

MULTI-PITCH TECHNIQUES

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INTRODUCTION

Multi-pitch climbs are the most challenging climbs you can do. They usually require more gear, more expertise and more logistics, and are riskier. Most people find that the difficult part is the logistical side. This chapter will deal with multi-pitch climbs that can be finished in one day.

PREPARATION

The multi-pitch climb starts with preparation. A two-pitch climb is easy, but a seven-pitch climb in Cochise or an all-day climb in the back-country requires complete planning. It should be your goal to get safely down before dark, when the risk of error and injury goes up significantly.

First of all, research the climb (unless you are the type that likes to go out and just climb whatever you see—which is a legitimate pastime, but riskier). Get and read the guidebooks, surf the Internet, and ask friends and local climbers about the climb. People may be able to tell you what pro you may need or can leave behind, about changes since the guidebook, about tricky sections, or about approach and descent information.

Weather

If you are not familiar with the weather, research it, too. You may understand local weather patterns, but every climbing area has its own characteristics. The mountains everywhere are legendary for making their own weather. Moisture-laden masses of air that do not form clouds at low altitude become thunderstorms as the air is compressed in its journey over the mountain. And they often happen quickly.

Gear

Take a look at the gear you are carrying. Plan on a tradeoff between weight versus needs. Do you need to carry your boots with you to wear at the top? They are quite heavy, which means a heavier load in your pack and potentially slower traveling. Do you need all the bad weather gear? How much water and food do you need for the day? Do you need to take all of your pro?

There is some gear you should always have on an all-day outing. A morning trip up Gardener's Wall, a two-pitch climb in the McDowells and an easy drive from Scottsdale, is a much different proposition than a seven-pitch climb with an hour-long approach in Cochise Stronghold. The gear for an all-day outing includes:

- Headlamp
- Whistle (virtually weightless)
- Food (with extra depending on the difficulty/risk factor)
- Water (with extra depending on the difficulty/risk factor)
- Rain or wind gear (if there is a possibility of wet weather)
- A second rope (for double-rope rappels and as a backup in case of rope damage)
- Cordelettes
- Helmet

Speed

Estimate how long you intend to take. Remember—speed is safety, but don't move so fast you get in trouble. There is a tradeoff between the absolutely safest anchor you can make and taking too long to do the climb. Again, if you come down in the dark, your risk increases dramatically. One of the hallmarks of good leading is efficiency, which translates to speed. This is evident in single-pitch routes in such skills as clipping the rope quickly, or identifying and making natural pro placements quickly. The longer you take to do a particular climb, the more likely you are to get tired; the more tired you get, the more susceptible you are to injury due to falling. In multi-pitch routes, all these factors are magnified.

In order to speed up your climbing time on multi-pitch routes, ask yourself how fast you are in leading single pitches. Practice two- and three-pitch climbs to get a feel for how fast you complete the average pitch. Then estimate how long an all-day climb will take. If you don't feel you can get down before dark, practice until you are efficient enough to do so. Climb with a regular partner so you are used to each other and can develop a rhythm.

Practice and use efficient swapping techniques to change leads if you are both leading. As you develop your skills, you may want to choose the more common techniques, such as racking and clipping methods, so that if you change partners, it is more likely that you are compatible. Re-rack gear only after the second has anchored in. Clip a sling to the haul loop on your pack with the other end clipped to your harness to prevent dropping your pack when removing it. The second can carry pieces deemed extra to relieve some of the weight on the leader. Consider using cams instead of nuts—they can be faster to place and remove.

ROPE MANAGEMENT

Rope management is one of the most time-consuming tasks in multi-pitch climbing. Beginners often find the ropes tangled in hopeless messes, and spend valuable time flaking and re-flaking ropes. If two climbers are swapping leads, it simplifies the process. The first leader ascends and sets an anchor that includes a tie-in point for the second. The second follows, pulling and re-racking pro. The first leader stacks or flakes the rope on the belay stance, with the second's tie-in ending up on top of the pile. Upon reaching the belay, the second anchors, gets all the gear, and continues on. Since the rope has been piled up with the second's tie-in on top, there will be no problem when the second continues. The first leader is now the second. This process continues all the way up.

In the scenario where one person is doing all the leading, that person ascends and sets an anchor that includes a tie-in point for the second. The second follows, pulling and re-racking pro. The leader stacks or flakes the rope on the belay stance, with the second's tie-in ending up on top of the pile. Upon reaching the belay, the second anchors and gives all the gear back to the leader. Now, the leader's end of the rope is under the pile and it must be re-flaked in order to prevent time-consuming rope tangles. This is usually complicated by the small amount of room on the belay ledge. There may not be enough room to re-flake. The leader should prepare for this eventuality.

Another option is to untie the leader's rope and retie it to the belayer, then untie the belayer's rope and retie it to the leader. Always leave one end tied in until the other is completely transferred, then do the other end. This technique avoids the re-flaking problem, but the team must go through the standard checks of each other prior to each pitch, and there is always the risk of introducing an error.

The leader can loop the rope back and forth over a leg or through a sling, effectively "piling" or "flaking" the rope sideways, so the bottom is on the right and the top is on the left. This is more effective if the leader makes smaller loops at the beginning and larger loops as the second comes up, preventing the loops from getting caught in each other and tangling as the rope is fed out again. If the leader can transfer the whole rope pile without jumbling it up, the leader's end of the rope will just come off one end of the pile. On long face pitches with no place to wedge the rope, it is possible to just let the excess rope hang so it is not jumbled in a pile, but this is usually not feasible. Most of the time, there is too much risk of getting the rope stuck and causing a delay in freeing it.

TAKING CARE OF GEAR

Consider using a chest harness for the extra gear. A big wall chest harness is usually designed to double as a weight-bearing chest harness, or one which will help keep you upright in a fall. There are three advantages: it helps keep you upright in a fall; it carries the rope higher and allows faster clipping, since the first pull of the rope has already been done; and it distributes your gear better. One disadvantage is that since the rope is carried higher, falls are slightly longer.

All gear should be anchored at all times. It is easy to knock something off and there may be no way to recover it. This includes water bottles, climbing gear, excess clothing, packs and anything you are carrying.