



Yosemite Expedition 2023: Report

Imperial College London

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1. Introduction

1.1. Aims and Objectives

This expedition was logistically very similar to the 2022 Yosemite Expedition. This involved flying to San Francisco on Sept 1st, hiring a car and driving to Yosemite Valley, and climbing there for six weeks before going home. Jake and Alex needed to get back to university, so flew back on the 24th and 28th respectively, George and Chorley stayed until the 10th Oct and Olly until the 2nd Nov.

This expedition had the following aims:

- Further develop more advanced big wall and aid climbing skills, which can be disseminated into the club allowing even more adventurous expeditions involving remote first ascents in the future.
- Improve our free climbing skills on features uncommon in the UK including: crack climbing (especially wide cracks) and granite friction slabs.
- Get everyone on the expedition to climb El Capitan at least once.
- Make a short video about the expedition.
- Get home safely.

1.2. The Team

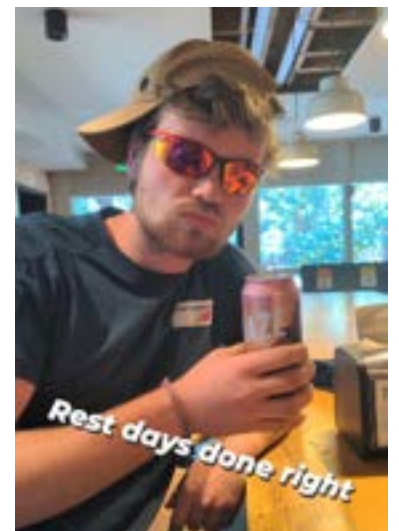
Oliver “Skill and Power” Tippett (24) – Graduated MEng Mechanical Engineering 2022

- Led Trad E8, Sport 8a, Alpine TD+ and Aid A4.
- Climbed half a dozen big walls including routes on El Capitan, Half Dome, The Stawamus Chief, and Washington Column.
- Climbed Zodiac (5.6 A3) on El Capitan solo over 5 days.
- Imperial College Mountaineering Club President 2021/22
- Qualified outdoor first aider Level. 3
- Expedition experience in Les Ecrins in 2021 and Yosemite in 2022
- Tom Evans said I had skill and power.
- Expedition Aim: The Shield (5.6 A3)



Chorley “Catch my jumars” King (22) – 4th Year Aeronautical Engineering

- Led Trad E3, Sport 7a+, Aid A2
- Multi pitch Trad experience around the UK and Europe
- Scottish winter mountaineering experience
- Alpine routes upto AD+



- Climbed two Yosemite big walls (El Capitan and Washington Column as well as other Yosemite multipitches)
- Expedition to Yosemite in 2022
- Expedition Aim: The Shield (5.6 A3)

George “The Rope” Gunn (22) – 4th Year Design Engineering

- Led Trad E1, Sport 6c, Aid A0, and bouldered 6C.
- Multipitch Trad experience in the UK
- Multipitch sport experience in Europe on routes up to 350m 6a
- Alpine mountaineering experience at Grade AD
- Winter mountaineering experience in Scotland
- Imperial College Mountaineering Club President 22/23 & Vice President 21/22
- Level 3 Outdoor first aid
- Portaledge and hauling experience
- Expedition Aim: The Nose (5.8 C2)



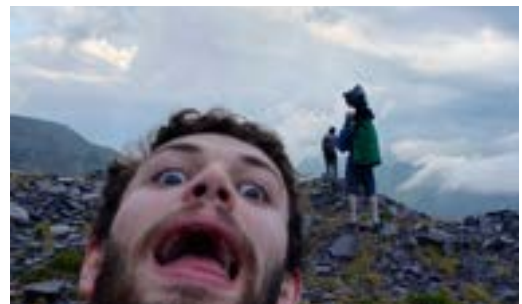
Alex “The Youth” Weir (19) – 1st Year Geology with a Year Abroad:

- Led trad E1, Sport 7a+, Aid A1
- Multi-pitch trad experience in UK and Chamonix
- Multi-pitch sport experience in Canadian Rockies and Europe (up to 6b)
- Experience on long alpine mountaineering routes at grade D+
- Ski mountaineering and steep skiing experience in Chamonix
- Expedition aim: The Nose (5.8 C2)



Jake “JCB” Lewis (23) – PhD in High Speed Aerodynamics:

- Led trad HVS, bouldered 7A, led Scottish Winter II
- Multi-pitch trad experience in UK and Alaska
- Alpine routes up to AD
- Got halfway through an A1 aid route (The Bat, Dovedale) and didn't completely hate it
- Remote expedition experience in Alaska, including glacier camping
- Level 3 Outdoor First Aid
- Expedition aim: The Shield (5.6 A3)



2. The Region:

2.1. Geography

Yosemite National Park is located roughly 170 km east of San Francisco, California. The UNESCO world heritage site is largely forested, being directly next to the Ansel Adams, Hoover, and Emigrant Wilderness'. One of Yosemite's main features (and of great interest to us) are the abundant large Granite faces and domes lining the valleys and canyons, cut from the Sierra Nevada Batholith by past glaciers, rock formations unlike any of those in the UK provide the perfect environment to develop our big wall techniques. Other notable geographic features of the park include a few relatively small glaciers (the largest of which being the Lyell glacier), as well as a collection of streams, rivers, and waterfalls that feed large river systems including the Tuolumne and Merced which drain large portions of the park.



2.2. Weather

The autumn is in some ways considered the ideal time of year to climb in Yosemite Valley, as temperatures are cooler than in the summer, but the routes are for the most part dry, as opposed to spring when they may still be receiving run-off. The main downside of climbing in autumn is that forest fires can lead to smokey conditions, but this was only experienced by Olly in the latter part of the expedition, with the others having clear air for the extent of their trip.

While not as hot as summer, temperatures were still high, especially on the exposed sun-trap of El Capitan, reaching around 25-30 degrees C, but feeling hotter when exposed to the sun. To mitigate this we ensured we did not compromise on water, taking at least 3 litres per person per day, as well as an entire day's emergency extra water (above even what we

would estimate as the upper bound for our route time, so if we estimated we'd take 3-4 days on route we would bring 5 days water). Everyone also wore sunshirts while climbing in the day, loose fitting UV protective garments with hoods to keep the sun off.

The other challenge with weather was precipitation and storms. While not particularly common, these can be very serious, with retreat often mandatory, especially on routes such as Lurking Fear (see later) where crack systems can turn into very dangerous waterfalls. A constant check was therefore carried out on the weather forecast (again see Lurking Fear later), using primarily Windy due to its ability to compare multiple forecasts. Due to the complex topography of Yosemite Valley, accurately predicting precipitation is a challenge for most weather models. We ended up using the ECMWF 9km model for medium-range forecasts, then switched to the higher resolution (to better resolve the terrain) NAM 5km and HRRR CONUS 3km models for short-range forecasts - we always compared across multiple forecasts and erred on the side of caution. This meant we were always prepared for bad weather, and led to many decisions we would later not regret, such as retreating from Lurking Fear, and choosing to climb the rain-protected Tangerine Trip. Even on routes where there was no forecasted bad weather, we always brought storm gear and synthetic belay jackets, just in case.

3. Logistics

3.1. Travel and Documentation

The largest and most accessible airport to Yosemite National Park is San Francisco International, a four-hour drive away from the park; team members flew to and from there. Team members applied for ESTAs to travel to the USA, which cost \$14 and allowed them to stay up to 90 days.

For transport in America, we hired an SUV on the Turo app. We did this since it was much cheaper to hire than a similarly sized car from a conventional rental company. It was a 4-hour drive (190 miles) from San Francisco to Yosemite. Normally a car pass is needed for Yosemite National Park, which costs \$70, but it turned out the pass bought for last year's expedition had not yet expired, saving some money. Free buses operate in Yosemite Valley which we used whilst there rather than driving the car. The car was not large enough to fit all members and gear in at once, so on the way out to the valley George and Chorley took public transport, and when Alex and Jake left they took public transport back.

3.2. Food and Supplies

Buying food in Yosemite Valley was expensive so we did a large shop on the way to the valley and used the Village Shop in the valley for when we ran out of things. We also drove to the shop in Mariposa twice over the expedition when we ran out of longer lasting food.

Food was stored in bear boxes whilst camping. In terms of eating on big walls, for shorter routes we ate cold food and did not take a stove (sometimes accidentally). On longer routes when we were hauling significant amounts of food and water, we took a stove and a homemade hanging kit. A standard wall food day looked something along the lines of a muffin/cinnamon roll for breakfast, pork scratchings for lunch, and either instant noodles with tuna or cold tinned ravioli for dinner. These were calorie dense options minimising weight while still giving us the energy needed. In particular the instant noodles with tuna, as recommended by Andy Kirkpatrick, worked well, as the water could be drunk as a kind of soup, and then the noodles ate with the tuna, meaning the water would not be wasted in cooking. Later on in the expedition, a builders bucket was transformed into the "Grub tub" by melting holes in the side using Jake's nutkey that he left behind and suspending it below the haul bags which created a hard shell to prevent the upsetting liquification of the muffins and pork scratchings.

