek to avoid any liability for injured rock climbers or other hikers in the event of an accident.

Said Rosenstein, sympathetically, “It’s the philosophy of government: If it ain’t broke don’t fix it. It’s more work for any individual park manager to allow a new activity in their park. Doesn’t mean it shouldn’t be done, but I understand the reluctance.”

Still, the success in opening other areas to rock climbing in recent years—from Minnewaska State Park in 1996 to select areas of New York’s Harriman State Park in 2013—demonstrates the feasibility of doing so at the Palisades, too. Such national organizations as the Access Fund and more local groups like the Gunks Climbers’ Coalition have decades of practice working with land managers as well as local, state, and federal bodies in drawing up and

implementing climbing management plans that address ways to minimize institutional liability and incorporate rock climbing, all without infringing on other recreationists' enjoyment and safety.

My investigation had come to a dead end. I was disappointed to learn that climbing in the Palisades is not even on the table for discussion. But I decided I needed to get a final and closer look.

ON AN OVERCAST DAY IN LATE NOVEMBER, I POINTED MY CAR WEST ACROSS the George Washington Bridge. After all I'd heard from Ghiz, Menke, Fehre, and Laird, the only thing left to do was feel this rock for myself. Like a mechanic who can't diagnose what's wrong with an engine until he hears it sputtering just so, for a climber there's no substitute for actually running one's hands over the stone.

The trees were mostly bare after a brilliant stretch of peak foliage three weeks before. A few scarlet and mustard-yellow leaves clung to the red oak and butternut hickory trees along the Hudson. I arrived at the State Line Lookout, a scenic overview eleven miles north of the GW Bridge that is part of the Palisades park system. I parked at the trailhead and trotted north on Long Trail. Next to the trail I saw small outcrops of the same brown stone as the cliffs below. I dragged my fingertips across them. The surface had the feel of 200-grit sandpaper. Further on, I passed families, fellow joggers, couples holding hands. Across the river a train crawled north along Metro-North Railroad's Hudson Line.

The trail descended down to river level, and the cliffs towered above as I doubled back south along the Shore Trail. I hopped between boulders half submerged in the water. An hour from the car, I hung a sharp right and hiked directly up toward the cliff. I angled toward a tall stripe of sulfur-colored stone—the scar from the 2012 rockfall. In two minutes I was sitting at the base. A larger boulder, surely one that tumbled down in 2012, had RINA ♡ MARK 2021 graffitied on it in two-foot-tall fuzzy white letters. After catching my breath, I fingered the edges and palmed the rounded corners of the cliff face in front of me. As expected, much of this rotten yellow rock, exposed to the air for only a nanosecond in geologic time, flaked off under only moderate pressure.

Twenty feet to the right, the weathered brown rock that accounts for the rest of the cliff line felt more stable. Looking at a cross section jutting out, I noticed that this portion of cliff was made of tall, thin columns stacked three deep, like books leaning against one another. This was the kind of rock the

naysayers fear: It is, for sure, extremely dangerous, and the wisdom of climbing it is more than a little questionable. Entire columns could topple over. My heart sank.

But I continued along the base, bushwhacking through fallen trees, snarled vines, rusty rectangles of corrugated iron, faded beer cans, and crumpled oil drums. The fallen leaves were shin deep. Fifty feet to the right, I arrived beneath a magnificent steep face, a brownish-burgundy color with a faint tinge of electric green wherever there was a thin film of moss.

This panel of rock was pristine. The clean geometry reminded me of rock I've climbed on Ragged Mountain, a crag in central Connecticut, and also on the Western Slope of Colorado, at an area called the Narrows. The cleavage pattern of perfect right angles and rectangles had a hypnotic effect. There was some minor looseness at spots, but, by and large, the rock was solid. It wasn't what climbers would call "bombproof," but there was no question: I would climb this rock if I were allowed to. In a heartbeat. Looking upward, my chin resting against the cliff, I imagined the possibilities.

Daylight was fading. For a moment I considered whether to pick a mellow-looking line and free solo out to the rim of the escarpment. It would save me some time on the hike back. And I was already wearing approach shoes with sticky rubber on the soles. It was tempting.

But I didn't want to jeopardize any future climbing access through a bone-headed impulsive decision that could end in me getting caught by the park authorities or, worse, falling, unroped. I resigned myself to the one-hour hike back up to the car, content in knowing that there *is* climbable and decent rock at the Palisades.

For now, I'll keep staring across the Hudson, hoping that if a proper campaign for access ever begins, that the climbers win their duel with the Palisades Interstate Park Commission.

"It would be a fabulous resource," Scott Ghiz told me as he reminisced about his climbs there. "It would take some legwork and some trail-building, and some sort of barrier to keep people from throwing bottles and trash off. But it would be great."

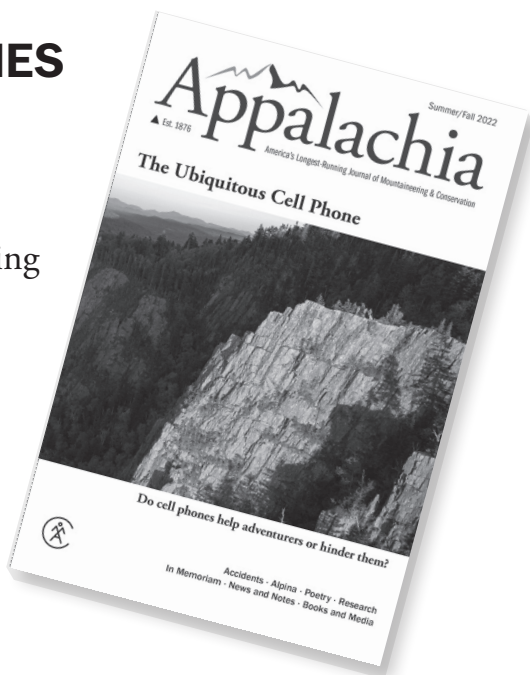
MICHAEL LEVY is a writer and climber currently studying for his MFA in literary reportage at New York University. He serves as *Appalachia's* assistant Alpina editor and is the editor at large of *Climbing* magazine.

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