

Big Wall Climbing in Yosemite

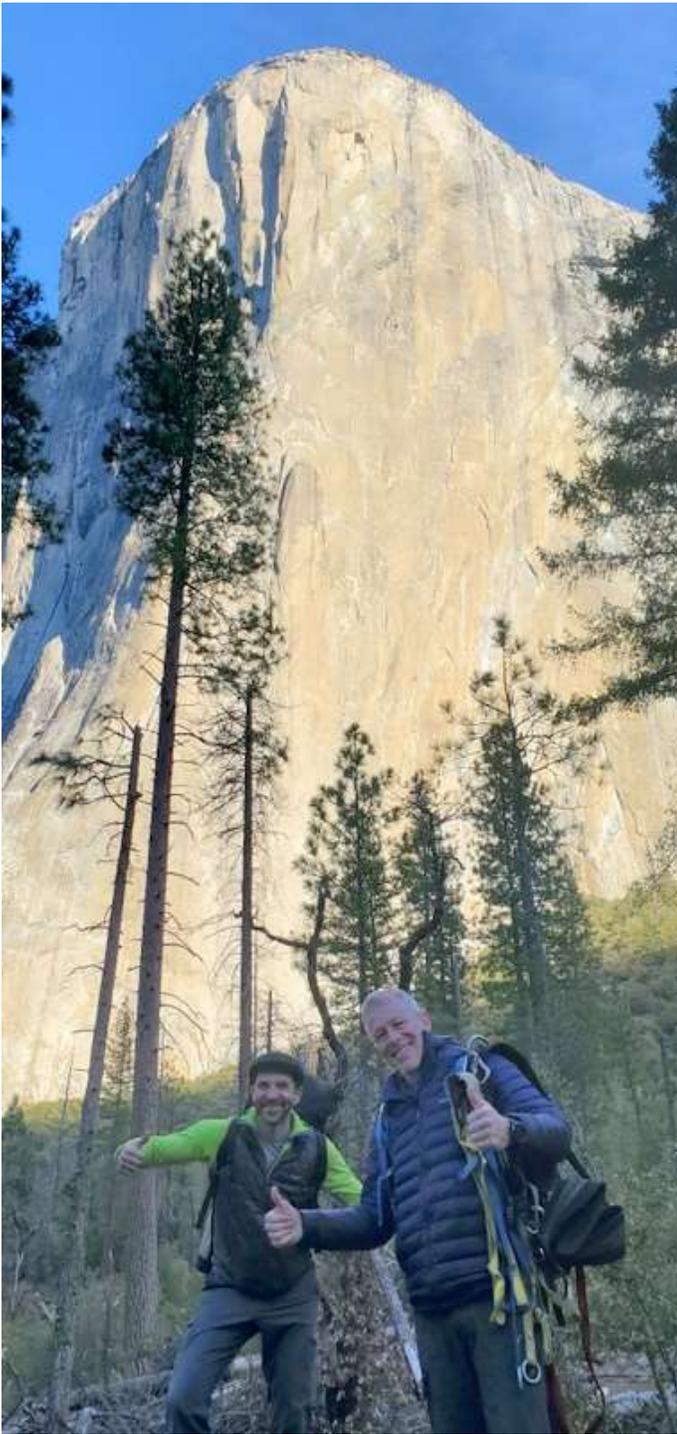
I just flew in from San Francisco, after five EPIC days of climbing in Yosemite.

I can't decide which blew my mind more: the scenery or the climbing. This is not a postcard – I took this picture of Yosemite Valley yesterday – with my cell phone camera!



Regarding the latter, on our fifth and final day together (of this trip), Paul and I had an AMAZING day yesterday climbing the first ~20% of The Nose of El Capitan – excellent preparation for climbing all of it later this year. (I've posted pictures and descriptions of our first four days climbing together on Facebook [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).)

One of the many nice things about El Cap is that it's an easy 15-minute walk to the base (in contrast, the "approach" to many of the world's epic peaks takes hours if not days or weeks!). Here we are walking there:



Note that Paul is carrying a big bag (called a "pig"), which needs to be hauled up the mountain for multi-day ascents like the one we did on Saturday and Sunday on the South Face of Washington Column. But since we were just doing a day-climb yesterday, we left it at the base and I just brought snacks, water and the first-aid kit in my small blue pack, while Paul had the heavy climbing gear attached to his harness.

As we approached the base, we could see Paul's wife, Breezy, climbing with a friend a few pitches up – you get a sense of how massive El Cap is by the tiny specks that they are (circled):



Here we are at the base, ready to go!



