

The Climbing Experience

I sunk my bruised, chalky, dry hand into the sharp granite crack, searched on my harness for the right size piece of gear, then reached as high as I could over my head to plug the cam in. A small .5 inch Black Diamond cam. A piece of metal that wedges itself in the rock and determines if I live or not. I was so dehydrated I could only speak gibberish. I was also terrified for my life.

This is the trad climbing experience. The terrifying fear of falling on sketchy gear you placed, the risk of getting caught in the dark and having to bivy with no food or water, the hours spent in your uncomfortable harness. To be honest, I do not know why this sounds appealing to anybody, but I love it.

Big wall trad climbing is something that has formed me as a person and has helped build my character. The hours I've spent on the wall suffering from severe dehydration and intense discomfort eventually lead me to believe that I am very capable of handling bad situations and good at pushing my limits. It has also taught me that I have to enjoy every moment of the experience (even during sufferfests) to make the entire time worthwhile.

The first big wall I ever attempted to climb did not go as planned. This is not so unusual in the climbing world, but I was not expecting what happened. My friend Miles and I got to Yosemite Valley about a week before we attempted the south face of Washington's Column. This is a long difficult climb that involves sleeping on a ledge halfway up the rock face. The week before we attempted the climb, we practiced the complex rope systems that would be used to keep us safe and haul the gear, food, and water necessary for the two days spent on the wall.

The first day we started the climb was brutal. We woke up at the crack of dawn to start the long approach with the heavy gear bags to get to the base of the route. I looked up and saw the unbelievably vast sea of granite above my head--I was in disbelief that this was what we were going to climb. The first few hundred feet of the route were horrible. The sun was beating down on us as we continued to climb and haul our supplies up the wall. The sky was bright blue and the sun was so hot it seemed to be sucking the liquid right out of our bodies. I was so delirious from the lack of water that I could barely continue to climb, but I kept pushing myself up the vertical wall one step at a time. It was already sunset by the time we got to the ledge we were sleeping on. We had an unsatisfying dinner of dried fruit, granola, and tuna for protein. I then layed down my thin foam sleeping mat and got as comfortable as possible. It is quite difficult to get comfortable when sleeping on a ledge hundreds of feet off the ground but I was so exhausted it didn't even matter. When I woke up the next morning, I was so cold I could barely move. We did not bring sleeping bags because it would have been too hard to haul that much weight up the vertical wall. After warming up, we got ourselves psyched for the summit day and had a quick breakfast consisting of more dried fruit and a cliff bar. The next pitch of the route was the crux of the climb: a huge roof jutting out of the rock face creating a very difficult sequence of moves completely upside down! Neither of us could get past this section.

We were forced to rappel down the wall to the valley floor. At first I was a little bummed out that we didn't even make it to the summit after all the hard work and suffering, but is that really all it's about? Getting to the top? The answer is no. The summit is not the only thing that matters. I pushed myself to the limits of what I'm capable of, that's what matters. I learned that I

have to enjoy the whole experience as it's happening, not only the good times, in order to make every moment count. This was an unforgettable memory that will stay with me forever.