

Half Dome Engagement Announcement

by Ben & Katie

One weekend a year we each pick a day to plan surprise activities for each other. These weekends have involved Scuba diving, roller coasters, clay pigeon shooting, and beach dates. This past December Ben took Katie climbing up at Gibraltar rock in Santa Barbara. We had climbed together once before in Joshua Tree, a year prior, and Ben had done some sport climbing in college; but neither of us had really done any regular climbing since. That weekend got the ball rolling and not long after that Ben and his friend Matt started climbing together and decided to set the ambitious goal of doing arguably the most famous big wall route in the world called “The Nose” up El Capitan (El Cap for short) in Yosemite Valley.

As part of his training, Ben suggested we do the Regular Route up Half Dome’s steep northwest face. The route is 23 pitches long, and takes most parties 3 days to climb. The climb begins with a 2,500’ approach up what climbers have dubbed the “death slabs”, then climbs 2,000’ up the vertical face. The route requires a “fast and light” approach as it is very difficult to haul extra gear. We planned out the minimum amount of water per day, food, sleeping stuff, gear, etc that we thought we could safely make it to the top with. We decided Labor Day weekend would be the good time to try the climb.

We were nervous! Half Dome is long and very committing; once you are part way up it is not easy to retreat. Ben had recently been on a couple big walls, but this was a much bigger endeavor. The lead climber has to deal with route-finding and placing gear in the rock to protect against a fall. Depending on the availability of cracks or other features to place protection, lead falls can be long and dangerous. Typically, climbing partners share the stress of leading, but Ben would need to be focused for 23 pitches in a row. Katie would be following on the climb and would have a rope attached from above to limit the length of any falls. She would retrieve the gear and haul our food, water, and minimal sleeping equipment. It is safer and easier to follow, but there were several traversing pitches that are difficult to protect and just as dangerous for the follower. On the most difficult and time consuming pitches she would ascend the rope, a skill we practiced in our neighbor’s tree.



The Regular Route up Half Dome’s Northwest Face.



Packed and ready to go.

to the “Robbins’ Traverse” which required climbing up high to set up a pendulum point, lowering down, and running back and forth for a swinging lunge to a ledge. Then came four consecutive chimney pitches, requiring a climbing style that involves putting your back against the wall with your legs out, and inching your way up – the last pitch of the day we did in the dark, with headlamps. We made it to the “big sandy ledge”, the only good sleeping ledge on the route, after 16 hours of straight climbing. A team we passed who was hauling too much gear was not as lucky and would end up hanging in their harnesses all night while stuck in the chimney pitches. The “big sandy ledge” was much smaller and less comfortable than we expected and the party in front of us had already claimed the most desirable spot. We settled for a spot on the edge that was just wide enough for one of us to lie on our back while the other was on their side. We laid the ropes down, then a space blanket, with a sleeping bag over the top of us. The ledge sloped down at our feet and off to the side. Ben was chivalrous and slept on the cliff-side of the ledge. The full moon illuminated Yosemite Valley, El Capitan, and cast a large shadow of Half Dome across the valley.

September 4, 2009

We decided to start the approach to the climb late in the morning after having a hearty breakfast in the Valley. We had difficulty finding the trail up the 2500’ of death slabs and had to find our own route for most of it. The approach took 6 hours, several more than we were expecting.

We would spend the first night at the base, and aim to get to a ledge on top of the 17th pitch for the second night. Pitches average 150 feet and can take anywhere from a half hour to up to 3 hours, so we wanted to do as much as we could to prepare for the long day ahead. We climbed the first 3 pitches and rappelled down leaving our two ropes behind so we could quickly ascend them in the morning. We had minimal gear and slept on an abandoned tarp with our sleeping bag unzipped over the top of us.

September 5, 2009

We started ascending our fixed lines in the dark the next morning at 5:30 am. We drank as much water as we could that morning from a spring at the base and decided to only bring 1.5 gallons of water with us. We made steady progress



Pitch 4, early in the day.

We made steady progress

September 6, 2009

We spent the morning of the final day getting through the 'zigzags', three time-consuming pitches that Ben aid climbed and Katie jumared. As you near the summit the route traverses under the "Visor" a giant overhanging roof at the top. The most intimidating part of this traverse was Thank God Ledge, a 30 foot long ledge with a 1500' shear drop off one side. We crawled across on hands and knees as the ledge narrowed to 6 inches wide and began to slope away from the wall. The remaining two pitches required some tricky and scary traverses on lead and follow. After 2.5 days we topped out. Ben found someone to take our picture at the top; after a few photos he stepped back and proposed. It was quite an emotional and surreal experience. We wish we had a picture of Katie's bruised hands with grimy fingernails, bloody cuts, dirty tape gloves and a shiny ring. We ran the 8 miles back down to the valley and got back in the dark but with time to celebrate with pizza and beer. We are excited for a lifetime of adventures together.



Our bivy spot on big sandy ledge.



Ben proposing on top of Half Dome.



You can see more photos at:

<http://picasaweb.google.com/Ben.Haldeman/HalfDomeKatieAndBenGetEngaged>

Please share this with anyone we might have missed.