

OUTDOORS

# An Obsession of Epic Proportions

An intimate look at Yosemite National Park's big wall climbing community, and what it takes to get to the top.

WORDS BY RACHEL SAMPSON, PHOTOGRAPHY BY DREW SMITH





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“**WHAT DO MOST** people misunderstand about the climbing community, and about your pursuits up El Cap?” I pose the question to Lance Colley in Yosemite National Park as cirrus clouds gently gather above the 3,000-foot monolith. We are in the meadow just across the road from its base, where visitors and climbers alike can kick back and gawk at this famed piece of granite in all its glory. It is not lost on me that I'm back here on this perfect May morning, this time to dig into what's behind the fire in my friend's eyes. Lance has ascended El Capitan 29 times in just under three years, setting three speed records along the way.

“Like, everything,” he says. “I feel like that's why some climbers probably don't like to be interviewed — no one wants to be called weird.” I have to laugh at his deadpan delivery. He is probably right. Many people are quick to tether words like daredevil, adrenaline, or even crazy to those who quest up big walls. But this couldn't be further from the truth for the elite few who have committed their blood, sweat, and tears to the pursuit of excellence. For those who have the tenacity to push the limits of what they love, the extraordinary can become ordinary — another day or multiday adventure into this vertical world.

I first visited Yosemite in 2016, and have returned each year since, whether for a weekend or a month. Innately and inexplicably, it has always felt like coming home, and it is no different this time as I pass through the gates. This place is alive. It's a sacred valley for the Southern Sierra Miwok Indigenous Nation, historic ground for a lineage of climbers who have made their mark pushing the limits of human potential, and an ecosystem held up by myriad National Park Service employees — biologists, hydrologists, archeologists, geologists, wilderness rangers, firefighters, animal caretakers, and packers, to name but a few. There is a lot of passion within this community, one that has both captured my imagination and embraced me.

Jamming my hands and feet inside the deep, aesthetic cracks that split lines down Yosemite's granite rock faces always gives me great joy too, as I've made my way up 16 pitches, or sections, of the rock to get to the top of a gorgeous route. I have climbed 12 routes in the park. But I have never climbed El Capitan — because it is so much more than climbing.

A big wall as long and demanding as this one requires a mastery of systems to aid you as you go, utilizing tools to stand on and devices to pull up on when sustained sections of the wall might be nearly blank or overhanging. And with aid climbing, as it's called, there's also the matter of hauling bags up behind you, packed with hundreds of pounds of food, water, and gear to sleep on the wall for what takes a group, on average, four days.

“I think what really shuts people down on these walls is being able to organize all this different stuff and transition



El Capitan peeking through the clouds on a beautiful fall day in Yosemite.

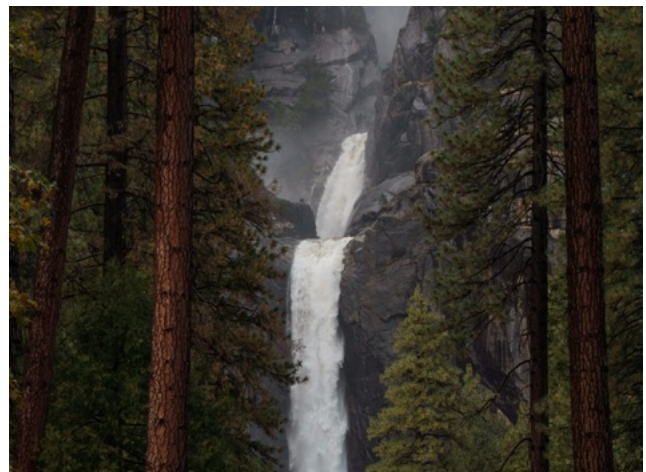
from one thing to the next,” Matt Bernstein tells me, “because there are all these micro tasks. But you just learn that by being here.” I’ve just emerged from the cocoon of my 20-year-old van, which spent a winter without me hibernating in the park, when I meet Matt. He’s another climber for whom Yosemite has become home. These days, he’s just as happy foraging for mushrooms in the park as he is big walling. His enthusiasm now comes in equal measure when engaging with the public’s curiosity about climbing, through outreach and education, or even a guided walk to the base of El Cap. As I quickly stir the hot water in my dehydrated oatmeal and blueberry crumble so it can work its magic, I too head back over to the base.

