

Publication: Jnl Final Edition 8/2005-today; Date: Aug 7, 2008; Section: Go!; Page: C1



HIKE WITH A VIEW

Scenic Half Dome climb turns tougher in the final 440 feet, where one slip-up can prove deadly

By Glen Rosales For the Journal

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. — Up there, mercilessly, two lengths of steel cable some 440 feet in length await.

Before that, however, the trail to Half Dome winds in and around through some of the most beautiful scenery imaginable.

Crashing waterfalls. Eye-popping cliffs. Majestic mountains.

And the looming cables.

Half Dome

Afternoon shadows fall early, blanketing Yosemite Valley in a twilight.

At the head of the valley, however, Half Dome gleams as a beacon in the sun, holding the light until well into the gloaming.

"This is my favorite time of day," says Jessica Wright, who lives with her family within the park's borders. Their back yard, like the rest of the valley, is dominated by Half Dome.

"I love it in the afternoon when it gets dark and quiet, but Half Dome is still all lit up."

We were sitting on a patch of grass adjacent to a meadow, slowly watching the shadows creep up the side of the iconic symbol of Yosemite. The next day, it was my plan to be standing on top of the 8,836-foot granite monolith.

Just about any Yosemite visitor who's put Vibram sole to trail has yearned to reach the top.

The wonders of the valley unfold to the visitor as soon the car pops out of Wawona Tunnel. On the right, Bridalveil Falls careens down a cliff side. On the left, majestic El Capitan captivates the true climbers. Through the middle, the Merced River carves its meandering path.

And commanding it all, Half Dome beckons.

It's far from the highest point in the park. But most of the park's more than 2 million annual visitors never see the 13,000-plus-foot peaks that dot the skyline of the

backcountry. They'll instead see Half Dome rising 4,800 feet vertical feet from the valley floor.

The elevation gain, however, is just one part of the equation to reach the top of Half Dome. Depending on one's route, it's from 14 to 16 weary miles round trip.

But What a Trip

Starting off well before dawn, a headlamp illuminating the path ahead, the trail first approaches Vernal Falls, where the decision must be made. Continuing straight up takes hikers on the Mist Trail, with its countless, steep steps, a precursor for the final approach to Half Dome. The longer but more gentle Muir Trail switchbacks up a cliff side.

I opt for the Mist Trail, so named because of the spray cast by Vernal Falls, which coats the trail and all passersby with a thick film of chilly water. Fueled by a heavy snow, the water crashes over the falls, dropping 317 feet. The footing is slick, but the trail is virtually empty. Next stop on the Grand Staircase is Nevada Falls, which cascades a dizzying 594 feet. The trail diverts through a crack in the cliff face, topping out above the thundering water.

The trail next visits Little Yosemite Valley, a veritable parking lot of tents.

Here I meet two companions from Albuquerque, Chris and Jami Gallegos, business owners who are in Yosemite as part of the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's Hike for Discovery fundraising program. We all got there early specifically so we could conquer the siren's call.

We head up for the final 3½ miles with nervous anticipation, wondering just what the cable system had in store for us.

Final Switchbacks

At one point on the approach through a maze of switchbacks, the cables pop into view, as do the climbers hauling themselves hand over hand, pausing occasionally to rest against the wooden blocks bolted into place on the sheer granite.

We gulp and keep going, fighting the urge to turn around.

The urge quickens upon reaching the base, where a stack of used gloves awaits anyone who failed to bring a pair. Before losing our nerve, we begin the laborious process of climbing. It's rough and brutal, made ever more so by the knowledge that to lose one's grip meant a fatal slide into oblivion.

At the slickest, most-vertical spot, the wooden, cheater boards are missing, forcing us to grunt through about 30 feet.

Finally, however, we reach the top and gaze out over the valley with satisfaction, not wanting to think about the next seven miles down, starting with the most-difficult 440 feet any hiker would want to encounter.

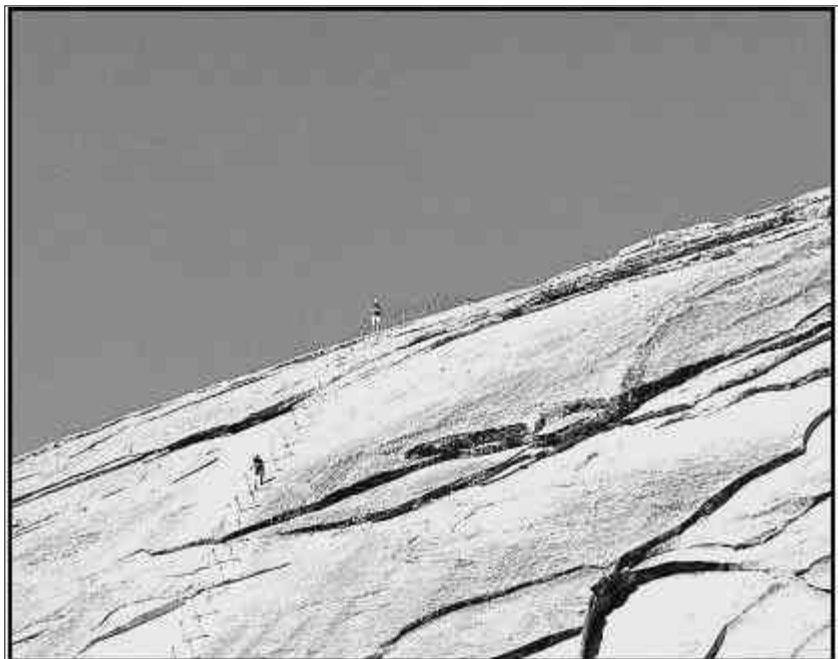




Above, the sun shines on the back of Half Dome.



GLEN ROSALES/FOR THE JOURNAL Top left, Jami Gallegos of Albuquerque, front, nears the bottom of the cable system that helps hikers climb the final 440 feet to the top of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



GLEN ROSALES/FOR THE JOURNAL Hikers haul themselves up the final 440 feet of Half

Dome via a system of cables and wooden blocks bolted to its surface.



GLEN ROSALES/FOR THE JOURNAL The dizzying view from atop Yosemite National Park's Half Dome.

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