

I wrote this book because big wall climbing has been the most rewarding sport in my life and I want to see more people succeed at it. The first time you climb El Cap can be the hardest and scariest event in your life. It can also be the most adventurous, exciting, and memorable. Eighteen years later, I still clearly remember my first trip up The Captain. And it's still the single most memorable day of my life. I would give anything to relive that experience again with the same level of heightened anticipation and adventure. But you only get one "first time." So the next best thing for me is to help other people succeed and to hear their stories. I love meeting people who dream of climbing El Cap and who exude that energy of half fear and half eager anticipation. You hear it in their voices. They know big wall climbing will step up their mental and physical climbing game – and they are clearly excited about it. I hope this book becomes a starting point for your own incredible adventure. And don't forget to email me your stories or post them on

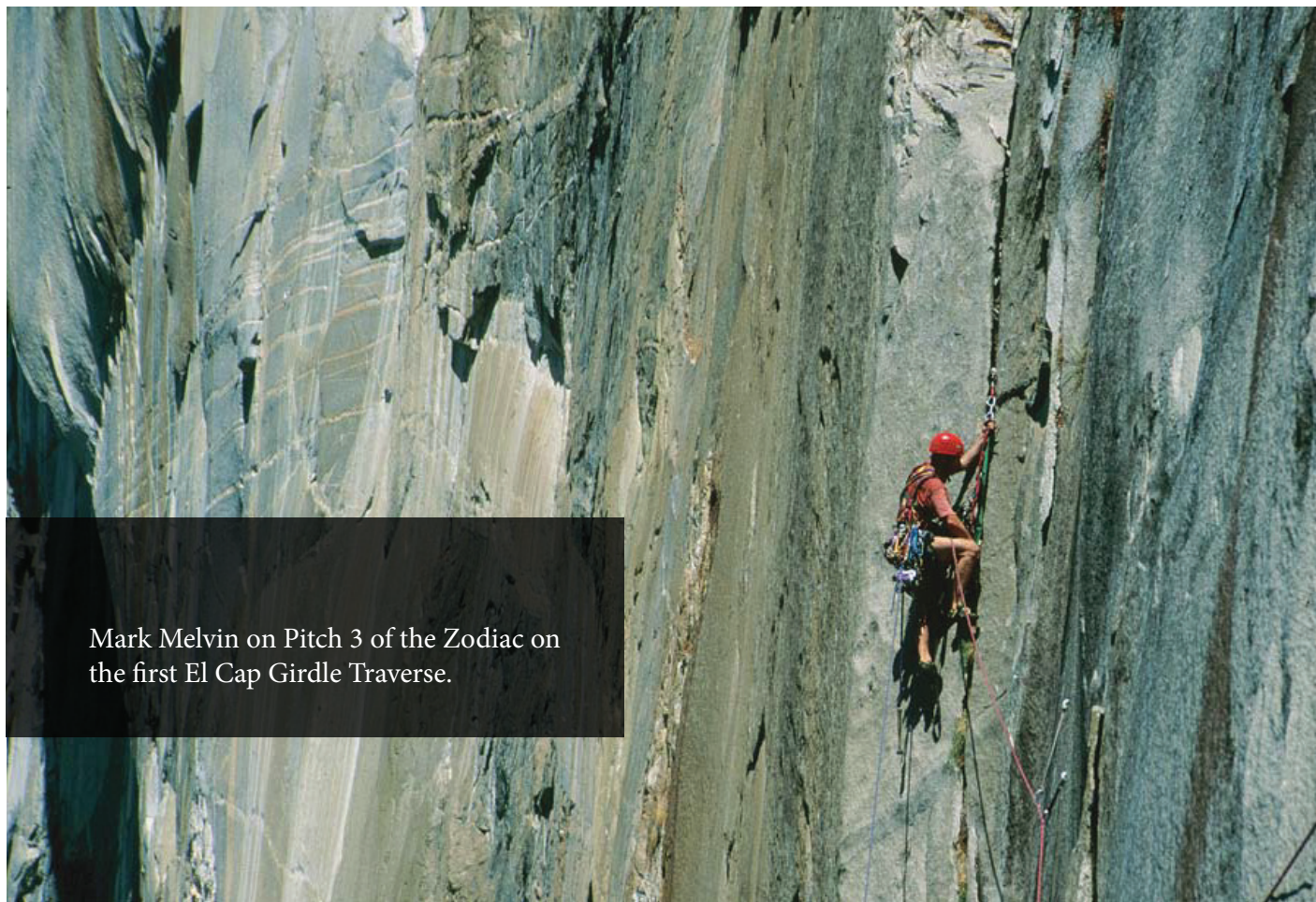
supertopo.com so we can all live through them with you.