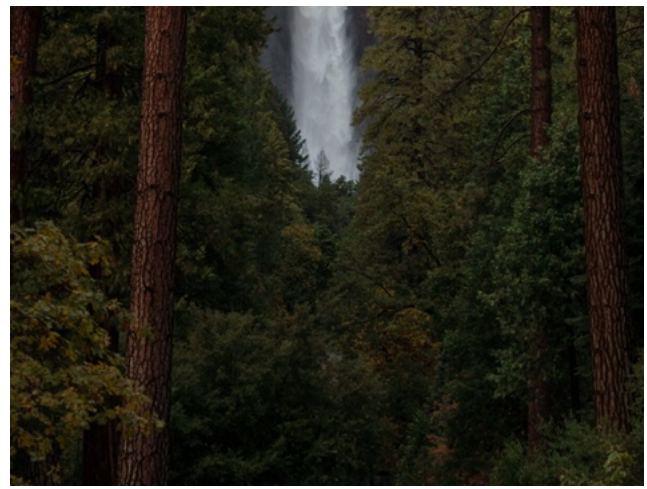
### **The Local: Lance Colley**

For Lance, climbing El Cap about six years before living here was eye-opening. “I just got totally smacked down, and didn’t even make it up two pitches. People were flying past, we broke our haul line — the rope used to bring up our bags — and I was just totally overwhelmed. But I’m really glad I got shut down because it forced me to go home, decide if I really wanted to climb it, and then come back.”

When Lance did come back as a newly hired campground ranger in the spring of 2018, the valley was flooded; the park even shut down for a

couple days due to the storm. But he soon met the partner he’d make his first ascent on El Cap with a year later, who was also eagerly scoping out one of the smaller cliffs that’s usually first to dry — a clue that he’d found a kindred spirit in stoke.





Lower Yosemite Falls.

Siebe Vanhee and Sébastien Berthe prepare to climb El Capitan, Yosemite Valley, Camp 4.

I first met this bright-eyed former ranger then, before he'd ever done that first big wall ascent. This stoke — that's climber-speak for boundless excitement — was already apparent in the signature Cheshire grin for which he is known. It is an enthusiasm and drive that had him summitting Mt. Rainier with his dad at 14, or fishing for hours and hours a day as a kid until he was dragged away from the pier.

“It kind of goes back to redefining your ordinary. It was like, if I want to climb El Cap, big, big things need to become ordinary. It needs to feel normal to go out and climb all these smaller walls before I can climb this. As I progressed, I really kind of had to sit down and identify, okay, these are the weaknesses. This is why I'm failing. And really focus on those things.”

That singular focus, despite plenty of trial and error, and even a broken back, has seen him join the ranks of YOSAR, the elite Yosemite Search and Rescue Team. It has turned that first trip up El Cap in 2019, via the Nose, into nearly 30 ascents via 16 different routes on this wall. (The Nose is El Capitan's most striking route, the prow that your eye gravitates to in photos, the route that a climber generally comes here to seek out, if but once in a lifetime.) Many of these climbs he now does in a day — three of them in a matter of hours, to break Yosemite's speed-climbing records. And now, due to his niche skills, he also climbs El Cap for the park's biologists, to try to pinpoint where bats roost.

“Aid climbing is a puzzle,” he says of this incredible effort spent exploring one rock in such a condensed and concentrated amount of time. “I try to imagine my brain is this puzzle-solving machine, and El Cap challenges it. It feels good to overcome it as the routes get harder and you have to figure out the pitches with the gear you have.”



Brette Harrington climbing pitch 25 of El Corazon, a 31-pitch route on El Capitan.

I find it poignant that this friend has found his home, and has surrounded himself with people who have enabled him to draw from a well of potential. “If you want to get good at something, you have to surround yourself with the best,” he says. Brandon Adams, a former climbing ranger in the community, is one such person for Lance. Together they broke the speed record on a route called Aurora, taking 11 hours off the previous record and completing it in 13 hours and 2 minutes. About this, Lance says, “When Brandon and I climbed Aurora, that was a moment for me of, ‘Whoa, Brandon has set the standard so high. There’s someone who thinks, what’s next? And he’s doing it.’ It was inspiring to see that I don’t have to climb walls the way everyone else does. What normally takes a week to climb, we climbed it in 13 hours.”