5 months in advance, we booked a campspot for every night planned in the valley in either Upper or North pines campgrounds. For the latter half of the expedition we were joined in the campsite by some Germans (Reinney, Leon and Magda) who not only made the camping cheaper for George, Chorley and Olly, but provided a good level of entertainment and good vibes too.

3.4. Pre-Expedition Training

Olly and Chorley only needed a refresher, having spent the previous summer climbing in Yosemite, but Jake, George and Alex were complete novices, so decided to do some training beforehand. Jake started this off by reading all 478 pages of Andy Kirkpatrick's Higher Education in less than a week, but then realised he'd almost immediately forgotten everything he read, and that the only way to properly learn to aid climb was to do it. Olly approached Westway Climbing Centre to see if one of their lead routes could be aided/jumared/hailed. Westway understandably weren't too keen to have some students potentially lobbing ascenders/haulbags from the top of the wall onto one of the children's birthday parties common in the centre, but after some of Olly's natural charm/annoyance they eventually relented, although they only let the team aid a route while also on top rope, so the usefulness of this was fairly minimal in the end.



Further training took place in the slate quarries of North Wales, also involving Isaac "Bald Eagle" Blanc, who topoped a tricky pitch of A3 and really enjoyed it, wondering again why he wasn't going to Yosemite before remembering he hated the entire idea of bigwalling. The novice aid climbers attempted to aid lead a 7c sport route, which involved lots of shouting and rage from George, who then put up the portaledge, which led to him being even more rageful, although Jake was secretly impressed because he had absolutely no idea how portaledges worked. Everyone then got some practice jumaring into and out of the portaledge, before Chorley decided it would be funny to take a huge, completely unprompted swing round a sharp slate arete, nicely core-shotting the static rope due to be brought to Yosemite.



Jake got some more aid practice a few weeks later when he led Main Overhang A1 at Llanddulas Cave with lots of encouragement from Olly. This involved a few rivet hangers and some slightly rusty bolts, which made Jake feel very cool and out there, not realising this would be very standard, even easy, for Yosemite. George also got some aid practise at Stoney Middleton, deciding to forget his struggles with bolt ladders and aid on nuts instead, which backfired in spectacular fashion when one blew out of the rock and he took a factor 2 fall onto his lanyards, surprising his sister (belaying) after how chilled out George had made aid belaying sound.

The final aid practice trip took place in Masson Lees Quarry in the Peak District, again aiding a sport route, although Jake and George then went



through the system of fixing ropes and hauling at the top, guided by Chorley. The original aim was to aid an A2 route in the dry-tooling cave, but after one look everyone realised they couldn't be bothered, and went sport climbing instead.

Overall, while more training could have been done, there are no bigwall routes in the UK, and the team felt that the fact they at least knew how the overall bigwalling/aid systems worked meant they could hit the ground running once in the USA. It should be noted that this is more training than either of the previous Yosemite expeditions had done beforehand.

3.5. Permits

A wilderness permit was required for any overnight climbing in the park. These climbing permits are free and there are no quotas or limits. The permits were picked up in person at a kiosk in front of the Yosemite Valley Visitor Centre by very friendly and helpful climbing rangers.

4. Diary

Usually, we would record a day-by-day account of what we did throughout the expedition and have a separate section for the walls we climbed, however this expedition consisted almost entirely of climbing walls with a few rest days between and very few days spent cragging or free climbing. As a result we thought it would be better to just give an account of each wall climbed and any general shenanigans that occurred in between.

Arrival

Jake, George and Chorley all arrived together from London on the same flight feeling quite happy after making good use of the aircraft refreshments and definitely didn't get lost on the SF airport train trying to find the others. Olly arrived from climbing in Squamish where as far as the others could tell he spent a bit of time doing some hard aid soloing, and a lot of time skinny-dipping with Germans. Alex arrived from LA doing who knows what but kept saying things like "Cali brev innit". Finally, the team of English bigwall turbo wads had arrived in the states.



Olly and Alex went to collect the car and then picked up Jake from the airport to start driving to the valley, whilst George and Chorley would take public transport and do a Walmart shop in Merced to be later picked up by Olly. After the large Walmart shop which filled 3 trolleys, the pair waited to be picked up, passing the



time riding trolleys and witnessing the deep and rich culture on offer in the Merced Walmart carpark at 1am.

Upon waking up in arguably one of the most beautiful landscapes in the world, the group went straight inside in search of a caffeine fix. Degnan's Deli, a legendary valley destination remembered fondly by the members of the 2022 expedition would be the first place visited by the group for coffee, cinnamon rolls, electricity and wifi. After this they took a stroll down to visit El Cap and have an explore around the base. This was followed by some beers in the meadow (the so-called "El Cap Lieback (Grade 1, FA 1868)" would become a frequently repeated restday activity).

Still feeling a bit jetlagged, day 2 would be a cragging day and the team headed to Churchbowl tree. Here Olly led the first pitch of "Book of revelations" (5.10d), Alex "Churchbowl Tree" (5.10b), and Chorley led 80% of "More Balls than Brains" (A3) after which he decided he'd done enough of it to tick it and tied into Olly's rope from his route. Turns out he did have more B than B... A passer by commented that it was the first time he'd seen anyone actually leading the route, which was a far cry from Olly's encouragement of "Mate, it's C1 with some duct tape". Jake and George then gave it a top rope before the team headed back for dinner.



Chorley leading "More Balls than Brains" with George spotting from a nearby tree

Lost Arrow Spire Direct, 5.8 C2+ (Alex and Ollie)

The first wall of the trip was Lost Arrow Spire Direct. It is a fairly moderate 15 pitch route that is blessed with luxurious bivvy ledges and stunning views of Yosemite falls. In a caffeine-fuelled Degnan's trip it seemed like an obvious choice; not too challenging for Alex's first wall but would also provide some fun and adventurous climbing.

The approach to Lost Arrow Spire starts with a long undulating trail that contours the valley side, which then leads into a steep and poorly marked trail. However, a large proportion of this approach can be bypassed by climbing a short multi-pitch called Sunnyside Bench (5.5). Naturally the duo deemed it an excellent idea to solo this with heavy bags filled with ropes and a full aid rack. For a seasoned climber like Ollie this really proved no problem, whereas for



Alex the same could not be said. After Alex's ab-dab, the two decided it was best to simul-climb the rest. The duo made it to the base of the route by mid afternoon and Ollie climbed the first 5.7 pitch with ease. Alex then led the next C2 pitch, which also happened to be his first ever aid lead (unless you count a bolt ladder in the slate quarries). He didn't set any speed records on this pitch, but nonetheless it was climbed without any issues! They then fixed ropes back down to the base and returned to camp just after dark.



The next day the duo got an alpine start and made it to the top of pitch 2, with the haul bag, by 10am. Psych was high to blast off onto the route but pitches 3 and 4 were a mixture of off-width and chimney climbing (possibly Alex's worst nightmare). Yet without hesitation, Ollie linked these two pitches to create a mega 200-foot pitch of chicken winging and squeezing. The next couple of pitches involved some moderate C1 aid intermixed with pendulums that led into mandatory run-out free climbing. By this point on the route, it was clear to both Ollie and Alex that the spire had fairly poor rock quality in parts. Alex then led pitch 7 and proceeded to bounce test every cam on the rack to an inch of their life, you could have suspended a 2-tonne truck off any of those placements! The duo eventually made it to the top of pitch 8 just after dark and were blessed with a glorious bivy ledge (so large that some guidebooks even recommend bringing a two-man tent for it). After rapidly consuming a packet of pork scratchings, some trail mix, a tin of ravioli and a can of beer each they called it a night.



The next morning was a tad cold and windy (a characteristic feature of this route) but after a morning coffee and cinnamon roll Alex led the rivet ladder off the ledge. The duo then swapped leads for the rest of the day and it just so happened that it was Alex's turn to lead the crux pitch (C2+) of the route. While Alex was racking up at the belay it was clear nerves were high, the rock looked a bit loose in areas and gear was a tad thin. But a reassuring "come on youth, it's only C2+ how bad can it



be " from Ollie installed some confidence into Alex and he swiftly got on the sharp end. It was on this lead Alex managed to take a whip whilst trying to cam hook in an expando crack. Yet he was seemingly unphased and quickly finished the pitch off and arrived at the spacious, pitch 12 bivy ledge. The duo stored the haul bag at the ledge and Ollie then fixed the ropes to the top of pitch 14 up some more wide free climbing. They ended the day with another a well-earned can of ravioli and the remnants of the pork scratchings, a luxurious dinner by big wall standards.

They woke up the next morning and wasted no time jumaring up to the top of pitch 14. All that remained was the final pitch to the summit of the spire. Despite the pitch being a reachy bolt ladder, Alex described this pitch as spectacular. The exposure, the noise of Yosemite Falls and the final scramble to the pointy summit made this pitch very memorable. After getting their summit selfie the duo didn't hang about and returned to the bivy ledge to collect their gear and prepare for the abseils back down the route.

