

CLIMB ON!

by Lisa K. Harris

"ON BELAY," SAYS Alexis Finley, a professional guide with Pangaea Mountain Guides, signaling it's time to move.

"Oh my God," I think, staring up at one of the craggy rock faces of Windy Point in the Santa Catalina Mountains. I've shoved my fear of heights aside to rappel the wall and now I must stuff them deeper in order to take my feet from the ground and find a toe-hold on the cliff.

"You can do it," Finley assures me, checking the figure-eight knot securing my harness to the climbing rope.

"Climbing," I say, giving the required reply as I grab hold and dare myself not to look down, otherwise vertigo might incapacitate me.

I needn't have worried though. Finley, one of Pangaea's three owners, expertly instructs me where to place my hands and feet as I clamber skyward.

Pangaea offers guided rock climbing and backpacking trips in Arizona, California, and Mexico. Finley, along with his best friends Jon D'Auria and David Merin, started the Tucson based company a little over a year ago. Locals, the three met in elementary school and have been buddies ever since. Finley and Merin lead trips while D'Auria manages the business end.

"Now what?" I shout, squishing my eyelids shut. I'm stuck half way up. With splayed limbs, I feel like a bug caught in a screen door with nowhere to go. Finley calmly talks me through my next move, making me believe that I'm a natural after I find a new handhold and haul myself a few more inches towards the top.

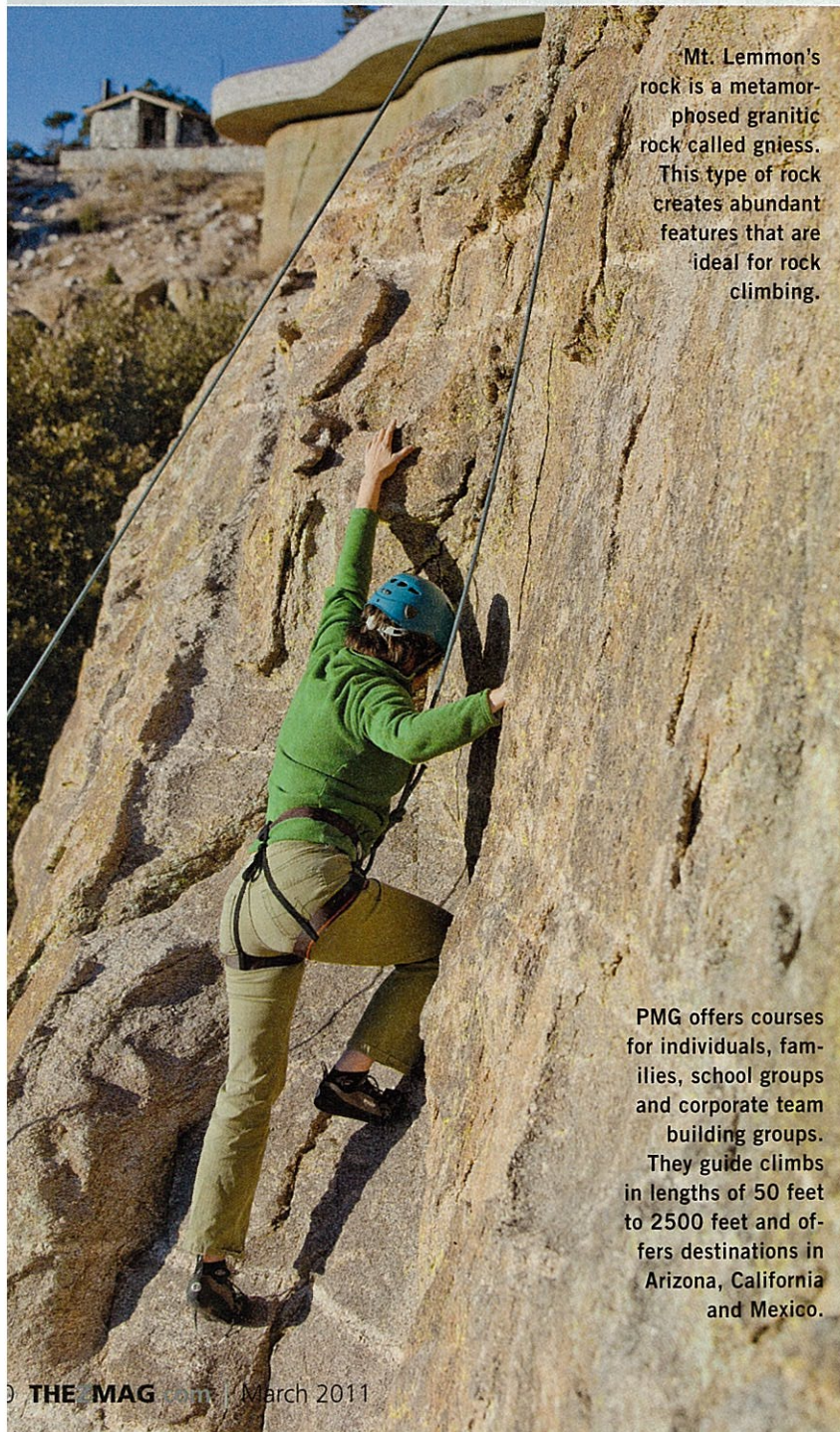
It's Finley who's the natural, though. Climbing for more than a decade, he's tackled peaks all over the West, as well as in Maine's Acadia National Park where he teaches climbing. With a degree from Prescott College in Natural History and Adventure Education, Finley was drawn to climbing because he enjoys its meditative quality. "I like focusing all of my attention at one time," he says.

I have to agree with him. My brain pushes stray thoughts aside as I search out a knobby outcropping I can curl my fingers around. It's just me and the rock on this fine sunny winter's day. Along with Finley below, holding the rope, making sure I'm safe.

Pangaea is one of two companies in Arizona certified by the American Mountain Guide Association. In addition to Mt Lemmon, Pangaea guides trips to Cochise Stronghold in Arizona's Dragoon Mountains, California's Joshua Tree National Park, and El Potrero Chico near Hidalgo, Mexico. They handle almost any climb, from single pitch or one-rope distances, to 3000 foot-high multi-day walls. They guide for novices like me, as well as experienced climbers.

Pangaea also offers corporate "bonding" experiences - the type where you just happen to be randomly teamed with your office enemy, blindfolded, and asked to work together to scale a cliff. "There's nothing better than climbing to get people to solve problems and learn to work together," Finley astutely comments. ■

To learn more about Pangaea Mountain Guides visit PangaeaMountainGuides.com.



Mt. Lemmon's rock is a metamorphosed granitic rock called gneiss. This type of rock creates abundant features that are ideal for rock climbing.

PMG offers courses for individuals, families, school groups and corporate team building groups. They guide climbs in lengths of 50 feet to 2500 feet and offers destinations in Arizona, California and Mexico.

photos: Jon Mancuso