“Admit it — you feel like a bit of a badass, don’t you?” I ask Lance as we both gaze upward, our eyes tracing the lines of El Cap. “Sure,” he says, “I feel like a badass when I realize that I’ve done something on this earth faster than anyone else, ever, has.” He goes on to make such a simple statement that it’s striking: “Ideally, we shouldn’t set limits for ourselves. If you set a limit for yourself, you’re done. That’s as high as you can go. Or as far as you can go.”

**The Artist: Rhiannon Klee Williams**

“It kind of goes back to redefining your ordinary. It was like, if I want to climb El Cap, big, big things need to become ordinary.”

The first time I crossed paths with [Rhiannon Klee Williams](#) in Yosemite, she was free soloing past me on another classic cliff in the park, called Royal Arches. As in, climbing without a rope. I know because I was most certainly attached to a rope. I became that person — out loud, I’m pretty sure — who utters, “Whoa, is that woman free soloing?” as she passed. Now, sitting down for a coffee beside the park’s picturesque Rangers’ Club, we talk about that moment.

“I really like that headspace of being so present — you can’t entertain the thought of fear and falling. You’re just hyperfocused. The difference is if I had a rope, I might entertain that because then you think, oh, there’s a rope, I can fall. But with soloing, you can’t fall. So I don’t think about it.” The stark simplicity in the way she puts it gives me new clarity into a mindset that I’ve always been fascinated by. Free soloing is a very personal, quiet practice for those who do it, and Rhiannon, in her words, is “extremely comfortable” on this particular route, after many past hours of climbing it *with* a rope.

She, too, certainly remembers how the big walls humbled her. The first time she and a partner attempted a full ascent of El Cap, it didn’t go as planned. “We basically messed up lowering out [a way to move sideways across the wall by lowering down, then across]. I ran out of lower-out line and I had to let go. And I just slammed into a corner really, really bad. I tore ligaments in my ankle. We spent the night on the wall and then bailed.” But she tells me it didn’t deter her. “I think I just realized that we weren’t prepared enough. You go through this period where a lot of things can go wrong and most people can get through it, and sometimes things do go wrong. It’s kind of a dangerous learning curve. So I messed up. It wasn’t the climbing; it’s the systems.”

I ask her why she climbs and what makes her feel most alive. Her answer makes me smile: “Definitely questing, questing into the unknown. Being in wild places. I feel like, especially as an artist, I’m very moved by the visual aesthetic of being in the mountains.” I’ve admired Rhiannon’s [art](#) for a while now, which lately has come in the form of large, intricate landscape paintings that take two to three months to complete, mostly of the iconic climbing areas in which she spends her time. She works in watercolors, which travel well up the big walls with all those gallons of water.

“When I’m up there and just painting for myself, it’s more about getting the essence of what I’m feeling and merging that with the thing I’m looking at.” Her creative process certainly informs her climbing process. What I soon learn is that our talk comes on the heels of another wild adventure on El Cap over the last days, an adventure she alone was on. As in, without a partner. This is another type of soloing called rope soloing. It is done through a set



of highly specialized techniques to rig the ropes and gear for support.

“It’s always been something that I’ve been intrigued by. I just like intense experiences. And so there’s nothing more intense than questing up a wall by yourself. It’s the kind of thing again, where you can’t mess up, or if you do, you have to get yourself out of the situation. Just like with watercolors; it’s so parallel. You just have to go for it and you have to go where it takes you — adapt and get creative if you make a mistake.”

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### The Photographer: Drew Smith

When I FaceTime Drew ahead of my Yosemite trip, the soft-spoken

and humble climber-photographer is packing for a three-week expedition to Baffin Island with the North Face team. Baffin, in the Arctic, is one of those last bastions of pristine wilderness, where first ascensionists can still ski new lines and scale new peaks.

Drew started bringing his camera on adventures at the suggestion of his brother, who saw that climbing was taking him to all kinds of wild places. His photography career now has him on the road much of the year, but Yosemite remains a central place to his story, with all the history, friendship, and loss that comes with it. Like Lance, Drew was part of YOSAR's lineage during his years in the park. We talk about this niche pursuit within the bubble of the valley. "When you go hang out in Yosemite, with Lance and those guys, you're like, oh, man, El Cap is just like going and doing a route. That's how it was when I lived on this search and rescue team. You'd go do El Cap in a day. You couldn't brag about it, or let's say, it wasn't a big deal. But just to be on the team — everybody was so motivated. You're climbing as much as you can around these people you've looked up to."