Here is a picture of Paul leading a pitch:



The main rope is hard to see – it’s in the crack on the left. I’m belaying from below while Paul climbs, setting gear (mostly spring-loaded cams) in the crack, and clipping in the rope as he goes so he’ll be protected if he falls.

(You can also clearly see the orange “chicken rope” hanging down – that doesn’t protect him; rather, it’s a second safety line for me that he clips into his belay device when I’m climbing after him. Very few climbers use one because it’s extra time/weight/hassle/rope snarl, but the Yosemite Mountaineering School requires its guides to use it, and both Paul and I took comfort in an extra layer of safety!)

Once Paul climbs up to the next anchor (the “top of the pitch”; there are 31 pitches on the 3,000-foot Nose of El Cap route), he clips into 2-3 bolts that are drilled into the rock, pulls up the slack in both the main and chicken ropes that I’m on, puts the ropes in belay devices, and then calls down to let me know that the ropes are fixed. Then, I clip my ascenders into the main rope, detach from the anchor, yell “climbing” to Paul, and start up the pitch, as you can see here:



You can see that the rope runs through a carabiner attached to a loop (together called a sling), which is attached to the loop at one end of a cam, which Paul placed into the crack (circled). As I come up to it, it’s my job to “clean” the gear, clip it to my harness and then give it back to Paul when I get to the top of the pitch so he can use it again for the next pitch.

Here I am having reached an anchor, safely strapped to the wall using a “daisy” (there are two, one blue and one yellow):



After four hours of great climbing (we did two easy free climbing pitches followed by four aid pitches to Sickle Ledge), we decided not to push it and rappelled down so I could get started on my 4+ hour drive to the Bay Area.

On my way out, in addition to the first picture above, I took this pic of one of the big walls Paul and I will definitely climb, the West Face of Leaning Tower:



I'm planning to come back in May and again in November to climb this plus The Nose. I can't wait!

Whitney

PS—I spent last night with my cousin Alex, his wife Deborah, and their wonderful kids!



PPS—If you’re interested in some nitty gritty about big wall climbing, read on...

AID CLIMBING VS. FREE CLIMBING VS. FREE SOLOING

Paul and I did two pitches of free climbing on Thursday, then a day of training for aid climbing on Friday, then two days of aid climbing on the South Face of Washington Column over the weekend, and finally two pitches of free climbing followed by four pitches of aid climbing yesterday.

Aid climbing means both he and I were pulling on gear and/or the rope to ascend. Some climbers only do “free climbing,” which means getting to the top solely under your own power (but using ropes for safety in the event of a fall; this is NOT free soloing, where one slip is fatal).

Some purists look down on aid climbing because they think it’s sort of cheating to move upward using artificial means, but Paul dismissed this, saying: “*Aid climbing allows mortals to climb with the gods.*” So true... The route we climbed over the weekend on Washington Column has been free climbed by only one person *ever*; the Nose has been freed by only six people. Thus, aid climbing is the only way thousands of people like me can experience big wall climbing.

And it’s not like you’re taking a chairlift to the top – it’s CRAZY hard. We ran into a young climber on Washington Column who told us he’d done a lot of free climbing, but had never done aid climbing before – and confessed to us that after getting his butt kicked on the big wall of the South Face, he’d never look down on aid climbing again...

FEAR OF HEIGHTS/EXPOSURE

You can’t climb big walls (or pretty much anything) if you have a fear of heights (or “exposure”). I’m lucky: I have none of it. When I’m up there, I’m so focused on what I’m doing (what Navy SEALs call your “three-foot window”) that I don’t even look down or think of the consequences of a mistake. (In case you’re wondering, I have a \$10 million life insurance policy.)

I totally get it that 99% of people will (sensibly) react to being 1,000 feet above the ground, hanging only on a thin rope, with emotions ranging from discomfort to utter terror.

But the people I don't understand are the folks who are climbing well, get a day or two up on the wall, and then get scared by the exposure and rappels down. Here's why: once you're more than ~60 feet up, any uncontrolled fall is fatal. So it makes little sense to be comfortable at the top of the first pitch, 150 feet up, yet become afraid of the height when you're further up (though in fairness, if you need to get off the wall because, say, a storm comes in, you get sick, etc., it's much better to be at the top of the first pitch, not the 20th!).

Once I'm past the first pitch, I PREFER to be higher up because the views are better!

