

First solo trip to Yosemite (May 2014)

This is me waking up 1000ft up on El Cap's North America Wall. I am not overly psyched.



Although you cannot see it in the photo, at this point I was being blasted by ice cold wind, being showered with bits of ice and I had a knee that had seized up. My psyche level was around 1 out of 10 and despite sort-of hoping that things would sort themselves out, I had pretty much already decided to bail.

I *really* did not come here to bail but somehow the idea of going back down is, on the whole, more reasonable when you are on a route compared with when thinking about it at home. So, what was meant to be my first big-wall solo, became my first big-wall bail.

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A week earlier I arrived in San Francisco. It was after a pretty hectic week and I was knackered, I think, due to this, somehow I managed to lose my wallet between airports. It took a while to accept this - I do not lose things. Boring story really; but I made contact with friends-of-friends, crashed at theirs and spent the next 48 hours getting cash via Western Union and finding somewhere that would rent a car using photos of a debit card and a counterpart driving licence.

I arrived in a cold and rainy Yosemite Valley on the 7th of May and, with no a tent, I set to work to find a bivi with a roof. Once found, I went shopping for the gear and converted the car boot in my gear store/wardrobe.



Awesome bivi

The next day I went dumpster-diving around the park to find water bottles for the wall. Most shops had stopped selling the 'best' ones so the result was a fairly assorted bunch.

I filled the bottles, put Gatorade powder in half of them, packed them into the haul bag and drove down to El Cap meadow to start the hiking gear in. The walk-in is technically quite short in the grand-scheme of big-wall walk-ins but it does gain quite a bit of height and with uncomfortable 40kg bag and 'office' fitness it felt long enough. That said, it was good, it felt real, better the discomfort of real work than the stagnicity of 9-5 in an office.

Water stashed, I walked back down, racked up with ropes and gear and hiked back up to fix the first three pitches. The start of the route features some of the harder aid climbing (C3F) and if the fixed copper-heads are missing/rip then this can be harder.

Actually it was the first C3 aid I have climbed and pretty much the first time I had used the Silent Partner (Solo belay device) in anger so it was a good learning environment.

The first easy pitch went well - I rappelled, cleaned & jumarrred. The second pitch was slower due to the difficulty but it went OK, despite being rained on for half an hour wearing only a t-shirt and, with no solid gear to rap-off, I had no choice but to keep going and finish the pitch. Due to the weather I left it at 2 pitches so I rappelled the route fixing my lead line and my haul line in place. I poured the puddles off the gear I left at the base of the climb and hiked down and then back in with the Portaledge before doing a food-shop. During this I noticed a team heading up the steep 'Mescalito' route, I would be able to see while on NA Wall and I was pleased to have some neighbours!

Initially I had planned to get on the wall the following day, but I was still pretty jet lagged I was actually very tired. Advice was taken and the next day I just chilled out before hiking up to bivi at the base of the route ready for an early start the next day.

Technically this was a good idea - but at about 1am it started raining and it carried on until about 5am. I was using a basic bivi bag and, a combination of rain, hearing animals (either deer or bears) and being too warm I only really got a couple of hours sleep. I got up at 7am finished packing the haul bag, ate some leftover snacks, and got going.

The first jumar was free hanging, so was the second. Chris Bevins and his girlfriend Harriet Short got me a Petzl Croll for my birthday and, using it with the 'frog' jumar technique was way easier than normal jumaring for ascending free hanging ropes. I was an instant convert and I like that it also provides extra gear redundancy.

I hauled, jumarrred and hauled and got back on to the lead. So far so good.

The third pitch involved some trickery, a fixed head was missing which meant a strenuous reach and putting a small pecker into the side of an old broken hammered in nut. It felt dicey, a 40 footer if it pops. I tentatively weighted it and, reaching up to add a small spur hooked with a sling, I carefully stepped up, strenuously reached a half broken through piton, tested it, and the crux of the pitch went down.



Pitch 4 has a '5.8' squeeze chimney. My psyche level 11/10; this pitch was the first pitch I planned to put on the free climbing shoes. I was geared up and ready to dispatch! I cruised up toward the crack - and got stuck in. The lower part was good, big enough, but that quickly diminished and suddenly it was awkward. Really awkward!

The problem was that with a chunky self-belay device (and back-up knots) on your front, a bunch of stuff on your gear loops, a hauling device & haul rope on the back of your harness and a double-to-triple set of cams on a gear-sling - it makes the 'squeeze' part rather, admin heavy.