I ask him what makes El Cap so singular, with all the other places his camera and climbing have now taken him. "If I imagine the perfect photo, El Cap has it all. Talented, motivated climbers and a sheer granite face with breathtaking exposure. Compared to other big walls around the world, it's very accessible. Within two hours from parking my car, I can be on top rappelling in and shooting."





Part of the Salathe Wall on El Capitan.

“The most badass cliff on earth,” as Lance had called it, is incredibly accessible indeed, just a quarter mile off the same road that all of us, millions of tourists per year, must drive in order to enter and exit the park. But as Drew reiterates, “You get just a couple of pitches off the ground and you feel like you’re out there, you know?”

A fun fact from one of Yosemite’s backcountry wilderness rangers: By very definition, this is true. The walls within the park are themselves designated wilderness, with the wilderness boundary just 200 vertical feet above the floor of the valley. And from 3,000 feet above, if you were to drop something off the top of El Cap

(don't), nothing would encumber its straight, clean fall all the way to the ground. That's exposure. Exposure is a feeling, one I finally understood once here, dangling in space on a rope nine millimeters thick on some of Yosemite's other towering granite walls. It's when you not only see but also really feel all the air around you.

### **The Pro: Brette Harrington**

I connect with [Brette Harrington](#) as she, too, is about to join Drew on an expedition to the Arctic. But for now, the sun is shining brightly across her screen in the Front Range of Colorado. The North Face athlete is hard to categorize for those who have the impulse, as she moves between all the different styles of climbing at an exceedingly high level — big walls, sport climbing, alpinism, and more. She is, in her own words, likely the most prolific female first ascensionist. “People can't really understand what type of athlete I am because I do so many things. And I think that is the one thing people don't understand — the value of having multiple skills.”

Five minutes into our conversation, I sense her quiet power, and already can't wait to see how she'll continue to further the sport. For now, Baffin Island will see her skiing new terrain with some of her fellow North Face teammates — Christina Lusti, Emily Harrington (not related), and Hilaree Nelson. It will be cold, and

she might get to see narwhals again. But California, Lake Tahoe specifically, is home, and I ask her, too, why El Cap stands apart from all the extreme places she's been.

“There are these big walls all around the world. Baffin Island is full of big walls. It's the mecca for big wall climbing, but you can't access them because of the sea ice. And it's so cold, you can't climb there until summer; but then in summer, the ice melts up, so it's really challenging to get there. Whereas Yosemite is right there in California. It's so pleasant, just so beautiful. Even if you get caught in rainstorms, you're right off the road. And you can just try really hard in really nice conditions. Looking out over the valley is really special.”

“ ‘I now see that as long as the mind is taking you somewhere that's creative, and new, and motivating, and if you're drawn towards it, then it's worth doing.’ ”

Brette is one of only a handful who have also free climbed routes on El Cap. That is, she has executed all the moves to the top through only the strength and dexterity of her hands and feet, no aid. She tells me she's felt lucky in knowing what she's wanted from a young age. Some of her foundation was built along with climber Marc-André Leclerc. He lost his life to an avalanche, but his spirit is captured with poignancy in the Sports Emmy-winning film, [The Alpinist](#), where Brette features too. “What was cool about Marc-André is that we climbed together all the time in Squamish. So we had done tons of alpine climbing together, alpine soloing, and then

rock climbing, hard multipitch climbing. So we trusted each other's minds, understood our analytical ways of thinking. Marc-André knew systems so well. He was like a scientist. And he knew the way that I processed was really logical, and that I thought things through."

With her focus and pursuit of excellence, I wonder about her interactions with those back on the ground. "I've met so many people who have found an equal passion for whatever that pursuit is in different ways. I've been reading a bunch of books about adventure, and big ship voyages and shipwrecks. Learning about the mentality that it took for people to go out on these big adventures is equally as impressive. I now see that as long as the mind is taking you somewhere that's creative, and new, and motivating, and if you're drawn towards it, then it's worth doing." (I had to know what she was reading: "In the Heart of the Sea" by Nathaniel Philbrick. She said it was the wildest adventure she'd ever heard of.)



After a week attempting to free climb the route ground up, Eric Bissell nears the top of the Salathe Wall on El Capitan.