## What is a big wall?

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A big wall is a steep multi-pitch climb that takes most people more than a day to climb. Big walls are all about vertical exposure; climbing and sleeping with thousands of feet of air below you and thousands of feet of rock above you. There is nothing else like it. Big wall climbing is not about summit glory or pulling a single hard move or savoring the rush of adrenaline, although all three of those things will happen. The experience is much more complex and rich. You don't flirt briefly with gravity as you might while BASE jumping or doing a hard single pitch climb. You live with the pull of gravity and daunting exposure 24 hours a day.

Plus there are side benefits, plenty of them. All big wall climbs are in stunning mountain settings. Usually you share the experience with a good friend. There is lots of time



Mark Melvin on Pitch 3 of the Zodiac on the first El Cap Girdle Traverse.

to contemplate, even read, and generally experience the slow life.

On a more philosophical level, a wall like El Capitan is just so much bigger than we are. It's mysterious, massive, and unforgiving. While nothing is truly static, the surface of El Cap is about as unmoving as anything can be. Because the rock changes so little it becomes a mirror. Every fear, doubt, and joy comes right back at you. Climbing big walls is very hard, and that is exactly what engages the people who climb them. A big wall makes you dig deep, both physically and mentally.

## But isn't aid climbing not much fun?

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I have always loved the process of aid climbing. But I am a little weird. Among most of the climbers who have never climbed a big wall, aid climbing seems like cheating, or simply not fun. I've heard, "Aid climbing is like hitting your head with a hammer; it only feels good when you stop." Unlike my case, for most people aid climbing is a means to an end. Few of them aid climb because they love the process. And even I concede that nobody goes "aid cragging" or "aid bouldering" like they would free climb a crag or a boulder. Nearly everybody aid climbs for one basic reason: to get up big walls. Aid climbing is the tool for ascending the most wild, massive, and inspiring faces in the world. And once you are up there, aid climbing through the wildly overhanging last pitch of The Nose, you won't judge yourself on whether it is stylish to aid climb. You will be too busy relishing one of the coolest locations and experiences of your life.

## Sixty percent of Nose climbers bail

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From El Cap Meadow, photographer Tom "Ansel" Evans of [elcapreport.com](http://elcapreport.com) has probably watched more El Capitan ascents and failures than anyone. He estimates that about 60 percent of the climbers who start up The Nose bail. Why? "Most climbers think The Nose is Washington Column but bigger. It's not. El Capitan is way bigger than most people think," says Evans. "They jump on The Nose without practice, so when the first glitch arises – and one does on every wall – they just bail." On a one-pitch climb or even on a 10-pitch climb like Washington Column, you can make basic mistakes and still get your way up the wall. When you jump on a 30-pitch route, those little mistakes and inefficiencies compound and you have to bail. Anyone can climb The Nose, but they need to master the aid climbing basics and train hard.