The next 4 hours of descending went relatively smooth, with the odd hiccup here and there. To add to the excitement of abseiling down a big wall with a 30-kilo haul bag dangling between your legs, the route still requires you to abseil off a peg and tree anchor. With reflection these anchors were completely 'bomber'. But when there is a few hundred metres of air below you, the sight of a few rusty pegs bound together by a sling didn't fill the duo with confidence! They made it to the base of the route by mid afternoon and after a quick organisation of the haul bag made the dreaded descent back to camp. The steep, scrambling descent combined with a heavy haul bag resulted in Alex losing feeling his big toes for the rest of the trip!



Overall, this wall was extremely successful. Not only did it have fun and adventurous aid climbing, but it also had a spectacular atmosphere with the route being a stone's throw from Yosemite Falls along with the feeling of being on a 450 m tall spire! Most importantly this wall taught Alex that big walling is 'recreational manual labour' as Ollie would put it.



Lurking Fear, 5.6 C2+ (Chorley, Jake and George)

Lurking Fear is considered the easiest route on El Cap with easy/moderate aid, as well as being less intimidating than routes such as the Nose with



(only) 19 pitches and being less steep. However, it is still a grade VI El Cap route so as Jake would say its still “a tricky little number that”. The trio decided this would be an appropriate next step for George and Jake’s bigwalling carrer, with their last wall being a 0 star 7a Masson Lees sport route in the Peak that only took a blistering 3 hours to get up. Spirits were high, and the team was psyched to get on The Captain.



Day 1 was spent fixing the 3 pitches. The approach to LF is known to be the worst of any El Cap route, taking around an hour up sections of steep and loose terrain as well as ascending some fixed lines up some harder scrambling. Ordinarily, this wouldn’t be too bad, but slap on a top heavy haul bag, ropes, and rack and it becomes quite a different task. The trio made it to the base, largely haulbag gunned up by JCB Jake, who had by far the best hill fitness. Above they saw a pair moving fairly quickly up the route and dropped a number 3 cam on the three at the base, but since the team are a noble and kind bunch decided to leave it at the base in case they came back for it. Jake led the first pitch (and his first ever proper aid pitch) which consisted of some C2 “sport hooking” and had some good fun getting in some bathook topsteps, George belayed and Chorley napped under a tree. George took over for the next pitch which consisted of his worst nightmare, a bolt ladder. Over many years George has developed a renowned hatred towards bolt ladders, which although very safe, are usually very reachy making them extremely strenuous if you are below a certain height (which unfortunately George often is). Chorley reasoned that since it was a trade route it wouldn’t be too reachy. “Trust me bro”. With only a couple of power screams, George hooked and reached his way up, making quick work of the pitch, so quick in fact that he made an anchor about 15’ too early due to a confusing topo, but nevertheless the team was doing well and starting to get used to some of the bigwalling systems. Chorley led the “Window Pane Flake” pitch to finish off the day, backcleaning the whole roof to make cleaning quicker which he immediately regretted after discovering that the flake is a bit expando towards the end... This is followed by a reasonably sized penji and some 5.9. They had a bit of an awkward time finding the intermediate rap anchor to set up fixed lines since the topo was simply wrong, but nevertheless made it back to the car just after sundown.



As they were packing up the car, a car pulled up and rolled down its window with none other than the famous speed climber Hans Florine at the wheel! He was super friendly and interested in what we were climbing, and after chatting for a while we found out that it was him on LF and said that we could keep his cam, now known as Cams Florine.



The next day was an earlyish start to catch the first bus to the meadow at around 7am. Once again the approach had to be done with the rest of the haul bags, and they ascended the fixed lines to the top of pitch 3. The pitches climbed this day were mostly fairly straightforward, but pitch 3 would see the last decent ledge for a while and the hauling was heavy and slow (they had to use a 3:1 pulley system the whole way). They made it to the top of pitch 6 just after dark and decided to set up their first hanging camp with Jake and George on the rigid ledge, and Chorley below on the G7. Feeling a bit knackered, they quickly consumed the gallon container which had been filled with pasta the previous day and went to bed.

Despite feeling a bit wrecked from the previous day's work, they woke up the next morning feeling psyched. We are on El Cap! The next pitch is the famous traverse pitch which involved alternating bolts and hooks, traversing around the corner of the west face which Jake led with no problem. The next pitch was led by George and featured a splitter 3"-4" crack for 80'. Due to having only a few of these sizes and the need to leapfrog, this was going to be a runout lead, which George decided to make even more bold by leaving behind one of his number 3s right next to cams florine at the base of the crack and not clip it either. Nevertheless he kept a cool head and pulled off a great lead. Jake and Chorley had a bit of a fatty belay in the meantime, with the bags getting stuck twice as well as the anchor being placed in an incredibly awkward place. Chorley french freed the next splitter 5.10 pitch up onto the pillar of despair (but was very undespaiored about his ability to finally sit down!). He also went on to get pitch 10 done which features a bit of awkward aid and some camhooking, before rapping down to Motel Zed to set up camp, whilst Jake made easy work of the C2+ on pitch 11 with George in high spirits at the belay providing great vibes with the speaker. They were tired, but feeling psyched that they had covered most of the slower aid pitches and the top



was feeling closer! Upon Jake and George's arrival to the camp, Chorley was a beer down and happily napping in his G7. Over noodles however, Jake (the team weatherman) discovered that there was a chance of a storm in two days, which immediately sunk spirits as we would likely still be on the upper pitches. They decided to sleep on it and check the forecast again the next morning and decide on it. Unable to sleep, Jake spent all night reading *Higher Education's* (the big wall bible written by big Andy K) section on rain on a big wall:

"it could be a fight for your life, the most terrifying out there experience you will ever have. It is vital you understand just how exposed you can be on a wall, looking down at the road, tourists driving by, while fighting to survive, and with no way of being rescued in the moment. It is hard to describe how exposed you can feel in such a situation, forced to just take it, like lying in the gutter while being blasted by icy water minute after minute, hour after hour, sometimes day after day. When the storm is all around you, and water is everywhere, there is no down or up, only survival." - *Higher Education, Andy K*

For some reason, the thought of Andy Kirkpatrick sipping a warm mug of hot chocolate by a fire telling this sweet bedtime story for Jake, didn't help him sleep. The next morning, the trio woke up to find the forecast worsening. They pondered whether they could reach thanksgiving ledge, which was more sheltered, however this was still 6 pitches away and LF is known for being one of the worst El Cap routes to be on in a storm, with the pitches above forming a huge funnel that would quickly turn into a waterfall. They decided it wouldn't be worth the risk in case the forecast got even worse or they had any delays, so they decided to bail. The next 6 hours were spent in a horrendous state of faff as they abseiled the route with 3 haulbags, made worse by Chorley forgetting about the existence of docking cords in his 'how to abseil with a haulbag' lesson. Despite the disappointment, the team managed to maintain high spirits for each other, and managed the abs without too many hiccups with only George abbing too far and trying to powerscream pendulum around the whole of El Cap once, and Chorley did nearly muck the pendulum to reverse the traverse pitch after trying to do it with the portaledge and slightly underestimating the size of said pendulum. At the top of pitch 3 they were surprised to come across another team going up despite the weather. They were extremely friendly climbers and the reasoning for them climbing despite the storm became immediately obvious when we discovered they were feeling the height in more ways than one...

"ah guys what happened up there?"

"Have you not seen, theres a big storm coming tomorrow?"



“Ah #*@#~ no way?! Hey Brad, looks like we are getting wet!”

They bailed later that day (Note Brad was made up, I can't remember his name).

After reaching the ground, the three dropped all rack feeling properly beaten up, ate all of their noodles and lay at the base in dehydrated hysteria for two hours. They then prepared for the long hike down with their gear, met at the meadow by Olly with plenty of rehydration supplies where they then preceded to get extra hydrated. To the groups relief, it did indeed heavily rain the next day and they were glad they were off the route. Despite not making it to the top, it was an extremely valuable experience with George and Jake now starting to fully understand big walling systems as well as providing a good refresher for Chorley. They were all now in a very good place to get back on the Cap again soon!

Afroman, 5.6 A3+ (Olly and Chorley)

As a second wall of the trip, Olly and Chorley decided to try Afroman. This is potentially the steepest route in the entire valley, with pitch after pitch of wildly overhanging terrain, before it kicks back even further at the top. Chorley was still recovering from Lurking Fear, but Olly was psyched so went to fix the first couple of pitches solo on day 1. These turned out to be a nice intro pitch, and a horribly overgrown one that involved as much digging as climbing, aptly named “Welcome to the Jungle”. Olly struggled through, and came to realise that the hardest grade in aid climbing isn't A6, but is in fact C2 Grass.

The next day Chorley was fully charged and ready to get on the route. The two charged up the approach and got hauling the bag. This went smoothly due to the steepness, and left Chorley racked up at the base of the Hornyzontal. He dispatched this with minimal struggle whilst Olly blasted appropriate music from the speaker. After turning the roof and continuing up however, the rope got caught in the crack, resulting in terrible rope drag for Chorley as he linked the next half pitch to a good ledge. At the top of his pitch he had to place a few beaks in a row whilst being dragged back down by the rope. He battled through and got to the Astroman bivvy ledge. Olly then finished up pitch 4, hooking and breaking up to the belay, before rappelling back to the bivvy ledge for a well earned kip. That night they ate like kings, feasting on tinned ravioli and drinking a few of the



I want you to be Hornyzontal now!



beers they brought up to help acclimatise to the exposure. Both stayed tied in and neither fell off the ledge.