### **The Teacher: El Capitan**

I realize that I am often at home in Yosemite's meadows and in

these communities because of a certain spirit I feel reflected in — among those who go for it, who see the big picture and design their lives to pursue that which speaks to them, who keep learning about themselves along life’s journey.

It was Lance who first likened El Cap to a teacher, a place to go figure things out, or realize you have nothing figured out at all. “We have our haul bags of all the random crap we bring up the wall, but we also have our emotional haul bags that we carry with us. And those are the thoughts and fears, anxieties and regrets, and all the things that weigh us down. If we can empty them, we can climb from a lighter place.”

The wall is simply a place that quickly puts you in an intense headspace by virtue of consequence, of needing to focus, trust yourself, and deal with fear. “I don’t even *not* like scary moments,” Rhiannon had said to me. “I just think that’s part of it. There’s almost always one point that I have on the wall where I think, This is so hard. I’m ready to be off of this thing. And then as soon as I get up and off it, I’m ready for more. I bet everybody has had these times where they wonder ‘Why am I doing this?’”

Getting through an epic experience certainly sticks with me far more than the moments of questioning. And as I’ve looked up to those around me when trying to bridge the gap in my mind between climbing in Yosemite and climbing El Cap, I’ve recalled something said to me by Alexa Flower, another woman in this community who has served on both YOSAR and as a climbing ranger. “When I first started rock climbing, I never thought there would come a time when I would spend multiple days on the side of El Cap climbing to the summit. I didn’t think that I had that ability, physically or mentally. It’s hard to put into words how powerful that experience is — to do something that you perceive is impossible.”

My own memories in the park rush over me, as does the sound of the Merced River at its fullest in spring. I roll the window down even further to take in the smell of the firs and the pines as I continue along the loop, where El Cap will soon reveal itself. I enter the bottleneck of tourists who abandon all semblance of driving at this point to crane their necks and snap photos. I’m just as guilty, every time. When you spend extended periods of time here like I do, it’s easy to lose sight of the majesty. Some of these incredible people who have made this big wall home agree that they have to jolt themselves into a reminder of what they’re doing and seeing every day. As Lance put it, “Sometimes we need to join the first-timer in the park freaking out in front of El Cap and remember to freak out with them,” letting the wonder of Yosemite wash over all of us. ●



The view from the top: Alexa Flower walking off El Capitan after 3 days on a route called New Dawn.

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Our Contributors

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Rachel Sampson is a freelance writer and editor based between New York and Berlin. She has worked on books, magazines, and travel guides for clients such as Random House, Monocle, Gestalten, Verso Books, T Brand, and Apple. She is currently a contributor and copy editor at Departures.

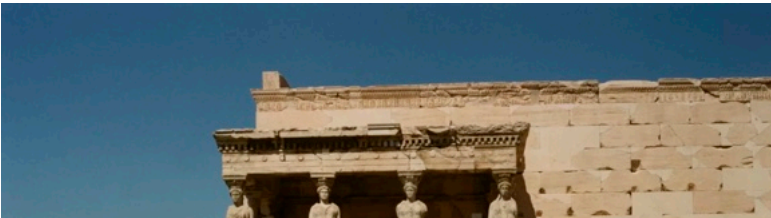
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### Drew Smith Photographer

Drew Smith is a photographer, brand ambassador, and mountain athlete for top outdoor brands. Growing up on a ranch in central Montana, he translated his hands-on work ethic into the fields of commercial fishing, fighting wildfires, and Yosemite Search and Rescue. After more than a decade of first-ascent expeditions from Patagonia to the Arctic, he has cultivated his passion for being on both sides of the lens of adventure photography.

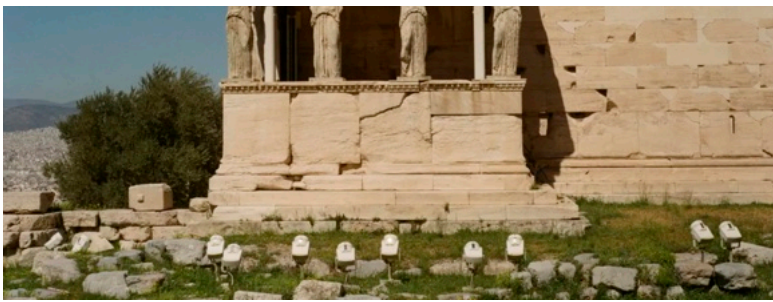
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