



1999: Craig Luebben FAs *Mr. Mogote* (5.12a), Valle de Viñales, Cuba. He named this pitch—the fourth—“Tufa Paradise” due to the perfect colonettes up the overhanging wall.

CRAIG LUEBBEN COLLECTION

silence, then, “Craig’s dead.” Then the cell connection failed. I searched the Internet to learn how my best friend and climbing partner had been so suddenly ripped from this world. A block of ice collapsed, Craig fell, debris hit him... I stopped reading. Word began to spread like wildfire. Despite an unthinkable tragic summer of loss, people were already flooding forums, blogs, and websites with info about the accident and a stream of fond memories, anecdotes, and condolences. Sitting with escalating anxiety, like my own life was slipping away, I took some comfort in the fact that even in death, Craig was still bringing people together.

I first met Craig in 1998, at a campfire in the desert. However, it wasn’t until after several years that I began to fully appreciate his depth of character. In terms of climbing, I had always perceived him as an offwidth master, best known for onsighting *Lucille* (5.13a), in Vedauwoo, Wyoming. But he was well-versed in all the disciplines: he’d logged more than 2,000 days bouldering at Horsetooth Reservoir; developed hundreds of routes across the country and world; made a free-solo link-up of two classic Colorado ice climbs, the *Ames Ice Hose* and *Bridalveil Falls*; made the first one-day winter ascent of the Diamond, with Topher Donahue; and bagged several big mountains—all before I started climbing, in 1995.

Yet, beyond Craig’s ticklist were passions that intrinsically shaped his life. Iowa born, he was adopted as an infant and moved to Colorado at age 7, when his father, Bob, took a job with the *Denver Post*. One day, a church group took Craig and a rowdy bunch of teens up a Fourteener. He soon began technical climbing, inspired by his idols John Gill and Layton Kor. Throughout, Craig always venerated his parents for accepting him into their family without reservation, a trait he would carry through life with his seemingly limitless love and generosity.

Craig was also analytical and creative. In college for mechanical engineering, he recognized that offwidths lacked adequate pro. So in 1984, he designed an expandable tube chock for wide cracks. Although the Big Bro was a small first step, Craig continued to improve safety through gear testing, clinics, articles, and his excellent how-to books.

Craig also dedicated his life to teach-

CRAIG LUEBBEN (1960-2009)

“BE KIND, BE STRONG, BE HAPPY, AND TRY HARD.”

By Cameron Cross

1999: AS THE CONVEYOR BELT screeched to a halt, I knew I was done for. I’d just sent an 80-pound “carry-on” with speaker wire, bolts, drill batteries, and a Bosch through the X-ray machine at the Cancun International Airport. The Mexican security personnel exchanged confused looks, quickly followed by much aggravated finger-pointing. I began to sweat. I was there with Craig Luebben, en route to put up routes in Cuba; we’d been climbing together three months.

Craig’s plan to avoid overweight-luggage fees by loading the heaviest gear into our carry-ons *had* seemed rational enough... until this ultra-tense moment. But then, Craig—always quick on his feet—pulled out a climbing magazine that featured him developing routes in the Cayman Islands. In moments, he was pantomiming the process, complete with Bosch sound effects. Shortly thereafter, the security guards waved us

through and we set off on one of the best trips of our lives. When Craig, a Senior Contributing Editor at *Climbing*, died in the Cascades on August 9, my world—and so many others’—ground to a terrible halt.

Silvia, Craig’s wife, called with the news the morning after the accident. With a faltering voice and over a crackly cell connection, she said, “Cameron... there’s been an accident...” trailing into a long, deafening

ing. His vast technical knowledge was a tremendous asset for climbing camps with Lynn Hill and Arno Ilgner, guide-instructor courses offered by the American Mountain Guides Association, intro classes at a local community college, and other venues. Even outside the classes, Craig sought to educate and instill passion. He always had a nifty trick to make something easier (like having a locker clipped to the anchor and waiting for the second at the belay) and loved to see people succeed, regardless of ability level.

I can't imagine a better ambassador for our sport. Once in Cuba, Craig told new acquaintances that our goal was to prove "not all Americans are assholes." He then pantomimed the graphic expression and made me translate. They roared with laughter and became close friends. (*Rock and Ice* No. 95 printed one of Craig's favorite pieces he'd penned: "Cube Libre: Climbing on the Island of Revolution".) Craig's vibrant, sometimes quirky personality brought people together, spanning cultural and ideological gaps in a way I've not seen since.

Craig also worked hard to develop positive relationships between climbers and land managers. As his good friend Tom Kelley notes, Craig founded the Horsetooth Hang and other stewardship events that "despite his best efforts, seemed to be loosely organized affairs, teetering on the brink of



was a good excuse to visit new destinations, but the people he traveled with and met defined many of his fondest memories and most intimate photographs. Silvia, whom he met in 1995 and married in 1997, remains one of his best travel companions, with whom he shared countless adventures.

