



## AAC Publications

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### **Magic Mushroom: A Female Ascent of El Cap's Second-Hardest Free Route**

California, Yosemite Valley, El Capitan

**Forty meters below the summit, what had seemed impossible had almost become reality. It was day nine on the wall, and Jacopo Larcher and I both were tired from the previous days. But our motivation was stronger than ever.** The sun was shining, we were hanging out in our portaledge, and the weather was on our side. Although it was much too warm to try the next hard pitch in the sunshine, we kept getting perfect conditions at night. Waiting for sunset felt like an eternity, and our eyes keep wandering up the last big challenge of Magic Mushroom, the 5.14a “Seven Seas” pitch shortly before the top.

When we arrived in Yosemite on the 10th of October, 2017, we weren’t sure which route we would attempt. My big dream was to climb the Nose, while Jacopo had cast an eye on Magic Mushroom, which leads up a steep wall a bit further left. Of course I was psyched to try that as well, but when I saw the topo—there were so many hard pitches. It sounded more like an interesting long-term project. But when we looked up El Cap the first time that fall, we quickly dropped our Nose plans. It was naïve to think it would not be overcrowded at the best time of the year.

And so, Magic Mushroom. The route began with perfect splitters and beautiful, varied climbing. This continued until we reached the first hard pitch, the sixth. We immediately knew we would not be able to just “climb” that pitch, not even with the occasional rest. We had to restore missing protection and clean the cracks, sometimes for hours, before we could attempt to redpoint. Our chosen style of climbing was ground up, without checking out pitches from above. This took a lot of time, as there is hardly any fixed protection in the route and we had little aid climbing experience—this was equally adventurous and thrilling, and we had to fight hard for every pitch. After another eight days on the wall, we finally made it to the top, our first milestone, but still far from any serious bid to free climb the whole route.

After that we invested more days working on the crux pitches, spending quite a lot of time on the last hard 5.14a pitch before the top, which turned out to be the most difficult for me. (Not so for Jacopo, who found his personal crux on pitch 20.) I was able to climb all the sequences of the Seven Seas, but hooking it all up in one go seemed impossible. My optimism quickly dwindled. In addition, our time was running out. We had already changed our flights, but we only had two weeks left, meaning we’d only get a single chance at a continuous free push. We both wanted to lead all the pitches harder than 5.12+, which would take additional time. We had stashed food and water during our previous tries, so we would be able to stay on the wall for 12 days.

On November 30 the alarm rang at 4 a.m. and off we went, climbing the first pitches in darkness. Many of the lower pitches were wet, and it was mainly luck that kept us from slipping off the holds of the first 8a pitch, but then it got better. We finally arrived at Mammoth Terraces exhausted. After some quick binge-eating there was silence and we fell asleep under a clear sky.

The next morning, I felt as if I had been run over by a train. It took a lot of effort to get out of the sleeping bag and put on my climbing shoes. Hauling the bags after each lead felt like an enormous feat, costing us half an hour per pitch. It was a battle, but we finally made it to our portaledge below pitch 20 at midnight. I felt really ill, and after two spoons of rice and a cup of tea it got worse. It was quickly clear the next day would be a rest day.

After the rest I was still weak, but as I climbed the first meters above the ledge, I realized that my head felt free. No matter how this day would end, I felt relieved to be climbing at all, and this feeling took away all the pressure. Unfortunately the day did not go that well for Jacopo—he kept slipping off the bad footholds on pitch 20 (8a+/5.13c), and he had to wait until the next day to redpoint. We still did the following 8b pitch in the evening, with Jacopo climbing the hard layback crux totally unimpressed by his previous battle.

The next day, the first 5.14a pitch waited for us. I felt recovered and fresh, and everything went smoothly. But pitch 26, which was rated 5.11, one of the easiest on the route, was soaking wet. We brushed silly amounts of chalk onto the holds and removed big soggy patches of moss—not a typical rest day! In the morning it was still completely wet, but we fought our way up, jamming wet hands and slipping off the moist footholds, relieved to know it was behind us.

Above was the Seven Seas, my personal nightmare. When we arrived it was still too hot to try this overhanging endurance monster, so we waited for evening. My first try immediately confirmed my concerns: I still was not able to maintain body tension and kept slipping off. I kept trying and trying, hoping it would start to feel easier at some point, but it didn't.

Jacopo saved that evening by fighting his way to the belay totally pumped. I felt very happy for him, but at the same time disappointed about my failure. Giving in was not yet an option. Half an hour later, the same story, again. I could not hold back my emotions and cursed and swore for at least ten minutes before I regained my composure. I knew I was too tired for another attempt, but my head wouldn't let me give in without looking yet again. And it was my head, indeed, that finally became the key! Pressing my skull against the protruding left side of the crack, under my elbow, enabled me to statically reach the crucial smeary foothold. After another rest day, I managed to climb the Seven Seas, and our cries of joy echoed from El Capitan in the first light of morning.

Barbara "Babsi" Zangerl from Austria is the only woman to free climb Magic Mushroom (VI 5.14a), generally considered the second-hardest free route on El Capitan, after the Dawn Wall. In 2019, she free climbed the Nose, her fifth El Cap free route.

**Images**

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