Racked up.. erm ready for a squeeze chimney. Need a new technique. Grey is to level out image.

Strenuously I pushed up, reaching in to the higher sections as the crack got smaller I walked up a #5 Camelot as I went.. but soon that was tipped out and I still had 10 ft to go. Using a tiny edge for my feet, my arm chicken-winged in I swore at the gear that caught on the rock as I scraped my portable gear-shop up through the constriction. Below me, the tipped out cam had shifted sideways exposing me to a iffy fall, possibly back to the ledge, far enough either way.

Looking up, just in reach was a small copper-head, I greedily got out a quick-draw - clipped it and, while getting a higher foot position, cranked on it with my left hand to help with my upward progress, instantly the wire snapped – a heart jolting moment as it almost sent me out of the crack, thankfully I stayed wedged in.

A high foot to a small edge and, carefully shifting my body higher, I was now 3ft below some old fixed slings on a large chock-stone. With one hand I pulled a 120cm

sling off my harness, put a biner on the end.. held one end in my teeth and threw the biner through the sling. I larks-footed the sling, pulled up, clipped into it on it and then hauled my way to the chock stone and took a rest. I felt like I had taken a beating – a warm welcome to Yosemite 5.8 off widths.



Getting up in it's grill – the start of the squeeze that leads up to the off-width

I made a move out to underneath a vast hollow roof carefully back-cleaning gear as I went but making sure I had at least one solid piece of pro. At this point the climbing was OK – like 'normal' climbing - but as I came to the corner the moves to get around the overhang were harder and I was knackered so I got back on to aid climbing. It felt nice to chill out on the Fifi hook after the struggle of the off-width.

The route continued and, to finish pitch 6, it required a pendulum off a bolt to a blunt edge which you could hand-over-hand and to reach some easy climbing to the end of the pitch. This would be easy as a team of two; you would pendulum over -

catch the blunt sloping ledge with two hands - and as you are slowly lowered by your partner - you can move yourself across and climb up the slopes to reach the ledge.

Not so simple for a soloist! I got to the pendulum bolt, used a gri-gri to lower myself out and made the pendulum – it took a bit of swinging around to get the right amount of lower-out, and catching it with two hands I discovered that I had a bit of a conundrum..

As I am hanging, my body at around 45 degrees I am supported by the rope pulling one way, and my hands pulling the other. To give myself slack (so I can move left, away from the bolt and up the slopers) I need to let some rope through the Gri-Gri. To do that I have to use one hand. So, after energetically managing to catch the swing, I hold the sloper with one hand, try to *very* gently feed some slack with the gri-gri - but with a touch on the lever, woosh! I go flying down the wall until the gri-gri decides to catch again a few meters later. I ascend and try again.. again the gri-gri sends me flying. The next time, more gently I ease some rope out, but I need a bit more.. and it sends me on a trip again.

The benefit of this is that I feel like a wild man. I literally did not care anymore, running left and right, jumping for catches, chucking myself off. It was ridiculous, frustrating but also really quite fun.

I was getting pretty tired, after climbing, jumaring and hauling a 70kg load for 12 hours with no rest (rappelling & cleaning is kind of resting). I resort to some aid-trickery - I place the biggest hook on the end of an aider and next time I catch the sloper I also put on the hook. To my general surprise it holds. I feed out a tiny bit of slack out – and with the hook's support, it works out OK, but the hook will only work in combination with the tension of my rope. Using aider-steps I blindly feel around the higher edge and, feeling a small slot the back, I take the small cam-hook and put it in what feels like a slot.. it sort of works.. I pull round a bit more, the main hook pops, but only slips an inch, it stays. I then notice a small nub on a ledge to the right, I get out a small hook.. put it behind it, so the hook is laying flat, it felt almost solid. Too tired to care - I stand on it.. it holds as the other hook pings off. I am finally able to reach the ledge.



There was a short section up to the Pitch 6 belay, 5.6 - super easy, but I was so beaten I pulled on a cam to get through one section.

I fixed my lead and haul line - and rappelled back to the P5 belay. There was a small ledge here and I got to setting up the portaledge. I had practiced this in the comfort of my own home - where we actually have a couple of bolts 25ft up an internal concrete wall. However, after 15 hours of effort it took me about 10 attempts to get the last pole in - my bicep was too weak to lift it in to place.

Finally sitting in the ledge, I had a Coke, cooked some food and rehydrated. For the first time since arriving in the States I slept well.