They woke the next morning, and a quick haul deposited Chorley on "The Quest to the West". After some technical beaking in the first half of the pitch, Chorley was confused at the inaccurate topo. He tried going left on some hooks, but couldn't see the rivets so gave the lead over to Olly, who was also stumped for a while. He continued up, rather than questing to the west where Chorley had tried, then ended up questing to the west higher up. Hooks and horizontal beaks past some loose rock brought him to the belay at the base of the crux "Walk the Line" pitch. This was incredible, being steep so having nothing to hit in a fall but also technical the whole way up. Olly placed almost all his beaks and clipped many fixed heads, with not many cam placements, as he slowly worked his way up the overhanging corner. He eventually made it to their bivvy spot for the night, which was unfortunately right on a massive streak of guano coming from the wide crack above.



Big wall (probably) belaying

What was even less fortunate was that this crack was the next pitch for Chorley. It was named "Piece of Pie" in the guidebook, but we later learned talking to a guide who got the third ascent back in the day that it was also referred to as "The Bat Graveyard", which Chorley found more accurate. It was a unique climbing experience for him to have to dig out skeletons to find good cam placements on which to progress, one that I'm not sure he'd recommend. Olly thought he had got lucky avoiding leading that pitch as he looked up at the seemingly clean A3+ pitch above. He realised his misconception as he entered the C2 grass above. This involved more gardening than the "Welcome to the Jungle" pitch lower down, the worst of which was pulling a bush from out the crack only to discover it was the home of an army of biting ants. They swarmed into his gloves and down his sleeves, and joined all the dirt and grass that had got into his clothes previously. Unfortunately there were no showers at the next belay, so Olly had to take off all his clothes and vigorously brush everything off.



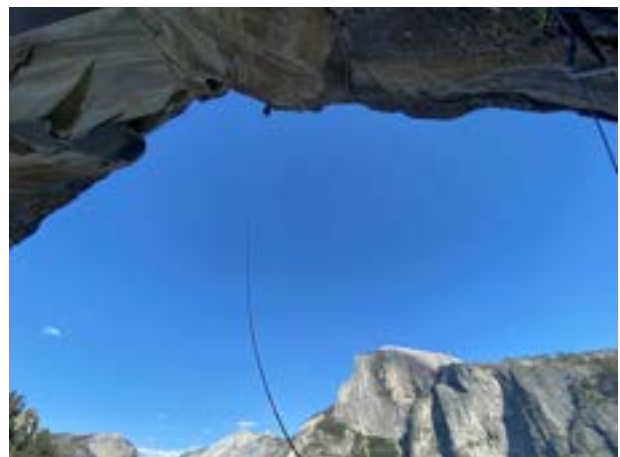
The expando bat graveyard

Due to the steepness of the wall, the two could 'flag' the portaledge. This involved hauling it fully assembled and clipped to the haul line, and allowed them to put it up at each belay quickly and easily. This made the long belays much more comfortable, and it wasn't uncommon for the belayer to have to be woken up by the leader mid pitch. The next pitch was Chorley's and would be his hardest ever at A3, where if a tear rolled off your cheek it'd take 20 seconds to nestle into the dirt 300m below you. He was understandably initiated by "The Tsunami", which looked like a giant wave of golden granite crashing over you with just a barely existent incipient crack as its only weakness. He told Olly that he was hesitant to lead it, to which Olly suggested they have a beer together on the ledge and think about it, after which Chorley could decide. The beer unfortunately didn't inspire Chorley, but it did make the long belay he had to give Olly more enjoyable. It also made him less stressed as Olly screamed an expletive as a beak ripped, sending him falling onto his daisy chain (you're really not supposed to do this) clipped to the smallest cam he owned. This would have put a lot of force on the cam, which thankfully held as there was a long way to fall to the line of beaks below him. Whilst relieved, he was also disappointed in a way to not have experienced such a big fall in a situation where injury was almost impossible as there was nothing to hit on the way down. Olly composed himself and finished the pitch, and the two bivvied at the hanging belay above.



A3+ psyche

The wall had been a hard one for Chorley, being only his 4th big wall and the first to have the unique exposure that comes with the extreme steepness of the wall rather than just the height. It was also his first that couldn't be described as a 'trade route'. Afroman would probably be lucky if it got climbed once every few years, so the placements are more crumbly and less obvious, the cracks are more dirty, and the climbing is generally more tricky. All this was exemplified in the last proper pitch which had an "A1" section involving a blind shallow beak placement through a roof with just small cams between that and the belay. This would have almost certainly been A3 on El Cap, but on such a route the easier pitches are often sandbagged. Chorley struggled to commit to the beak with a fall from it being potentially painful, so Olly took over and climbed to the summit. The two then reorganised their stuff and hiked it over to the Royal Arches rapells. These were followed with only minor incident when the haul line was too short without any rope stretch to make one of the anchors. The 5 minute walk from the base of the raps to the footpath was equally as treacherous for



Riding the Tsunami

Chorley, who was luckily still wearing his helmet when, fully spent, he tripped and fell face first into the ground.

Overall it was a wall of extremes. Extreme steepness, extreme quality in some sections and an extreme lack of quality in others due to the lack of traffic. It was a massively adventurous experience, with many unknowns leading it to be quite mentally taxing. At the same time though, it was also the most relaxing wall either of the two had ever climbed. They normally only led one pitch each per day, and always finished in time to watch the sun set on the face of Half Dome enjoying a few beers and some tunes. It was certainly an experience neither will forget for a long time.

Skull Queen, 5.8 C2 (Jake, George, Alex)

Having spent some time getting their bigwalling systems dialled on previous routes with Olly and Chorley, who at least somewhat knew what they were doing, the three bigwalling novices decided to climb something independently, without being able to fall back on someone else's experience when things got hard. They chose Skull Queen, on Washington Column, due to it being easily accessible, less likely to be as queued as its neighbouring route South Face (popular as a warm-up for The Nose), and featuring lots of aid, good practise for later routes.



Jake on pitch 5

Preparations went well, with all the gear fitting into one haul bag and a rucksack, and the team set off up the easy approach to the base of Washington Column, JCB Jake again taking the haul bag as that played to his best climbing strength (hiking). After a short section of easy scrambling the team got to the base of the first pitch. The first three pitches of Skull Queen are also shared by South Face, leading to the huge "Dinner Ledge", a bivvy for up to 10, which most teams spend the night on before climbing and then abseiling Skull Queen/South Face the following day, spending another night at Dinner Ledge and then continuing to the ground on the third day. This was the trio's plan. Everyone was in great spirits and feeling very competent and strong, until someone decided they wanted a quick snack, which led to the realisation that all of the trail mix had been left back at camp. This comprised all of the team's lunch food, meaning each person was left with 3x cinnamon



buns, 4x packets of instant noodles, and around 2/3rds of a tin of tuna. Not ideal. After much debate and arguing over whose fault it was (still unresolved to this day), the team decided to push on, as the route was fairly low commitment, easily retreatable well before the lack of food would become a problem if necessary.

The first three pitches went quickly, the only event of note being a black Totem cam unclipping itself from Jake's harness and deciding to BASE jump to the ground far below (or so Jake claims...). Dinner Ledge was even bigger than expected, and the team had a quick break before George led off up Pitch 4, the infamous Kor Roof. This is notorious for stopping many underprepared teams due to the difficulties of leading and following through the large overhung section, but George made admirably easy work of it, as did Alex when cleaning. Jake jumared up the free line and headed up Pitch 5 while Alex set up camp below. This pitch started with some small gear excitingly placed around a loose-ish block, before turning into an easy bolt/rivet ladder, although the photo opportunities were fantastic, with Half Dome lit by the evening light in the background. After fixing the ropes Jake abseiled back down, and the three spent a chill evening with some friendly Australians attempting South Face the next day.



The next day started with a horrible hanging jumar, made even worse by rucksacks, but eventually everyone was at the top of Pitch 5. Alex then led the next two pitches, the first of which involved climbing through a tree, and the second a scary bit of chimney climbing which Alex got through in an excellent lead, using a tipped-out number 5 cam. Jake had a horrible time cleaning this when one his jumars clipped itself into a cam deep in the back of the chimney. While this was happening George was going very well, using cam-hooks and other small gear to get through one of the harder aid pitches on the route. Jake then took Pitch 9, probably one of the best aid pitches he led in the valley, a straight-up crack on very small gear (Jake used a #1 brass RP for the first time) into a pendulum leading to a lovely long splitter. Jake enjoyed the pitch so much that he even ate something at the top, as a reward. Alex took the next pitch, as it was marked as "reachy", and he was the only one of the team over average height for an American male. This pitch turned out to be very tricky, with free moves off skyhooks, although Alex potentially made things harder for himself by missing a rivet. He then impressed even further by trying to free the final 5.10b pitch in the darkness, getting admirably far before switching to french-freeing and aiding to the top - very good effort by the fresher.

