



AAC Publications

El Capitan, Southwest Face, Heart Route (First Free Ascent)

California, Yosemite Valley

While free climbing El Capitan's Golden Gate (VI 5.13b, Huber-Huber, AAJ 2001) in 2009, I spotted a system of beautiful cracks and corners leading out the left side of the massive, heart-shaped recess in the middle El Cap's southwest face. The steep I was looking at belonged to the Heart Route (VI 5.9 A4, AAJ 1971). This was one of El Cap's earlier wall routes, and Davis and Kroger completed the first ascent in impeccable style over a bold, eight-day push. The upper part of the Heart Route went free when Alex and Thomas Huber climbed Golden Gate, a linkup that started on the Salathé Wall. The lower part of the route remained a mostly forgotten aid climb.

Exploring and establishing first ascents has always been the most intriguing part of climbing for me. After a few solo missions on the route, I enlisted the help of my good friend Brad Gobright, a strong climber who at the time was working at the Ahwahnee Hotel. It wasn't long before we were completely consumed by the project. Brad and I put a lot of time and effort into adding bolts to variations, cleaning out cracks, scrubbing holds, and of course climbing. The route boasted some mind-blowing terrain—like the exposed roof pitch exiting the heart feature in the middle of the wall and the wildly technical slab getting to Heart Ledges, a few pitches lower. We knew we had something special.

After a couple of seasons of attempts, the first free ascent still eluded us. Eventually we put the entire project on the back burner as Brad and I focused on other things. I began to wonder if I still possessed the skill, and mad determination, required to free El Cap. Then the Dawn Wall went free and something clicked. Kevin Jorgeson asked the world, "What's your Dawn Wall?" I was reminded that my Dawn Wall was just a few routes left of the Dawn Wall. The Heart Route was still waiting for us, all equipped and ready to go.

Brad and I met up in spring 2015 and got straight to work. The first seven pitches of the route (what we dubbed the Heart Blast) feel almost like a route in themselves. Pitch six, the Dub Step, has the hardest moves of the route: a difficult slab downclimb to an outrageous, sideways, dyno (approximately a V10 move). The next pitch, a slab getting to Heart Ledges, appears impossible to climb—and, indeed, some of the holds are no bigger than the edge of a nickel (5.13a). The biggest question marks on the route were these pitches, and it was an exhilarating process to find the way through these variations.

While the hardest climbing is down low, the steepest climbing is in the middle of the wall, starting with the Heart Roof. Here, the route climbs through classic El Cap terrain, with exposed, sweeping granite and unbelievable climbing (two long pitches of 5.13 as well a bouldery 5.13 arête.) Above this one must head up a spooky flake (5.11 R/X) before the angle eases. Another wild pitch of crack climbing marks the end of our newly free climbed terrain (16 pitches for us), and the route then joins Golden Gate to the top (10 pitches for us).

Brad and I spent six days on the wall for our final push, starting June 12. We had previously stashed bivy gear right below Heart Roof and made our main camp there. This spot spared us from the intense heat and sun that plagued the wall every afternoon.

Although the hardest single moves were on the Dub Step (which I free climbed but Brad could not due

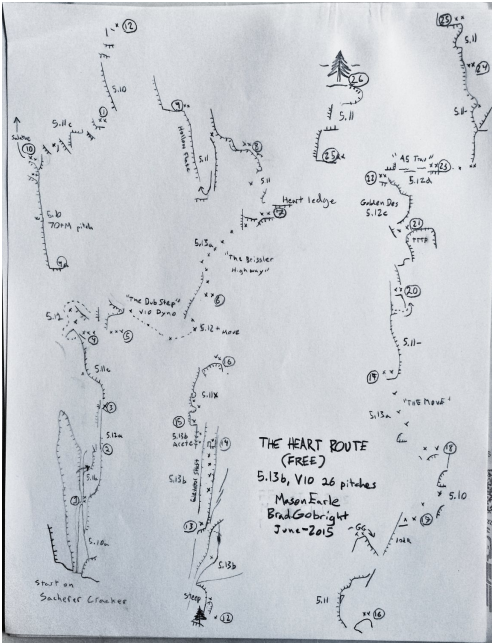
to him being shorter), the biggest challenge was completing the steep and sustained climbing above our camp. I had injured my shoulder on the dyno a week before setting off, and it worsened with each pitch. Even in full battle mode, I was doubtful I could even follow the 5.13 arête. But by the skin of my teeth I was able to climb the final cruxes to reach Golden Gate. On our final day we juggled several hundred feet to our high point and completed the final eight pitches to the top.

The final pitch of any El Cap route is a special thing. Totally exposed above the valley floor, worked to the core, and slaying a dragon that had haunted us for five years, it was truly a profound time and place.

[Editor's note: Aside from 10' of climbing that Gobright was unable to free climb on pitch six, both climbers led or followed each pitch of the entire wall free. In all, the free Heart Route has five 5.13 pitches and many of 5.11 or 5.12. The pair also climbed all three 5.13 pitches on the upper part of Golden Gate; however, Earle believes the Golden Desert and A5 Traverse pitches are 5.12+ for tall climbers.]

– Mason Earle

Images



A topo of the free version of the Heart Route. Note that Mason Earle has labeled two of the 5.13 pitches on Golden Gate 5.12+.



The line of the free Heart Route.



Mason Earle on the "Dub Step."



Mason Earle leading on the free Heart Route.



Brad Gobright on the upper part of the free Heart Route.



Mason Earle exits the "Heart Roof."

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