The next day I woke with the light, the day was cool and crisp - and it looked like the bad weather was finally at an end. I realised that I had made a mistake in my breakfast choice. I had decided not to bother cooking to save time so I just got some granola bars, pop-tarts and some protein bars. Early in the morning they all tasted disgusting and forcing them down made me want to vomit.

I packed up, racked-up and got moving. I wanted to be on Pitch 11 (Big Sur) the next evening. The following few pitches went without a problem. The hauling was harder as pitch 8/9 were slabbier and generated more friction but the climbing was easier and I could free/French-free more sections. On pitch seven I took my first solo-lead fall, a relatively pleasant 20 footer when a fixed-copperhead, which bounce-tested OK, ripped when trying to top-step. Fortunately there was a reasonable hooking edge that allowed me to bypass the missing head.

Video.. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hgnWpw9ofik&w=560&h=315>

The only problem I had this day was that my right knee was feeling pretty sore - not terribly but enough to try use it less. I was not sure why, it was aching a bit the day before - I can only imagine I did something to it during my squeeze-chimney trauma. I tried to jumar using my left leg, but not using it is fairly impossible, but if I could avoid weighting my foot when it was nearly totally extended it felt OK.

During that morning the party on Mescalito managed to take their portaledge right down to the base. They bailed shortly after and now I was totally alone with no other parties on the entire West Face of El Cap.

The higher chimney (5.6) did not give me the pain of the previous 5.8 and 12 hours after starting I hit Big Sur, but as it was going to be dark within an hour, I headed back down to pitch 10 to set-up the ledge. I was tired and sore but also super satisfied with progress.

Ledge up. Cooking done. I posted a big-wall solo-selfie on to Facebook, partly to point out that I am still alive, and partly because that side of the valley has great 3G.

On waking the next day and immediately noticed my right knee was not so keen on mobility. It felt really stiff - so I just decided to lay there for a while - slowly moving it, testing it to see if it would sort itself out. It warmed up a bit but it was definitely swollen and pretty sore.

It was bloody cold so I let the sun come up, ate some disgusting bars for breakfast and was generally feeling a bit sorry for myself. Everything up until now (despite lost wallets and the odd bit of walking around un-roped) had gone amazingly well. My rope work and haul systems, which in the past were generally a bit bodged (but safe) were basically perfect. The main pitches that relied on fixed heads had gone well. I took a photo of my knee and posted it to Facebook to substantiate my excuses (not sure why I felt the need to do this) and, as the next pitches traverse and would be very hard to reverse, I made the decision to head down.

As had not really bailed before this was a bit new too.



Initially I wanted to keep the spare water - after hiking it up here I figured I might as well try and re-stash it at the base for a future attempt. A pitch down (lowering the bag, rappelling, fixing the bag, jumarring up, rapping down) I realised that the effort required to keep the water soon became way more effort than hiking it in and besides, hiking in water was a job for future Nathan. Present Nathan poured out the water, halved the weight of the haul bag so that the rest of the route could be rappelled more easily.

That said, it is still hard work when you have a haul-bag and ledge hanging on your belay loop. Luckily the lower, steeper sections were more-or-less straight-down rappels. I left a couple of biners for the rappels, old ones of course, and always on the bolt that I hauled from.

Once down, almost the rest of the day was spent hobbling up and down the walk-in to get my stuff back down to the car.



North America Wall - Red is approximate route/progress. Green is a very approximate rest of the route – note that due to foreshortening it looks less distance than it is.

Havasupai

After I was down some friends were in the Valley so I foolishly offered to join them on a hike - they would go 'slow'. It was not slow, my friend Taylor does not know the meaning of this word, and it mostly comprised of hundreds of big steps, however I went slow, and even slower downhill. The hiking is pretty good in Yosemite - having been here for a couple of trips before it was the first real hiking I had done that did not involve hulking gear into a route.

I spent a few days hanging out in the valley and my knee was feeling significantly better. I had already decided that I would go to Havasupai for a couple of nights with friends so I figured after that I would be well rested. I had never heard of the place either - but it turned out to be an amazing gorge in the middle of Arizona with a turquoise-blue river full of waterfalls and pools that were great for swimming and jumping off.



How cool is that?! ^

Leaning Tower

When I got back into the valley I had 6 days left before the end of my trip. My knee felt really good and I had discovered out that it only flared up if I had hiked for a full day. Therefore, my plan was to try and get a couple of solo 'walls in a day' before I left the valley.

The first wall I decided to hit-up was Leaning Tower, in part because I had done 4 years before with Oli Lyon but also because it is a super steep fun route. It is not a very serious route but, due to it's overhanging nature, it would be very hard to retreat from solo.