By this point it was past 11pm, and the trio knew they had 7 abseils to reach Dinner Ledge again. Things got off to a fantastic start when they abseiled the wrong way for the first pitch, down a grotty gully instead of a nice clean slab, which led to the ropes getting stuck when

they tried to pull them down. As this was a double rope abseil, jumars couldn't be used to go back up and free the ropes, so Jake pulled out his prussik cords and set off up. While this took around an hour and made Jake very unhappy, he was secretly quite satisfied that all his time spent messing around with prussiks on a tree in Margravine Cemetery back in London had paid off. The rest of the abseils passed without incident, with George's routefinding proving excellent. The team were proud of how they never let themselves get complacent, always checking each others setups and holding the tails of the rope knot to the side to make sure no one could accidentally abseil off them. Eventually they made it back to Dinner Ledge at around 5am, where to their dismay they found the once-empty bivvy spot to be almost completely full. Alex and George just about still had spots, having left their sleeping stuff out while on route, but Jake had not done this, due to some silly ideas about it being "unethical" and "impolite". Jake was very regretful as he sat back against the wall for a sitting bivvy, thinking this type of bivvy was something only done on horrible hard Alpine routes.



Everything was forgotten in the morning however, as the team woke up to a fantastic sunrise, and the knowledge they'd managed to do a bigwall independently. They also got to spend the next 3-4 hours chilling and watching all the other teams on the ledge attempt Kor's Roof, which made the trio very relaxed. Remarkably they still had some noodles and tuna left, although it soon transpired the tin opener had also not made it into the haul bag. Jake channelled his inner caveman and got the tuna open with the aid of a nut key. After a while the team got hungry, and abseiled back down to the ground. They then went back to camp and ate everything, Jake managing almost an entire bag of trail mix just to himself.

Tangerine Trip, 5.7 A3 (Olly, Chorley, Jake)

'The Trip' is a great, fairly popular route on the SE face of El Cap that's not super scary, although it is one of the most continuously steep on the wall (which makes it a very good option should there be a chance of rain, which there was later in the wall). Olly and Chorley were excited to employ the new techniques learned on Afronan (ie flagging the ledge and chilling one's way up the wall), whilst Jake was psyched for attempt two on the el cap.



The fixing day was off to a great start when Olly realised he had left his approach shoes in the camp, and arrived at the meadow with only his flip flops. The approach wasn't too bad, and we were even donated some water by some Japanese climbers who had bailed off Zodiac which would mean a much lighter load for blast off day. Olly went to go speak to a climber who was soloing Zodiac, but had to get rescued from the last pitch after dropping his haulbag 12 pitches resulting in a bit of a bag explosion. Apparently it was okay though because his weed bag survived. As recommended by the guide book, the team would do the first few pitches of Lost in America and Virginia to avoid the awkward and often wet downclimb. This started with a pitch of A3, which Chorley and Jake decided Olly should lead in his flip flops for their amusement, and not at all because they were too scared to lead it. Chorley jumared up, led the next pitch of 5.7, and Olly abbed down to go and buy the rest of the supplies. Jake took the second pitch of Virginia which was by a way the hardest aid pitch he'd climbed so far, featuring a section of A2+ heads. After some tenuous and microcam placements, Jake made it to the heads and managed to get up through them to the belay in an awesome (and emotional) lead. The last pitch to fix was pitch 4, which Chorley led, featuring a thin wet crack of rusty fixed RURPS, heads and beaks, as well as placing some lost arrow pitons (one of which became a bit too lost when he dropped it). This finished with some grassy C1 which resulted in him spending the rest of the evening picking out bits of grass from his teeth. The pair set up their fixed lines (which required some considerable swinging due to the steepness of the wall) and headed back to the meadow to meet Olly, who was chatting to some climbers he had met who donated us each a beer and a beautifully crafted belay seat.



Luckily on blast off day, Olly managed to remember his shoes which is something he was very thankful for as at the base he very nearly stepped on a rattle snake (Mr Fluffy) who was chilling by our fixed lines. To Jake and Chorley's amusement it was then they learned that Olly is very scared of snakes. Olly was reminded of this when he went looking for the lost lost arrow, which became a found lost arrow which made Olly very excited, so excited in fact that he completely forgot about Fluffy as he was skipping back over to us. Chorley reminded him of Fluffy's presence, carefully waiting until the last minute resulting in a fantastic yelp from Olly.



Keen to get off the ground, Olly went up first, followed by Jake and Chorley. The jumaring was crushingly steep, and a fine taster to what was to come for the next 2000'. After making it up to the first anchor, the trio waited for a while whilst the pair ahead of them got off the next belay, during this time (actually almost as soon as Chorley had arrived at the belay) his jumars unclipped themselves from his harness and plummeted straight through the trees to the ground. I don't know how to describe the feeling one feels after jumaring 60m of freehanging rope to then immediately drop something important and have to aback down just to do all the jumaring again, but its not a good feeling at all. Luckily, the Japanese guys were still at the base and saw the jumars fall, and were able to attach them to the end of the fixed line to tag up. Chorley then declared something along the lines of them being his favourite human beings in the world at that moment.



Olly then pulled off a swift lead of the "Avatar" traverse pitch, followed by Jake sending the next two pitches which featured some pretty scary looking loose rock upto the "Gold Corner". Olly then led the next pitch clean at C3, but what he probably found more challenging was trying to shout back to the other two who were getting blown about in the very exposed Gold corner. Eventually they managed to tame the flapping ledge, and Chorley went up to do the "Sobriety" pitch up to their camp for the night. The team was making good pace and had plenty of sunlight left for Olly to fix the next pitch. The three of them huddled together on the two man rigid ledge, and tested out their new homemade hanging kit for the jetboil comprised of a hose clamp and some cord, which worked really well. Beers were drunk by some, and noodles consumed by all as the sun set. All was well until Jake took his shoes off which completely ruined the evening and they went to bed.



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They were woken the next morning by the early morning sun, and the very loud noise of a wingsuiter blistering right past them. The morning muffins were consumed, and the team set off up their fixed line. Chorley took the first pitch of the day which featured some brittle C2 cams and A2 beaking followed by a long line of reachy rivets, finishing with some fun consecutive hook moves off some fixed heads. The following pitches were taken by Olly and featured some technical thin beaking, meanwhile Jake had some trouble cleaning one from the previous pitch, followed by some biscuity 5.8 which made the three Brits homesick as it reminded them of digestives and made them desperately want some tea. Jake then took them up to the next anchor via a pitch of awkward cams followed by a long rivet ladder.

A bit of rain was forecast on the final day, but with only three easy pitches to go, they decided to push to the top. Olly cruised the C2+ pitch 15, and Chorley made his way up the windy 5.7 and hooks to the top of 16 just as a bit of hail start to fall. Olly ran up the final section of 5.6 to the top and the heavens opened, perfectly timed. They were soggy, but the psyche was high to be on top of El Cap! After shuttling the gear to the top, they sat under a rock, made some noodles and had a few summit beers whilst waiting for the rain to pass, and the descent to dry a bit.



The trip ended with a graceful descent of the East ledges which they survived without any issues until Chorley stacked it again on the final flat section to the carpark. He needs to stop doing this.

The Nose, 5.8 C2 (George and Alex)

With Olly, Chorley & Jake needing three quarters of the team's portaledge real-estate for their ascent of Tangerine Trip the number of suitable routes was small. Behold The Nose, the most famous line up El Cap, combining classic pitches such as the stovelegs, texas flake, king swing, great roof and changing corners with an abundance of natural ledges to sleep on. This made it an ideal logistical choice for a single ledge ascent. The climbing on The Nose remains moderate throughout, but provides a significant challenge due to the length of the route and the exposure being greater than George or Alex had previously experienced. With the goal set the Duo set to work on the logistical preparation. With a rainstorm forecast for later in the week, and The Nose enjoying masquerading as a waterfall as much as Lurking Fear, it was decided that delaying the ascent would give the team the best chance of success. George and Alex



spent what felt like months at Degnans charging their batteries and keeping the hydration levels topped up.

A few days later they headed to the base to fix to sickle ledge and pre haul all their gear. Arriving at 6:00am they were shocked to find a queue at the base of the fixed lines with three other teams waiting to go. Much to their surprise a strong London accent cut through the morning air and the duo were greeted by two blokes from Watford who had fixed a few days before. Thankfully despite the queues on the fixed lines the first pitch was free. After a delicate scramble to the base George set off on pitch one, cruising the lead and moving efficiently. Alex then led pitch two without a hiccup and by 11:00 the team were half way to sickle ledge. Pitch 3 provided a bit of spice with George electing to use skyhooks instead of doing a 5.9 free sequence. Alex raced along the traversing pitch 4 leaving slightly less protection than George would have liked. By 14:00 the pair were happily perched on Sickle Ledge and devoured a bag of trail mix. Also on Sickle were the Watford pair, however after a second consecutive day of queuing to the ledge, they were not quite as happy to be there. This was George & Alex's first experience of the infamous Nose traffic jam. The duo from Watford explained a team from Cambridge University Mountaineering Club were the bottleneck some two days ahead on route. Evidently the indoor bouldering prowess they displayed in this year's inter uni bouldering competition didn't translate well to big wall efficiency. The morale of the Watford duo continued to decrease and at 15:00 they elected to bail. They graciously left 5 gallons of water for George and Alex. After fixing ropes to the ground George and Alex discovered an Irish team had just arrived with two of the largest haul bags ever seen. Interestingly they had chosen to haul these bags one pitch up the descent route before starting to climb themselves. After retrieving the haul bag (now 5 gallons of water lighter) from the car, George and Alex made light work of the hauls and enjoyed a beautiful sunset on sickle ledge. They then bumped into none other than famous speed climber Hans Florine, who was on a fixing mission before aiming to take a party of 4 up the nose. After a brief chat with Hans they descended to find the Irish team shouting 'No sleep till sickle'. The Duo returned to camp for a good nights sleep. They vowed to return early the next morning to beat the Irish pair onto the route and hopefully not get stuck in a traffic Jam.