## Two key points

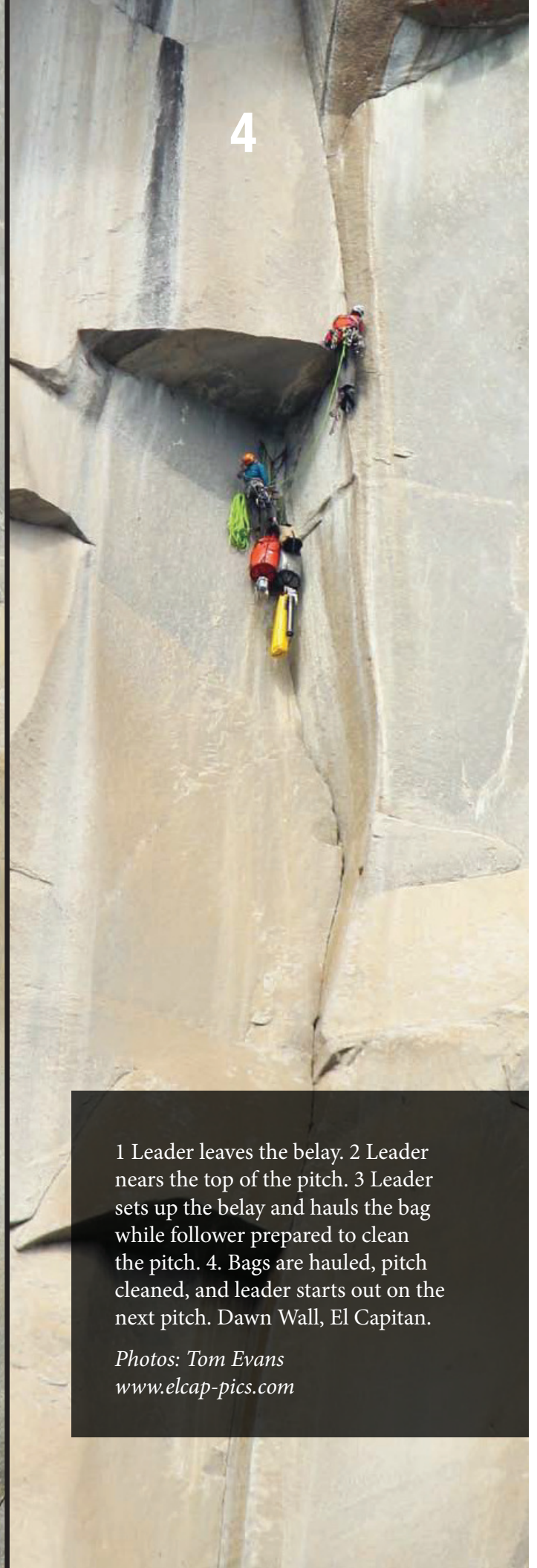
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Like anything worthwhile, big wall climbing requires hard work. However, unlike climbing 5.13 or bouldering V8, big wall climbing doesn't take heroic strength. It just requires solid 5.9-5.10 multi-pitch skills and making thousands of easy moves efficiently. That is where this book comes in. It's the first How To Big Wall book specifically organized and clearly designed to address the process of building big wall skills, step by step.

I've climbed more than 100 big walls and have spent more than 400 days on El Capitan. During my time I've seen lots of people bail, myself included. In nearly all cases they missed the two main principles of this book:

- Keep it simple.
- Master the aid climbing basics.





1 Leader leaves the belay. 2 Leader nears the top of the pitch. 3 Leader sets up the belay and hauls the bag while follower prepared to clean the pitch. 4. Bags are hauled, pitch cleaned, and leader starts out on the next pitch. Dawn Wall, El Capitan.

*Photos: Tom Evans  
www.elcap-pics.com*

I believe in reducing everything to the essentials, so that's all I include here. I offer the techniques that I have found helpful and omit the rest. Here's a taste of the sort of climbing myths I want you to deal with:

- Don't duct tape water bottles.
- Don't use four aiders (two work best).
- Don't use oval carabiners.
- Don't bother with 3-to-1 hauling systems.

My technique for hauling up huge loads of gear is this: don't bring huge loads. Instead, climb light and efficiently so you don't have to bring big loads. I keep the vertical baggage handling to a minimum. I spend time climbing lightly and quickly over the rock and spend minimum time moving luggage. If every moment an aspiring wall climber spent figuring how to set up a 3-to-1 system was instead spent mastering moving in aiders efficiently and learning to set up a simple belay, they would not need a 3-to-1 in the first place. And a lot more people would summit El Cap and enjoy the experience of getting there.

## Wall climbing is easy...sorta

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Technically speaking, big wall climbing is easy. Walking up a pair of aiders is not physically or technically demanding. Jumaring is pretty straightforward once you get the hang of it. Hauling is not that complex. Each component of big wall climbing is surprisingly easy. The challenge comes in two parts:

1. Big walls require putting together a lot of unfamiliar skills and logistics.
2. These skills must be put together extremely efficiently and everything must stay organized.

These two challenges can be overcome by one simple principle: master the aid climbing basics. That is what this book is all about, a step-by-step guide to mastering the basics. If

you do that, all the little aid climbing tricks will fall effortlessly into place.

## Don't be a vertical baggage handler

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Personally, I don't just want to get to the top of El Cap. I want to enjoy the climb and wall experience, spending as little time as possible dealing with haul bags and gear clusters. Maybe one day there will be a portable hot air balloon for wall climbers. All the gear, water, beer, and fish tacos you need will float just a few feet away from you and effortlessly follow you up the wall. But until that day arrives we must deal with a brutal fact: we need a lot of water to stay alive and water is heavy. Conservatively, we need a gallon per person, per day when wall climbing and a gallon of water weighs eight pounds. So on a five-day climb of El Cap:

8 lbs. x 2 people x 5 days = 80 lbs.