I made the mistake of filling the platypus before packing it, somehow the nozzle switch had turned, and emptied most the contents out in my haul bag. Not a great start - but I figured I could get by with less water so I hiked in anyway.

This time, in contrast to the emptiness of NA Wall there were a few people at the base - it turned out that while I was in Havasupai it had basically rained the whole time in

Yosemite which meant that people who had been waiting to get on a route all decided to go for it the day after it stopped.

I walked into the base using the fixed lines (the route starts a couple of hundred feet of the deck and there is a long ledge system you use to get there) and got my ropes set-up ready to jump on lead the next day. There was a load of 'booty' water at the base - I decided to risk it and boil some up to make-up for my platypus losses.

At first I thought I was going to have big-wall-traffic related problems, but it turned out to be OK. Two of the guys at the bivi-spot were actually bailing, another guy was aiming to solo it in 2-3 days - and he kindly said that if I was on the route by 6:30 that I could go first. At 3am another party came in to the bivi area. A veritable wall party!

Again basically my sleep was pretty bad. Not totally sure why, I was not feeling nervous, but perhaps after being disturbed at 3am it was too late to worry about it. I got up early, made a sachet of oats and some tea. I felt really tired - I am not a morning person.

In my day bag I took a 60m half rope, 4 litres of water, a waterproof jacket, sun-cream, GoPro, torch, 3 cliff bars and some mixed fruit. Rack-wise; 2-3 small cams, doubles of mid size cams and one size 4 and 5, nuts, micro nuts, cam hooks and usual ascending/descending gear.

The first two pitches being mostly bolt laddered flew by and were despatched within an hour, however at the end of the second pitch I realised that I really needed to go for a shit, badly. I rappelled, went down the fixed lines, walked down past the bivi-spot and way further, took off my gloves and did my thing, the 'booty' water might not have been such a good idea.

Video.. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tCmIU9ka_Jc

Back up, got on the rope and then after casting off - realised I left my gloves. Hard decision, but I did not want to have to be gentle on this route. I used the lines the bailers left to get back in to the face. Back down found my gloves. Went back up, got on the line, cast off.. but with the other soloist slowly getting set-up with stuff all over the ledge, and being in a rush, I did not notice that I left my bag with water/rappel rope. Back down - pull in - get my bag on - and get back up. MASSIVE a waste of time! I was feeling pretty stupid, but I knew it was just tiredness and that it would sort itself out once I had woken up a bit.

So, at the P2 belay again, on request, I dropped the bail-team's ropes and got on with the route. Pitches fell pretty quickly, not having to haul was very nice and I could link pitches which, although always a preference, when solo-climbing as you do not experience rope drag it is a no-brainer if you have enough gear.

The day was baking hot with almost no wind. Luckily I was in the shade until around 2pm but even then I was sweating buckets.

At one point I put in a sort-of wrong-way round Alien off-set cam and, while pulling off it to reach a higher placement it popped sending me down. Luckily I placed a solid cam about only 10-15 foot below. Luckily because generally I placed around 6 to 8 pieces per double pitch, partly out of stinginess in case I needed them later, but also because the falls were in to space and the pro was generally pretty good.

I moved efficiently, drinking water while I jumarred and eating every-so-often. Pretty soon I was under the big roof, 3 pitches from the top.



On the slab before the big roof

The roof pitch went down, and I had caught up with another soloist who was doing it in 2-3 days - I had to wait for him to clean a pitch, so I did not link the last two pitches to give him time. It was a small inconvenience in reality and it was nice to have company for rappelling the gulley to get back down.

Video.. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8XtBA5bGNc>

The last pitch I over protected, I was feeling fairly tied and had to wait for the guy above so my efficiency went to pot. Not a big problem, but I could have been a bit more focused.

It was great to be on top hanging out for sun-set.

End of the trip..

The day after I did the tower I fell ill with some gunky chest infection that basically wiped me out for the rest of the trip. So for the last few days I just hung out with climbers, chilled by the river and watched other climbers on El Cap with Tom in the meadow.

Video.. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGgWArWznNU>

And that was basically it!

What I learned..

Choose a suitable pace

Probably the most useful bit of learning I gained.

Although doing 5-6 moderate to hard pitches (with hauling) per day was possible, it was not the safest option and it left me over tired and with little time to enjoy just being on the wall which, lets face it, is a big part of the fun of big-walling. I found that on average a pitch took 2.5 hours to lead, clean, jug and haul - some faster, some a bit slower due to harder climbing or due to having to descend again to get the haul-bag un-jammed.