The next morning at 5:00am the pair arrived at the base of the route to find the Irishmen on the ground. It appeared they had to retreat and sleep at the base as they left their head torches in the haulbag some 60m off the ground on the abseil route. With the route now clear the pair made swift work of the 200m jumar. Alex set off on pitch 5, navigating the tricky mixture of free & aid climbing with style. After sorting some anchor confusion George stuck his teeth into a big penji and wondered off route. He slowly made his way back onto the route and into the second penji. At this point the heavens opened, water started running down the rockface and gushing down the very cracks the pair were climbing up. George, with water now flowing down his sleeves and into his torso, braved upwards on lead to the next anchor. Alex sought shelter by wrapping a tarp around his head whilst belaying. The rain

soon stopped however both were soaked through, and regrouped at the top of pitch 6. The sleeping bags were sampled and felt wet to the touch. The potential for more rain in the evening as well as the lack of a proper rainfly didn't fill the duo with confidence. After some discussion the decision to 'tactically withdraw' was made.

It turned out that Hans had fixed 250m of rope all the way to the ground the previous evening from below pitch 6, and was ascending it with the rest of his quartet. They graciously let George and Alex rappel down their ropes, vastly speeding up the withdrawal process. On the way down Hans offered the duo some words of encouragement and placed stickers on their helmets advising them to 'do hard things'. He also asked if George happened to have a spare cam. Sadly for Hans the rack was with Alex who had sped ahead and thus cams florine remained in the expeditions possession. Upon reaching the ground George declared that Hans was a bad omen, as every interaction seemed to result in a retreat from the captain. The damp duo returned to the campsite with sunken spirits and soggy cinnamon rolls.

Triple Direct, 5.9 C2 (Chorley and George)

Whilst Olly was on South Seas, Chorley and George had just enough time for one more wall before they had to leave. With George keen to achieve his goal of getting up El Cap, and Chorley feeling psyched to do a third El Cap route, they turned to Triple Direct as a good option being a central El Cap route more challenging than the Nose. TD follows 30 pitches starting up Freeblast, then doing the central pitches of the Muir Wall before blasting up the final 10 pitches of the Nose. Chorley and George had a bit of a weird few days prior to getting on the wall, with multiple storms delaying blast-off (since Olly had the only team portaledge fly) as well as a potential government shutdown which would likely mean being kicked out of the park.



After a long period of sitting in Dregs during rain and waking up in the cold wet campsite, the pair started to go slightly crazy and were thankful to find a day break in the poor weather to get Freeblast done. The plan was to do Freeblast in a day, and then blast off by hauling up the Heart fixed lines. There was a chance of rain later in the day, however, the pair knew that for most of Freeblast, they could bail fairly easily should they need to with gear anchors only starting from pitch 7 (after this point they would really need to blast to mammoth to then abseil the fixed lines). The day started with the usual pancakes and Nutella before heading to El Cap. George took the first pitch of C1, with Chorley taking over for the next couple,



spending way too long trying to crag swag all the stuck cams in the popular free route. George took over for the first pitch of the famous Freeblast slab which starts with some C2 flaring pods which he made light work of, followed by the free climbing crux of the route with some fairly stiff 5.9 friction slab mandatory moves between bolts. It's definitely fair to say he tried hard here, taking some pretty large swinging pendulum falls. After nearly hurting his ankle on this, and the slight time pressure building with the storm approaching, he lowered off for Chorley to give it a shot. Embracing his inner Mezz training, Chorley managed to get up the slab (which was a little runout in places) and up to the Triangle ledge, where George took over for the next pitch which required some pretty awkward aid to free switching. From here there are a couple of gear belays to the top of Freeblast so they wanted to avoid having to bail back down the route, so the race against the rain was on. Chorley led the Halfdollar pitch which involved some of the most awkward (and painful for the feet) aid he had done yet followed by some poorly protected 5.8 chimneying. After this, it was just the two 5.7 pitches to blast to Mammoth. The rain started just as George was doing the last couple of moves seconding the last pitch. Nailed it! Within 5 minutes El Cap went from being completely dry into an icy cold hail and waterfall which instantly soaked them through as they navigated the fixed lines to the ground, getting back to the car at about 1:30 am.



The next day or two were pretty wet, however after this, the forecast cleared for a whole week. Finally, it was blast-off time. Blast-off day started a bit slow and the pair were mortified to learn that the village shop had run out of instant noodles... Cold "Chef boyardi" ravioli it was! After making it to the base, they managed to ascend and haul to mammoth without too much faff, receiving many compliments for the style of their ascent from other parties, in particular our finely crafted "Grub tub" as well as our impeccable pee-in-a-bottle ethics. One of El Cap's most famous features is "the heart" which is unimaginatively a heart-shaped indent in the West face which we were to go up the side of. There are several routes going up off the heart ledges, so there were a couple of teams in and around this insane amphitheatre of granite towers. The famous Salathe (and Freerider) route goes up the left side of the Heart and we spotted our German friends who had been staying with us



(Reinney, Leon and Magda) as they were about to head up the monster offwidth. They saw us and Reinney let out our group call (this sounded like a seal call, don't ask why...), to which we replied "Ooah Ooah Oooahh". The whole West face lit up with monkey calls and chants (a bit cringe but a pretty cool feeling moment representing the weird community of El Cap climbers). The other funny side of these El Cap climbers was shown about 10 minutes later when this ex-pro surfer guy we met the previous day when we were hiking up water to the base (who we are pretty sure is the first person ever to describe Newquay as "bitchin") asked his partner to tag him up his cheater stick, to which Greg (one of a team of three behind us trying to climb the Muir Wall) let out a loud "booo". I'll never understand aid climbing ethics. Chorley and George had planned to climb up to Pharaoh ledge, one pitch above Mammoth, but decided to drink beer and eat dinner early instead on the luxurious Mammoth terraces.

We would share the next few pitches with Greg and his team who had also slept on Mammoth. They were moving slower being a team of 3 so let us go ahead. Chorley led up to Pharaoh, and then as George was cleaning the unthinkable happened. snap, thunk thunk thunk "@~\$%^ no!!". As soon as he heard the noise Chorley knew what had fallen and his heart sank. Whilst cleaning, the keeper cord on the speaker on George's bag snapped, sending it rocketing 1000ft to the ground. The vibrator (distributor of pwemium wibes) was gone. After a serious bail conversation, the pair decided to soldier on relying only on their willingness to survive and their phone



speakers for the wibes. George wiped away a tear from his cheek, and began questing up the first C2 pitch of the Muir section. This was followed by Chorley leading the next C2 camhooking pitch and then another 5.8 chimney, where once again disaster struck. clink, clink, "George catch!", George looked up just as Chorley's ascenders flew past him to join the fate of his speaker. Note to self: don't rack both of your really very important ascenders on one retired camp snapgate and attach them to the back of your harness before climbing a chimney. Being very careful to not drop anything else, the pair made it up to their next camp (the Grey Ledges) with plenty of daylight left to fix the next two pitches.

George took the first pitch of C1, and Chorley finished off with the Silverfish Corner, a cool thin and steep pitch, just as the sun was going down. The pair went down to join Greg and his team on Grey to set up camp where they very kindly let us borrow their speaker to provide some evening wibes. The pair heated their only packet of instant noodles



left and enjoyed the rest of the evening on another great bivy spot, slightly ruined when some Chamonix mountain guides who were just above on the Shield pissed directly onto them. Felt just like being at home in the Alps...

The next morning, the pair started jumaring their fixed lines to their high point at pitch 16. George started up the first pitch of the day which was the first of 3 traversing pitches to joining the Nose. It started with a bolt traverse, then a pendulum around the arete into the next flake and up. Chorley took 18, which according to the topo involved two pendulums off two pitons followed by some 5.6 free. After swinging about for 5 minutes, with the line slamming into the haul bags below George, it became apparent that these pitons were no longer in place. Instead he tension traversed across the two pendulums, risking taking a very large (but probably safe) pendulum if he slipped. This was the most gripped he had been for the whole route and definitely regretted not taking any climbing shoes or chalk, and was relieved to make it to the 5.6. Since the route was traversing here, they decided to empty the pee bottle. As Chorley went to do this, the wind picked up, upwards... This made Chorley really quite upset. George then took the crossroads pitch upto camp IV on the Nose, which involved climbing a long wide crack up, littered with loose rock held together by random bits of cord.