Add another two pounds per person per day for food, 20 pounds in bivy supplies and your haul bag might tip 120 pounds at liftoff. Can you say Sufferfest?

## Beyond suffering

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Even beyond the suffering issue of moving bags up a wall, there are other reasons to climb efficiently

- Climbing efficiently keeps you safe from bad weather. You will be better able to "turn on the gas" and summit before an oncoming storm, or at least make it to a more sheltered bivy spot. Most climbers who die on El Cap do so because they get caught in storms, often just a few pitches from the top. Weather forecasts won't protect you because most weather forecasts in mountain areas are only good for a few days. Read John Dill's "Staying Alive" at <http://www.supertopo.com/topos/yosemite/stayalive.pdf>

- Climbing efficiently is more fun. You get to sleep on the ledge you want to, not the one forced on you by circumstance and vanishing sunlight. Or, worse, having to spend the night standing in aiders.
- Climbing efficiently is taking the right amount of water and food – not way too much or way too little.

## Sneak Peak: Examples of efficient climbing covered in the book

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- Use two aiders instead of four.
- Aid like you free climb.
- Spend your time at belays keeping things organized and visualizing what to do once the leader is ready to haul.
- When leading, always move to the top step or second step.
- Clean with two slings that can be handed to the leader, instead of handing over each piece one by one.

## Efficient climbing, not speed climbing

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Climbing The Nose in two bivies instead of four does not mean becoming a frantic speed climber. You don't have to rush every move, frantically scream at your partner to jumar faster, and take more chances when you're leading. You just need to streamline your systems and have the aid basics dialed. If you read and practice the techniques in this book, you will cut out the hours lost to inefficiency that the typical big wall team endures and instead wonder why you ever climbed walls any other way.

### TWO CLIMBING SCENARIOS:

Just to drive home this critical point, let's look at climbing The Nose route on El Cap under two different scenarios.

## First the Sufferfest Way, the surprisingly common way that it's done

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Prep Day – Climb slowly to The Sickle with a few parties nipping on your heels, trying to pass you. Spend all afternoon and into the night bringing up heavy haul bags.

Day 1 – Get bogged down in the Stovelegs due to heavy loads. You're so tired from the hauling that you have to aid climb cracks that you had planned to free climb. Bummer. Make it to Dolt Tower after dark with little time to dial in a nice bivy, let alone kick back and appreciate the amazing ledge and location.

Day 2 – Wake up exhausted with worked hands from all the hauling. So far the climb hasn't been much fun. You and your partner each hope the other comes up with a good excuse to bail, as 60 percent of climbers usually have done by now. Climb all day and barely make it to Camp 4 by nightfall – an uncomfortable bivy site.

Day 3 – The Great Roof takes forever and antsy parties stack up behind you. You wanted to free the Pancake Flake (awesome 5.10a) but when you made a hand jam your arm cramped up, so you had to aid it. Now you have to let the party behind you pass and you deal with some gnarly belay clusters in the process. The passing team offers to fix a rope and you accept. You had wanted to climb every pitch but you are moving slowly and don't want to climb into the night again. You make it to a crowded Camp 5 and have to take the lame bivy sites and hope the team above doesn't pee on you.

Day 4 – At this point the haul bag is getting lighter but all the heavy hauling down low has wrecked your hands and drained your strength. You have to aid everything, even the easy free climbing, which makes you move even slower. The turd bucket is dangerously close to overflowing. You have

to bivvy on Camp 6 and another party catches up to you, creating another cluster.

Day 5 – You have to ration your food and water, which just adds to your malaise. You finally top out. You are relieved and feel proud to have summited. However – because of the hauling, bad bivvies, and belay clusters – your climb of what is probably the best route in the world was not much fun.

## Now, the Efficient (non-Sufferfest) way to climb El Cap

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### Prep Day

Start early and zip up the first four pitches in a half day. Return to the ground and have plenty of time to haul to Sickle or just do “the El Cap Lieback” in El Cap Meadow.

### Day 1

Blast off and pass a party in the Stovelegs by climbing variations around them. With a light haul bag holding only three days of food and water, the hauling is easy and you have plenty of strength to free climb these classic pitches. Get to El Cap Tower with plenty of time to kick back and enjoy the view.