If (or when) I do it again I would probably pack my haul bag assuming I climb 3 pitches a day, but aim to do 4 per day. This means that you can be relatively chilled out in the process and get longer periods of rest. By doing long days of continued

physical exertion I found myself getting tired quickly, when I get tired I get stupid and there was definitely moments where simple mistakes could have caused injury or death. At one point late in the second day on NA wall it took me 3 attempts to tie a Munter Hitch - I was clearly mentally impaired.

Get over jet-lag

It can take time. I felt time pressured and was keen to get going as fast as possible. It left me generally over-tired due to a lack of sleep and rest which definitely had a negative effect on my performance.

Breakfast should taste good..

If I only I could take bacon and eggs.. however, in lieu of that, next time I go I will try and be more imaginative and bring some food that I would actually like to eat at 6:30am. I will also test it out before buying a week's worth.

Leave Facebook behind

Oddly enough I felt much better just letting people know I did Leaning Tower the day after than having friends sort-of as part of the process like on NA Wall. Not sure why - it just felt better to be doing it 100% for myself without any outside communication.

I can move pretty quickly over rock

It was nice to throw down pitches fairly quickly solo, I think I could move a lot faster with more time-on-rock and increased fitness.

Solo is not thaaat scary

Once you got your process dialled and have done a bunch of pitches it felt more-or-less like being on belay. The silent partner gives a pretty soft catch and, unless you get it twisted, it feeds pretty well. The scariness probably has as much to do with how you think about it than anything else.

I actually really want to get strong & fit

Aiding is kind of OK, the spicier bits are entertaining just due to the wild feel of it, but this trip really inspired me to get strong and fit enough to do more free. The aid techniques are useful and placing and testing a bunch of gear is good for the mind - but over-all I aspire to free climb big routes.

Practicing putting up the ledge at home was totally worth it

The nice people at The Castle Shop ordered-in a ledge for me to buy - and getting familiar with how to put it up by myself at home was incredibly useful. If I was trying to figure it out while feeling totally exhausted it would have probably made me cry.

Doing stuff in a day is a lot of fun

Climbing stuff in a day is a lot of fun.. I knew this already but the same applies for Solo - cutting out hiking in loads and hauling has serious advantages.

Train over-all stamina

My stamina could have been much better - the ability for your body to work long hours, recover, and do the same the next day needs to be trained to build up this sort of resilience.

Going on a solo climbing trip to Yosemite alone is totally fine

Maybe I like my own company too much but the reality is there are so many climbers around that if you want to hang out with people it is easy enough - even if you are not staying in the main camp grounds. Also I bumped in to a whole bunch of people I met on other trips so it all worked out.

My cunning bag-release system worked like a dream

Video.. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3QkUsc--lYs>

Using a rope-man to stop rope-feedback worked really well

I also found that it was only on the steepest and longest pitches that I needed to use more than one.

Arcteryx 320 Trad Harnesses are shit for big-wall – unless you like a cheese wire effect on your waist when hauling/jumarring. Also the buckle under the lower loop broke in a fall.

Rope management

Initially I figured I would use a rope bag for the haul line, but stacking ropes just takes quite a lot of time and feels a bit of a faff. It was not very windy for most the day so I just let it trail. Seemed pretty much fine and it certainly made things faster.

Using light weight dry-bag gear sacks were a success

You can get these dry bag things, about £8 each – not essential-spend but totally worth it. Not only are they strong/easy to find and seal. But you can write on them what is inside and if you got seriously rained on – everything inside them would still remain dry.



Summary

Over-all despite a bunch of screw-ups (lost wallet, hurt knee, chest infection) the trip went pretty well. At minimum; at least I soloed *one* wall successfully, learned a lot from the failed attempt, did some fun trad in between. I got to hang out in Yosemite and discovered Havasupai. The main upside is that I did not kill/maim myself which all-in-all is indicative of a pretty successful first Solo trip.

Glossary:

- **Copper head** – soft metal lump on a wire [mashed in to a small crack/feature](#)
- **Clean Aid Grades** (C1/2/3 etc) – basically A grades but graded if you do not have a hammer. [More here.](#)
- **Silent Partner** – probably the best soloist self-belay device
- **Offsets** – Offset cam device where one [side is smaller than the other](#) – good for odd features and pin scars
- **Cam-hook** – a flat bent hook thing for [placing in very thin cracks/features](#) – faster than nuts
- **Portaledge** – Hanging tent/platform – see [Oli Lyon](#) chilling in one [here.](#)