After Chorley french freed the pitch off camp IV, George pulled off a great lead sending the famous "Great Roof" pitch, just as the sun was setting. Having covered the ground faster than expected, the pair decided to push to camp V. Chorley sent the pancake flake and the following awkward aid pitch up to camp V, both feeling slightly delirious with hunger but spurred on by their hype tunes. They made it to camp V by about 10pm, set up the camp and scanned a chef boyardi and a muffin each, before conking out. Although feeling a bit wrecked, they were super psyched by how much they had climbed that day, being 9 pitches higher than their last camp! They could definitely make it to the top the next day. Olly gave added motivation as he had finished SSPO so was hiking up the next day to get the rest of his gear, and offered to bring up beer if they made it up the next evening.



The next morning they had a bit of a lie-in, as there was another team leaving camp V first (nearly clattering Chorley's G7 with their haulbag). George then headed up the "Glowring Spot" pitch verifying that it was indeed 'Glowring', a cool bit of C2. Halfway up, however, he

got abseiled on by a team of Ecuadorians who had taken their paraplegic friend up Mescalito which added an interesting dimension to the lead. Chorley led upto camp VI, where they then waited for a NIAD team to over take them. The NIAD team, Sam and Jason as it turned out were trying to do the Nose and Lurking Fear in a day and managed it in 20 hours! "Yeah you guys! You guys aren't bailing past the Great roof! ... Yeah you guys". Chorley took the "Changing Corners" pitch, followed by George who led upto the top of pitch 27. These upper pitches of the Nose are epic, steep, super exposed and splitter! After Chorley got up to the "Wild Stance" it was time for George to face the final bolt ladder to the top. The sun was setting in the valley, and they had 3000ft of air below them. Epic! George had a bit of an adventure on this last pitch, getting lost in the dark trying to find the anchor whilst fighting lots of rope drag and at some point down aided a bush. Exhausted but psyched, they met up with Olly, as well as Yolan and Hayley (some other climbers they met in the valley who had just finished Mescalito). The 5 had a group summit bivy with plenty of beer, whiskey, noodles and good wibes.



South Seas, 5.8 A3+ (Olly)

Soloing Zodiac last year really took it out of me, so I wasn't really planning on another El Cap solo this year. When I got to the valley though I feel like my psych to climb walls was so big that I kind of had to. Whilst the others would often need a couple days rest before even thinking about the next wall, I'd already have mine planned out before I even topped out the previous.

The plan for the trip had been to finish by climbing Mescalito, but bad weather had made the progression to this seem unrealistic. The others also wanted a decent rest before getting on one final wall. This gave me the idea of soloing Mescalito, but after looking at the topo it didn't seem hard enough to really challenge me. I instead settled on South Seas as I'd heard the route was amazing, and I had pretty much the exact rack for it (minus a bolt kit which I managed to borrow).



The first day on the route I just fixed a rope up the first pitch and returned to sleep at camp. It was relentlessly steep climbing out of an alcove, and was fairly slow as a result. As I got to the first belay, the guy ahead of me who had just replaced a missing rivet on the second pitch decided to bail. This left the route completely clear for me and no bolts to replace.

The second day I came back to fix two more pitches. I fell off on the second pitch when the wire on a copperhead snapped, but the rivet I was right next to held, so it was a fairly small fall. It was really nice not to have to replace any rivets as I only managed to borrow 3/8" bolts, which would take at least 30 mins each to drill. The third pitch was much more chill, with very straightforward clean aid up a ramp, to a slightly trickier finish. These pitches went pretty quickly, and afterwards I tied my two ropes together and just about made it to the ground 120m below, fixing the rope to the very crest of the alcove on the way down.

The nice thing about soloing this route was that it was really easy to get others to carry my water up to the base for me, which would normally be a separate 30kg bag to the rest of my stuff. This is because the fixed rope left up from the previous days climbing makes very possibly the best rope swing in the world. I spent the previous evening and the next morning chilling out at the base with the exped team and the other friends I had made in the valley, taking turns on the swing going from progressively further and further around the alcove, making the swing bigger and faster as we went. This probably culminated with a swing at least 60m long, but potentially further.

A stark contrast to all this fun with friends was the 120m free hanging jug I had to do to get to the top of my ropes, followed by the 120m haul I had to do to get my bag with 9 days worth of food and water up to me. It was strange to be by myself all of a sudden, but I kept my head down and did all the grunt work. After all this messing about, it was into the afternoon before I started to lead. I got through a short pitch of A3 and, after cleaning and getting the bags up, decided to start what used to be the



crux pitch even though it'd probably mean finishing in the dark. This was a stunning pitch traversing under an undulating overlap. I utilised a lot of inverted camhook placements to avoid nailing too much, but knocked in a couple beaks in constrictions to make cleaning easier. I finished the pitch in the dark and abseiled back to my ledge, cleaning the pitch in the morning.

The next day was fairly uneventful, with soloing greatly benefitting pitch 6 as I didn't have to experience the unavoidable rope drag on the A3 section (when you solo the rope doesn't move so there's no drag). The pitch after was my first ever on aluminium dowels, which felt slightly sketchy at first but, since they don't rust, eventually felt better than some of the old steel ones. It finished in "The Great White Shark", which requires cams bigger than I was currently carrying. Instead of rapping back to my bags to get them, I managed to just about make it work with the biggest cams I had (a single 2 and 3), which I was very pleased about. It was still fairly early after I had finished that, so I decided to start the next pitch. It was perhaps the best pitch of the route: "The Rubber Band Man". I fixed some moderate A3 nailing up to a rivet pendulum point, then returned to my ledge to sleep and finish the next day.

Waking up in the morning genuinely felt like Christmas. I'd read about this pitch last year and have wanted to do it since. It's a medium sized pendulum, but the difficulty and novelty comes from the wall being really steep, so you can't use the wall very well to run across. The first ascent team got around this by having the two people at the belay pull the leader back on the haul line, before releasing and slingshotting him towards a spike opposite. The pendulum has since got harder as someone fell on the pendulum point rivet and broke it, making the swing harder but more interesting, so no one has replaced it.

I left most of my rack at the belay, opting to swing light, then go back and get the gear once I had a piece across the gap fixed. I initially tried the slingshot method, but to no avail. I found it tricky to coordinate releasing the haul line and turning and hooking the edge that I couldn't quite get the distance to. I then tried a combination of kicking out from the wall and the conventional running along it. This worked better, but I still couldn't quite get to the good edge. I had noticed that there was a poor, flat edge slightly nearer that might take a hook, but for some reason thought that would be cheating to use until I got tired of going for the good one. Within a few goes of going to the worse one, I had a hook latched onto it, and followed this up with a massive stretch to the good one. Working out and sticking the pendulum was definitely a high point of the route, however the pitch after slightly dampened the high. It was the last pitch of the South Seas section before joining the Pacific Ocean Wall, and it was the only one that wasn't really good. The lack of quality came from the poor rock



on the pitch. Whilst this wasn't too bad lower down where the rock was just expanding (the placements get wider as you weight them and can sometimes come out), higher in the pitch the rock became loose where it could actually break off. It was definitely scary as a big flake coming off can easily cut your rope, but I wasn't too worried about it. This changed when a cam levered off a laptop sized chunk of rock that hit me on the shoulder on the way down and made me take a daisy fall on the bolt below. Luckily it avoided the rope (and anyone on the ground), but it definitely rattled me a bit. I got back up and had to place another cam right next to where the chunk had come off in order to progress. I was rewarded at the top of the pitch though with the first natural flat space I'd had so far, a ledge the size of a small exam desk. The forecast was looking bad for the evening and the next couple days, so I set up the rain fly and settled down for the night in the mid afternoon, after eating my dinner for lunch and having a beer hunched over on my castle of a ledge.

The wall is fairly steep, but where I was wasn't very sheltered from the rain (and hail). I hadn't thought to question the sturdiness of the fly that was bought second hand over a decade ago until the rain started hitting it. Whilst worrying, the leaking was limited to some moderate dripping in places that didn't really get anything too wet. I woke the next morning and peered out my fly to some incredible views of low cloud clinging to sections of El Cap. The forecast was only for afternoon rain, so I decided to try to fix the next couple of pitches before it hit (always with the option of a quick rap to my ledge if it started to rain earlier than expected). It was nice to do some tricky aid climbing and get my head back in it after the fall the day before, but also to finish at midday and rest a bit waiting for the rain under the fly. I accidentally used the rest of the data that my mobile network allowed me in the States whilst killing time listening to podcasts before going to sleep, which was pretty stressful as it meant I couldn't check the weather forecast anymore. I could still send texts, so messaged George to ask for the forecast for the next few days. I certainly felt a lot more isolated on the wall with only the ability to text George, but not completely cut off. This did mean that I got bored with nothing to read and only old photos on my phone to look through to entertain me, so I went to bed at about 3pm and slept till the next morning! The rain was slightly heavier that night, and the fly leaked a bit more, but again not enough for anything to get uncomfortably wet, and I slept surprisingly well.