### Day 2

Cruise through the King Swing and the Great Roof. With a light bag, easy hauling means you still have enough strength to free climb Pancake Flake: Oh it’s soo good! And exposed! You have enough time to choose Camp 5 or Camp 6 (whichever has fewer people). At this point the bag weighs almost nothing.

### Day 3

Pass that suffering party I described above. You give them a little water because even though they started with 80 pounds of water, they are almost out. Three pitches from the top you feel a potential afternoon

thunderstorm developing. You step on the gas and blast through the final pitches, topping out before the rain starts. There is plenty of time to pack up, walk down, and still buy a six-pack before the store closes.

## Three Paths

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So there you have it, there are essentially three paths:

- Get frustrated and bail low before Dolt Tower.
- Barely eke out an ascent and not enjoy the process as much as you could.
- Master the aid basics and climb The Nose confidently and have fun.

## The basic equation of efficient climbing

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A little time saved on an action, when multiplied by thousands of actions on a wall = giant time savings.

For example, on The Nose:

Lead a pitch ten minutes faster multiplied by 31 pitches = 5+ hours.

Save five minutes on a belay changeover multiplied by 31 pitches = 2.5+ hours.

Save three minutes when you lower out the bag and leave the belay multiplied by 31 pitches = 1.5 hours.

You haven’t done any fancy “speed climbing” and you have already shaved a day off the climb.

Now, imagine, after dialing the skills in this book you shave 20 minutes off leading each pitch and belay changeovers that used to take 12 minutes instead take two.

There are other things that can’t be quantified in time: hauling with less effort, over 31 pitches = more energy for free climbing the classic pitches and more fun.

## How to use this book – The Master Checklist

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This book is intended to be “active reading.” Print or photocopy the Master Checklist in Chapter 3 and take it with you on all your training. Every time you get to a major stage, celebrate!

Open up the first chapter on Aid Basics and go out and practice, practice, practice. Make sure you check off everything on the Master Checklist. Then you’ll move onto Chapter 2 and get that dialed and so on. If you have never aid climbed, you are lucky. You don’t have bad habits yet. If you don’t skip ahead, and instead master each section, one chapter at a time, you are on the path to cruising up El Cap.

OK, maybe skim through the entire book once. That’s allowed. But I encourage you to read this book slowly, dialing in each section before skipping ahead. Don’t skip around to pick things here and there.

Some folks out there may say, “But I already know the basics, I want to know how to stack pitons or set up a complex hauling system.” While I can’t call BS without actually seeing you aid climb, the vast majority of aid climbers I see on El Cap could still use a lot of help with the aid basics. So even if you are moderately experienced at aid climbing, please don’t skip ahead.

## Videos explain technical parts of the text

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I have free instructional videos available at <http://www.supertopo.com/gear/how-to-big-wall> There you will see chapter titles that match the chapter numbers in this book. Chances are, if there is a confusing technique mentioned in the text, I put a free video online to explain it. If there is not a video, email me and I may be able to go shoot and upload it for you and everyone else.

## About the gear in this book

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This book has many gear photos. I am not sponsored. At the time of publication, the gear shown is the gear I like to use. But while I like the products you see in the book, other gear might work better for you. The only way to know is to experiment for yourself. On this page <http://www.supertopo.com/climbingareas/bigwalls.html> is the gear I currently use. In addition, we have written a number of reviews on popular aid gear at <http://www.outdoorgearlab.com/big-wall>. There you can also see what other climbers find works best for them.

## Before you start - get psyched!

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Big walls are a big undertaking. If you are not genuinely psyched to wall climb, then you will suffer. If you just want to say you have climbed El Capitan but are not thrilled about the idea of being on the wall for days on a time, don’t bother. Wall climbing involves a ton of work. If you are just half-hearted about the endeavor, then all that work feels like suffering. If you are truly psyched, then all the work just feels like part of the adventure.

In addition, if you are not amped to be on the wall, you will get scared. Probably really scared. You’re more likely to bail when the first challenge arises. On my first El Cap ascent I was scared. But I was so pumped on the adventure that the fear just added a little spice to the experience. Compare that to an ascent seven years later when my heart was not into climbing El Cap at that moment. Despite having done 60+ El Cap ascents, I was actually more scared than my first time on the wall because I didn’t REALLY want to be up there. A year later, I had my psyche back and suddenly El Cap was a quarter as scary and four times as much fun. It’s all in the head.

