



AAC Publications

The Xue Way: A Brilliant New Route Up Half Dome's South Face

California, Yosemite National Park

As we quietly enjoyed the waning warmth of the late fall sun on the summit of Half Dome, a breathtaking view of the sweeping valley leading toward El Cap stretched before us. After 10 years of climbing all sorts of routes, from Alaska to the Canadian Rockies, the Sierra to the Cordillera Blanca, standing there with my good friends Chris Koppl and Brian Prince after completing a new route on the south face of Half Dome was a dream come true. All of our collective skills and gained wisdom had culminated in this route.

Yet I wasn't completely happy. I hadn't recovered after the climbing community lost the brilliant young alpinist Michelle Xue a few weeks prior. I had first met Michelle one day in Lee Vining, and we all later spent a season with her in El Chaltén, in Patagonia, sharing many meals and spectacular sunsets and rainbows in those amazing mountains.

As we descended barefoot down the exposed slabs toward our first rappel anchor, negative thoughts flooded my mind. On the same day that Michelle and her climbing partner, Jennifer Shedden, were hit by major rockfall and lost their lives in the Sierra Nevada, my grandmother also passed away. She was the person who took on the responsibility of raising me while my single mother had to work full-time. Because I see death almost daily while working in the emergency department of a trauma center, I had thought I'd become callous to the loss of life. However, this double tragedy knocked me off balance, and instead of a pleasant victory lap, our three-day push of the full route was for me a time to mourn and accept.

Two and a half years prior, we had started this climb ground-up on the broad face to the right of Southern Belle. The route ascends some of the best stone any of us have touched. The dikes on the lower pitches range from ones large enough to traverse by walking to others requiring granite voodoo to climb. We found steep cracks, powerful underclings, and other wild terrain as the wall steepened to the 800' headwall.

After all kinds of battles and shenanigans on the sharp end, and a few efforts where the leader was stranded in terrain too blank to climb, we had completed about 60 percent of the route, with only two very short sections where we pulled on gear. Eventually we decided to change our tactics and rappel in from the top in order to explore and then establish the best route through the steep upper headwall. We wanted to piece together a route of lasting quality, to maximize free climbing, and to make it reasonable in terms of risk for the future ascensionists—and that didn't seem possible while bolting on lead without leaving trails of bathooks and rivet ladders. So we swallowed our egos and accepted the fact that some people might not pass up a chance to contribute negative remarks about our choices.

The full route's orange granite is formed into crispy incut crimps, slopers, sidepulls, intersecting bands of dikes, and a few random chickenheads positioned in just the right places to allow for gymnastic free climbing—reminiscent of some of the best Shuteye Ridge pitches, but here with 2,000' of exposure. The climbing is very sustained in the 5.10–5.11 range, with a few cruxes of low 5.12 and a few moves of A0. Surprisingly, the latest addition to Half Dome's south face is likely to be the most attainable. It is not as technically difficult as Growing Up or Southern Belle, and of course much better protected than the latter.

The views on top of Half Dome took me back nine years to the time when I had sat here after completing my first multi-pitch route, the super-classic Snake Dike. The night before, I had slept very little, anxious about attempting something seemingly over my head.

Now, at the culmination of our two-and-a-half-year journey on the south face, I felt some of the same sense of satisfaction that comes after completing an ambitious goal, along with climbing partners who have evolved into dear friends. Despite our feelings of sadness and loss, it felt like Michelle had been with us through the whole push, helping us heal by reminding us to keep a positive spirit and appreciate the little things—the warm rays of sun, snacking on pineapples, committing to a difficult but reasonably protected move. She reminded us to chase after big dreams while walking in the steps of kindness, joy, and generosity—to live life as she would. That is the Xue Way.

– Vitaliy Musiyenko

Summary: First ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome, completed by Chris Koppl, Vitaliy Musiyenko, and Brian Prince in fall of 2019.

Images



The massive south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park, showing the line of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) completed by Chris Koppl, Vitaliy Musiyenko, and Brian Prince in fall of 2019. Southern Belle, Growing Up, and other existing routes are to the left; Karma is to the right.



Vitaliy Musiyenko leading the steep second pitch of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Vitaliy Musiyenko leading one of stunning gold headwall pitches during the first ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Vitaliy Musiyenko leading a traversing pitch partway up the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Vitaliy Musiyenko leads up perfect golden granite slabs during the first ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Chris Koppl, Brian Prince, and Vitaliy Musiyenko on the summit of Half Dome after completing the first ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0).



Chris Koppl leading a traversing dike pitch partway up the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Chris Koppl enjoys coffee in bed below a featured dike pitch, during the first ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



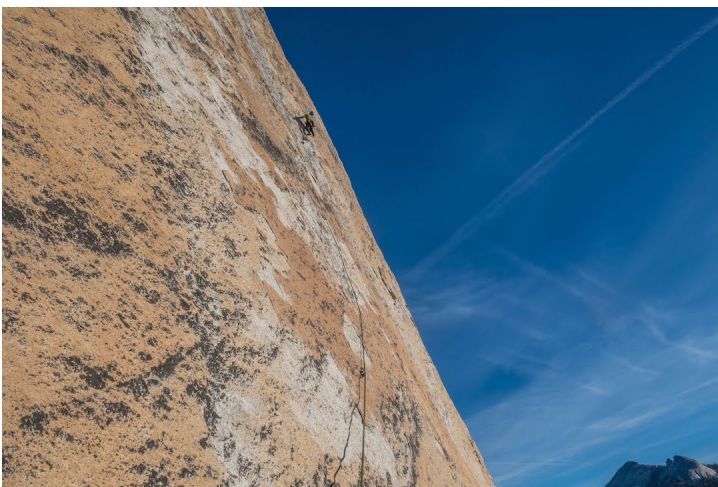
Chris Koppl following a traversing dike pitch partway up the south face of Half Dome.



Chris Koppl and Brian Prince breaking down the portaledge early in the morning during the first ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



A long way to the top—Brian Prince casts off on the first pitch of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Steep slabs and perfect golden granite—Brian Prince leading one of the headwall pitches during the first ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Brian Prince leading on a featured dike midway up the wall.



Brian Prince executes tough moves to reach the anchor during the first ascent of the Xue Way (2,000', 20 pitches, VI 5.11d/12a A0) on the south face of Half Dome in Yosemite National Park.



Brian Prince and Chris Koppl contemplate the massive south face of Half Dome while taking a breather on the approach.

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