The forecast George sent for the next day was again for afternoon rain. With nothing else to do and the morning sky looking clear, I packed up and moved to the more sheltered belay above which was under a huge roof. After that I had enough time to fix what was apparently the crux of the route, but ended up being mostly a clip up on old fixed gear, so was fairly unmemorable. I had an actual conversation for the first time since being on the wall that wasn't with myself or a piece of gear, shouting across to turbo legends Mark Hudon and Skot Richards on the turbo classic Sea of Dreams. This was really surreal, given that less than a month earlier I had been at one of Mark's slideshows in Squamish and came out thinking how cool he was. I had also bought some of my gear from Skot, and had his name on the T-shirt I was wearing! I'm not sure if it rained that night, as I had the huge roof above me, so I slept really well!

I woke up the next day to a likely clear forecast, so decided to try to do three more pitches to get to 'The Island in the Sky'. This started with a fantastic pitch, a photo of which is on the front cover of the guidebook. It was mostly on imperfect beak placements until the crack

widened enough to accept a cam. This was followed by a long and grassy pitch of easy aid, which although unchallenging was pretty tiring. The final pitch of the day was some awkward aid up a short dirty corner, which felt like a real sting in the tail, but at the top of which was The Island in the Sky. This is a big sloping ledge with a few flat spots to comfortably sit, and was the first place I could walk around on for almost a week. I had also underestimated how much food I'd want to eat, but this ledge was probably the second last bivvy I'd have to do on the route, so I ate a double dinner and drank a couple of my beers. Even though there were still 7 more pitches to go, I felt I was most of the way there and was incredibly contented in a way that I'm not sure you can be if you aren't soloing a big wall.

The 5.8R mandatory free climbing the next morning couldn't take the wind out of my sails, as I cracked out the free climbing shoes and practically ran up the 'Black Tower' pitch compared to how slow the aiding had been. I did have to make a brief abseil back down to get some bigger cams for the top offwidth and free the rope when it got stuck, but this was no bother. The next pitch had a 20m aluminium dower ladder, drilled by Bridwell who famously liked to drill his rivets shallowly to increase the difficulty of his routes. I thought light thoughts and had a small breakfast, so the ladder went quickly and was followed by some interesting but unchallenging aid. The last pitch of the day was the Aleutian Chain, which seemed really easy until I came to clean the pitch and realised that the whole feature was expanding. I noticed this when I couldn't get a cam out, but was able to easily when weighting a different cam next to it. Thankfully cams have made expanding sections of rock much easier to climb compared to the pegs people used to use. I got up to the thin ledge at the top of the pitch and set up my bivvy there.

I was slightly annoyed to have not made the "Highbrow Bivouac" the night before, but passing it the next day it didn't look amazing. Unfortunately the route becomes easier, slabbier, dirtier and more forgettable from here, but there were just three pitches left to go. The first was quick with lots of free climbing, the second was long with some exploding rock making me fall off C1, and the third was a pig with a really awkward flare and horrible summit haul, but I was at the top.

Overall it was an incredible experience that took a while to sink in. At the top I felt neutral. I was happy to have finished the route, yet sad that the experience was over. Now I'm left with a lasting satisfaction, and a drive to climb El Cap more and more, particularly solo.



West Face of Leaning Tower (Ollly)

After South Seas (and a few days rest) I felt ready for another wall. There wasn't really enough time for one before I had to drop George and Chorley off at the airport, and they were finished for the season after Triple Direct, so I returned to the idea I'd had about

soloing walls in a day. I decided to try to solo the West Face of Leaning Tower in a day as a warm up for potentially soloing El Cap in a day.

To simulate what I'd do for El Cap, I started climbing in the afternoon, anticipating climbing overnight. I had a chilled pancake breakfast at camp, then went and had lunch in the meadow. I mentioned to Tom Evans that I was going to solo the WFLT in the afternoon and invited him to join the others in guessing how long it'd take me. He said 12 hours to the ICU.

I started at about 2pm and, with two ropes tied together, linked the first three pitches into one. These were mostly bolt ladders, but the steepness was a bit of a faff when abseiling on the lead line as I had to pass each piece of gear. The system worked pretty well though, and I had all my stuff up and ready to lead the next pitch in just over two hours. The popularity of the route became clear when I encounter the first party on the ledge on top of this pitch. I waited for them to finish the pitch then began to lead as their second cleaned. It was his first wall, so I gave him advice on cleaning gear when he asked for it. As they finished cleaning the pitch I arrived at their anchor and continued linking the next two more pitches above. The climbing remained steep but there were fewer bolts, so I slowed down a bit, finishing the pitch and having all my stuff at the belay in 6 hours 22 minutes after starting. I did manage to clean a new fixed microcam though, so was buzzing.

The final pitch started incredibly steep with lots of manky fixed gear. I was in speed mode so just clipped it and hoped it would hold, keeping in my mind that loads of people have weighted it recently and it hadn't blown. I passed a second team who were sleeping on a ledge just below the top. They must have been confused when they saw my headtorch going past up, then abseiling down, then coming back up again. I managed to clean a second fixed cam, so was in the money on this route. I topped out in 8 hours 31 minutes, which I was pretty pleased with. I had previously thought I'd go for Lurking Fear solo in a day if I could get under 8 hours, but given the delays for passing teams and getting cams out, I decided to go for it anyway when I got back to the valley.

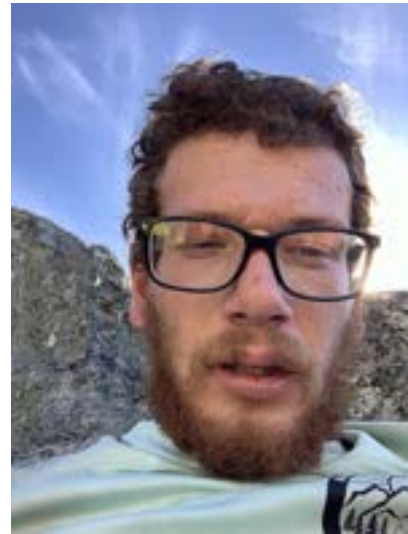
Lurking Fear (Olly)

I got back to the valley after dropping the others off and my plan to skip a nights sleep so that I could wake up at midday the next day hadn't worked. I wanted to wake up late so I could start the route late and not have been awake for 30+ hours by the time I finished. I decided to take a day to prep and rest from all the travelling.

The day of the route I had some pancakes for breakfast again, then headed into town to discreetly decant cups of coffee into my Nalgene from the cafe, and buy 5 cinnamon rolls from the shop (my only rations for the wall). I packed my bag with the stuff I'd acquired, plus a warm fleece and a gallon of water and headed to the meadow for lunch and to chat to Tom. He said he thought I'd be able to do it. At about 3pm I started ambling up to the route. I planned to start at about 5pm, but there was a team fixing the first three pitches, so I waited for them to get to the ground before starting.

I set off at 6pm, free soloing the first scramble section to an anchor, then linked three pitches at a time. My first pitch was mainly bolts with the occasional hook move and went very quickly, but the next was mostly natural aid in splitter cracks that was a little slower. My

ropes got stuck for the first time on my third pitch, so I had to go down to free them then continue up, which wasted a little time. Pitch 4 had the technical aid crux, a single camhook move and lots of fixed pins that I just clipped and trusted. There was more free climbing on pitch 5, which although quick was very tiring with my heavy rack and clunky solo system. Likewise pitch 6 had some more moderate free climbing that I aided through. It did start to get light again at the start of the pitch and I passed a party as they woke up. Pitch 7 was my last, and was very easy but I was very tired by then and knew I had the sun-24 hours in the bag, so wasn't moving incredibly quickly. I ended topping out in just under 17 hours and 26 minutes.



Whilst physically quite hard to be on the go moving for so long, the actual climbing was really easy. I'm pretty sure that this was the first time El Cap had been onsight soloed in a day by a Brit, and I'm not sure of anyone else who has done it (though I'm sure it's been done by someone). Whilst it makes a flashy headline to be potentially the first, I have a much more lasting sense of achievement of my solos of South Seas and Aurora. It's funny to see how other aid climbers are much more interested in those rather than Lurking Fear. I think it has opened the door in my mind for soloing El Cap routes in a push, though with plenty of rest after!

6. Budget and Funding

Expenses

Item	Expenditure
Car Hire	£1703.97
Fuel	£226
Accommodation	£1100
Food	£1551
Flights (exc baggage)	£2700
Insurance	£1924.93
Total	£12,729.13

Funding

Below is a summary of the individual and group funding that was made available to the expedition, without which it simply would not have been possible. We are extremely grateful for the generous contributions from the Imperial Exploration Board, the Lord Mayor's Trust as well as the Old Centralian's trust. In addition, we must especially thank Lorraine and the rest of the expedition board for their advice and guidance to make sure we didn't die as well as giving us access to the long list of exploration board gear such as tents and solar chargers. Through speaking to many other friends at universities around the country as well as abroad, the exploration board is a truly unique privilege that not many other universities have and has enabled us all the ability to have truly amazing experiences.

Source	Per Person	Overall
Imperial College Exploration Board	£ 650	£ 3,250
Imperial College Exploration Board (insurance)	-	£ 1410
Lord Mayor's 800th Anniversary Award Trust (successful)	£ 450	£ 1,800 (note Oliver did not receive this)
Old Centralians	£360	£1800
TOTAL	£ 1652	£ 82620