So before you get too much into this book



or spend too much money on wall climbing gear, go to Yosemite or Zion or your closest big wall area. Spend a day walking the entire base of El Cap or your local big wall. Bring a book or watch a movie from the list at SuperTopo. Go to the back of El Cap Meadow with a pair of binocs and watch climbers up on the wall. If you can't get to a big wall area, read even more from my reading list.

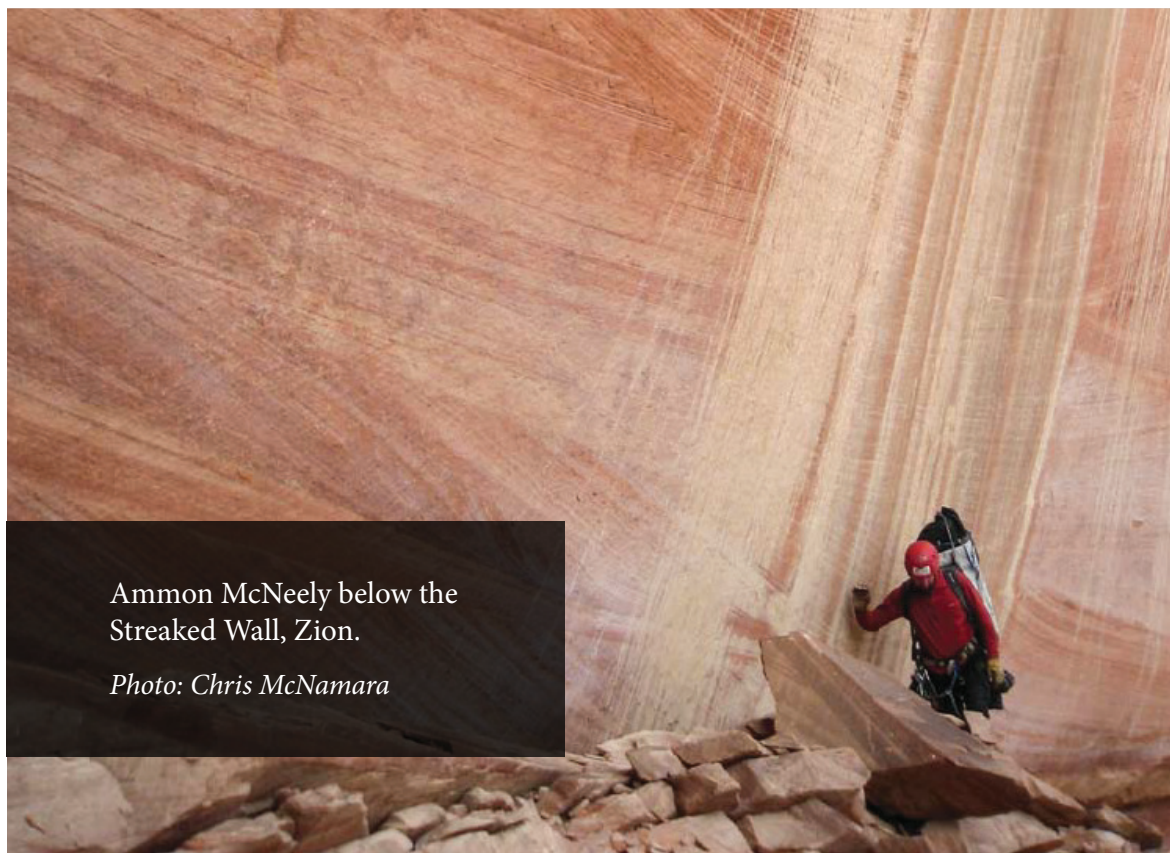
If you are genuinely psyched, keep charging on this path of learning to climb a big wall. If you are not yet truly psyched, move forward, but maybe put off the purchase of that portaledge.

## Winding up

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By the way, this is the only section of the book where I am quite so long winded. After this rant, where I try and convince you to do things as simply as possible, I'll heed my own advice and write as simply as possible. I'm working at it – the first draft of this book was three times as long. Then I pared it down to just the essentials.

PS: I want to hear success stories! If this book helped you get to the summit of EL Cap, please email me: [chris@supertopo.com](mailto:chris@supertopo.com). I would love to hear about it.



Ammon McNeely below the  
Streaked Wall, Zion.

*Photo: Chris McNamara*