In recent years, Craig's camera pointed more and more at a curly haired girl with a mischievous grin. His daughter, Giulia, 6, was born in 2003 and became the focus of his attention. On her first birthday, he carried her up Colorado's Mount Bierstadt (14,060 feet). By age 5, she was skiing black diamonds at A-Basin, had summited the Third Flatiron, and was wiggling up offwidths. Craig would proudly relate her latest achievements to anyone who'd listen. In an unpublished article written a month before his death, he reflected, "Climbing in Cuba was like a dream for me... I have often said, if I could only keep one set of my climbing adventures over the past three decades, it would be my trips to Cuba. I can't wait for... Giulia to grow older, and

the US travel restrictions to ease, so I can return and share with her the magic that I found in this Caribbean paradise."

It's hard to imagine life without Craig. He was a loving father, husband, and friend, survived by Silvia, Giulia, parents, sister, brother, and many close friends. Perhaps in time, the pain of Craig's absence will

Luebben in the 1980s, using his Big Bros to protect *Texas Finger Crack* (5.11; FA: Luebben, Chuck Grossman), Escalante Canyon, Colorado.

Luebben's Select Features for Climbing

- "Reservoir Dogs" (No. 160): Classic history of Horsetooth Reservoir's sandstone boulders; photos by Luebben, Craig DeMartino, and John Sherman.
- "The Cold Truth" (No. 172): Seminal piece about ice anchors and the ideal orientation/usage of screws. Luebben and Chris Harmston drop-tested with a 185-pound weight at the Ouray Ice Park.
- "Big, Bad, and Burly" (No. 179): Hit list and historical piece on America's burliest offwidths, with ticklists, tips, and lingo.
- "Great Walls of Ice" (No. 219): Story and photos on the Shuangqiao Valley/Siguniang Mountains China, re. his and friends' new-ice-route blitz there.
- "Vedauwoo Fats" (No. 239): Cover feature on the notorious offwidths of Vedauwoo, Wyoming.
- "Silo High" (No. 245): Photo feature on silo ice farming in Luebben's native Iowa.
- "In Search of El Chupacabra" (No. 268): Humorous piece on Puerto Rico's holiday cragging.

Books

- Guidebooks: *A Rock Climbers Guide to Greyrock*, Horsetooth Press, 1991.
- Instructional: *Knots for Climbers*, Globe Pequot Press, 1995; *Advanced Rock Climbing*, with John Long, Globe Pequot Press, 1997; *How to Ice Climb*, Globe Pequot Press, 1999; *Go Climb!*, North South Publications, 2001; *Betty and the Silver Spider: Welcome to Gym Climbing*, with Jeremy Collins, Sharp End Publishing, 2002; *Rock Climbing: Mastering Basic Skills*, The Mountaineers Books, 2004; *Rock Climbing Anchors: A Comprehensive Guide*, The Mountaineers Books, 2006.

First Ascents

- Fort Collins area, Colorado: 80-plus FAs.
- Wind River Range, Wyoming: *Red Light District* (V 5.12a R), with Tim Toula.
- Zion National Park, Utah: FFA of *Plumblin* (5.12a), with Topher Donahue, Mount Sinawava.
- Vedauwoo, Wyoming: *Lucille's* (5.13a) first onsight.
- Viñales Valley, Cuba: 14 climbs (5.10c to 5.12d), up to five pitches.
- Puerto Rico and Mona Island: eight climbs (5.9 to 5.12b) with friends.
- Chamonix, France: *Thai Boxing* (5.12c), a notorious offwidth, with Stevie Haston.
- Tsaranoro Massif, Madagascar: *Life in a Fairy Tale* (V 5.12a), with his wife, Silvia.
- Siguniang Mountains, China: 12 200-to-600-foot ice FAs up to WI7 M8.
- Val d'Aosta, Italy: five FAs up to WI5+ M6, with various partners.

ease—perhaps not. Either way, the depth of his influence will continue to enrich us. As a consolation, I often reflect on wise words he'd tell Giulia: "Be kind, be strong, be happy, and try hard." 🗡️

Craig was deeply dedicated to education; visit nococlimbing.org/get-involved to donate to the Craig Luebben Memorial Fund, to help Giulia attend college. To submit a fond memory of Craig for her to read later, visit nococlimbing.org/craig/.



A master of the handheld self-portrait, Luebben captured this photo of himself, Giulia, and Silvia in Australia in 2008.

chaos." Still, they always united the community and became building blocks for later grassroots activism, like the founding of the Northern Colorado Climbers Coalition.

As evidenced by our little stunt in the Cancun airport, Craig had a knack for adventure. He loved travel. He didn't speak a second language and didn't care. Climbing