CLEANING GEAR

Over the course of a day of climbing, Paul will set – and I will clean – over 100 pieces of gear (an average of roughly a dozen per pitch). Every piece to be cleaned is its own unique challenge. Sometimes it's easy and takes no more than five seconds: I just grab the cam, squeeze it to close its “jaws” to release it, then detach the carabiner from the rope and clip the whole thing to my harness.

But I have to be SUPER careful not to drop it, which is easy to do because I'm wearing leather gloves, because: 1) it's expensive; 2) a big cam, falling far enough, could kill someone below; and 3) you might need that particular one for a placement later in the climb.

Sometimes it's really difficult to remove the gear because: 1) the cam (or worse yet, a “nut,” which is just an oddly shaped piece of metal that's not spring-loaded) can get jammed; and 2) if the rope is anything but completely vertical (meaning it's angled through the carabiner, as it is slightly in the picture above), then all of my weight on the rope is pulling hard on the cam, making it difficult if not impossible to release.

If this happens (which is often – maybe half the time), I have to figure out a way to get my weight off the rope, if only for an instant. The easiest way is to find a place on the rock to stand on – even a tiny nub for one foot is enough. Barring that, sometimes I give a little hop, but that rarely works because there's so much tension in the rope (you'd laugh watching me). Or I detach my top ascender and then reattached it above the gear. Or maybe I attach myself to the next piece of gear if it's not too far away, switch my weight to that, and then “back-clean” the lower cam. I faced just about every gear-cleaning challenge over the last five days!

JUGGING

Moving up the rope using ascenders (called “jugging” or “jumaring”) is the most basic skill one needs to master for aid climbing. Each ascender slides in only direction, up the rope, with teeth so when I pull on it, it bites into the rope and I can stand/pull myself up. In addition, each of my feet is in a stirrup with a strap up to each ascender.

So, as I stand in the left stirrup, putting all my weight on that side, I can then, with my right arm, move that ascender up the rope (with my right foot along with it). Then, I stand up on my right leg and put all my weight on that side and pull the left ascender up until it's right beneath the other one. Lather, rinse, repeat and, before you know it, you're at the top of the pitch (stopping to clean gear as you go).

When I first learned jugging during a two-day training session 14 months ago in the Gunks with a guide Paul referred me to, I was a mess. My arms and legs were going everywhere, the rope wouldn't go through the ascenders, and I was drenched in sweat and completely exhausted after only five feet. I leaned back in my harness and thought to myself, “There's no way I'm going to be able to do 3,000 feet of this!” It does indeed

require a lot of balance, strength and stamina, but after an hour of practice I started to get the hang of it, and now I really fly... It's sort of like doing the Versaclimber in the gym.

RAPPELLING

Rappelling simply means lowering yourself down on the rope, using a belay device. It's super fun almost running down a rock face in one minute that might have taken you the better part of an hour to ascend – but it's also potentially very dangerous. If you attach your belay device to the wrong rope or only clip your carabiner to one of the two ropes, when you lean back to rappel down, you will plunge to your death. Or you can sail off the end of your rope, as Brad Gobright, one of the best climbers in the world did a few months ago... So the lesson Paul drilled into my head was: don't get sloppy during the fun part at the end of the day, when you may already be thinking about getting back on terra firma, slapping high fives with your partner, and looking forward to a big dinner!

Here's Paul far below me on the second-to-last rappel pitch yesterday:



And here I am following him:



LOWER OUT

A necessary skill for big wall climbing is a “lower out,” which you do when you need to move horizontally across the rock because, say, the crack you’ve been climbing ends and you need to switch to a better crack nearby. You can see this in the picture above where I circled Breezy and her partner, Shawn, who’s in the lead: he is far to the right, having just completed a lower out.

When the lead climber is doing a lower out, the second climber simply belays him/her. But it's trickier for the second climber. You can see me doing it in this picture:



The problem I have is that there was no place for Paul to place gear for 5-10 feet across the rock, so if I just unclip from the piece I'm attached to (circled; it's a fixed bolt with a ring, not a removable piece of gear), I would take a nasty fall/swing across the rock (you can see the rope going off to the left in the picture above). Therefore, I needed to lower myself out.

To do to, I took the rope attached to my harness, pitched it in half and put the "eye" through the fixed ring in the wall, and then held the loop, slowly letting the rope through my hands as I moved carefully across the rock. Once I was safely in a vertical position below the next piece of gear, I let go of the rope and pulled it through the ring (hoping it didn't get stuck!).