

May 2-18 2025: Golden Gate on El Capitan

Thomas and I have it planned OUT! We're just gonna go to The Valley for two weeks, with like five trad climbing pitches done in the last year each, and we're gonna ground-up free-climb the 37-pitch Golden Gate on El Capitan. Really?

I was pretty cautious telling people beforehand about our specific plans. There are just so many unknowns. Are we fit enough - physically and mentally? How much time does it take us to get used to the notorious Yosemite-style granite climbing? Can we even still haul the loads up the wall? And do Thomas and I function efficiently as climbing partners?

Thomas and I have known each other since my early days at uni in Germany. Perhaps we met at one of the gigantic parties we hosted in our shared flats. Or in the old-school climbing gym. Or at a crag in the Frankenjura. He has accompanied me throughout much of my climbing and scientific path. Actually, he might be the reason I'm here in Cambridge now, as I'm not sure I would have turned to astrophysics if he had not inspired me. Anyways, numerous joint climbing trips later, including Freerider on El Cap, the astrophysics duo sets off again. Albeit, only partly communicating in our research communities what we're up to, as either the reaction is: "I could never sleep up there," "how do you even poop," or "don't die because then all our research is gone."



Let's go. Running lapses on the Generator Crack, a great emulator for the "Monster Offwidth," a notorious wide crack and the sheer horror of every crack-climbing-wannabe east of the Rockies. And how does that thing with the portaledges work again?

We roll into The Valley and it rains. The first real multipitch on our plate is to day-climb on El Cap half-way up to a cozy notch in the rock, called the “Alcove.” Also a good practice run to get used to the hauling and the wide-cracks on the mid-section of the route and stash some water. Ooooh, it’s so sick to be up here. As always, the Hollow Flake and Monster Offwidth are character-building pitches, the first one being a gigantic 200 foot pitch where one ends up placing no protection (always fun to see the rope dangling from belay to belay), the second one being a burly shoulder-squeeze offwidth crack that just doesn’t end. I forgot how much work the hauling of the bags is. Humans need a lot of water to survive, and we want to be able to spend eight days on the wall. With a gallon of water per person per day, food, camping gear, a hanging tent called a “portaledge,” the poop bag, and all the climbing gear, the bags become pretty heavy quickly.



Pre-hauling water to the Alcove. El Cap seems rather gigantic and intimidating and bags are heavy.

Three days and lots of logistical planning later, we're going for the push. The first part of Golden Gate follows the famous Salathé Wall and is relatively easy as El Cap is rather slabby at the bottom and steepens tremendously at the top. Hundreds of feet of vertical or overhanging rock, with thousands of feet of air below you. But we're not there yet. It takes us two days to climb the slabby section, called Freeblast, and the big crack system leading into the Alcove. It's hot and the slab climbing feels insecure, as always, but we manage. All smooth sailing up to now. With the only hiccup at the belay of the Monster Offwidth when one fellow climber started peeing into an upwind gusts. "Oh no, this is bad, I can't stop!", he cries, while we duck to the wall. "It's so funny," says the Spaniard next to us, brushing off the sprinkles that hit him. Well, such things happen, what can we do...



The Alcove (left) and El Cap Spire (right) with some fellow climbers. El Cap Spire is just so cool.

Here's where the Salathé and Golden Gate part, we're alone from now on. The first hard pitch is the "Downclimb", where one needs to do a negative "pistol-squat" on a tiny ledge to reach the lower tier of footholds. It's hot and our fingers feel slimy, but Tommy blasts off and sends, and I battle through, too. A burst of relief overwhelms me. The pressure while free-climbing on a big wall can be intense. I've heard people compare it to competition climbing, it's a similar now-or-never situation. With limited time, supplies, and physical and mental resources, we don't have a lot of tries to siege the pitches. Either they go down in a few tries or the dream of free-climbing Golden Gate is gone. Our day finishes just below a little waterfall that comes out of the rock. The water streak is just above our bivy. As the sun sets and stops drying the rock, droplets begin to trickle on us all night. Annoying. Pretty phenomenal, though, how one can transform a terrible hanging belay to a comfortable(-ish) sleeping position. Portaledges are fun.



Left: Thomas pulling up our haul bag chain. A big and small haul bag (blue, gray), portaledge (long tube), and poop bag (red). Right: Thomas climbing in golden evening light.

The Move pitch, physically the hardest section of Golden Gate, is phenomenal. Face-climbing on bolts, far above the ground, superb rock, and a reachy crux move with an awesome final campus traverse on a crystal dike. In the crux, I can span through the undercling all the way to a good pocket, while Thomas, a little bit shorter, has to kick up his foot, which makes it a fair bit harder. We both climb it after a few tries, drawing energy from each other's send. Luckily, Thomas has his pocket power ready as he considered the final traverse not necessary to check out, and just campuses through using one-finger pockets. The next pitch, called the "Chickenwing Chimney," is memorable for me. I take a fall into an old rusty piton when my foot slips, start over again, and wiggle through the chimney in what feels like hours, digging pretty deep. I can feel that my mental armour is crumbling. I got pretty scared on this one. We make camp at the Tower To The People, just a few pitches below the summit. This will become our home for three nights.



Psyche is high after both sending the Move pitch.

Somehow, many people seem to be scared of sleeping on a wall. That's puzzling to me because the evenings and nights are the calmest and most peaceful moments of the whole climb. The body and mind have time to wind down, comfortable in the sleeping bag with the stars above and the air below you. Magical. I wake up in the middle of the night and see a blanket of clouds underneath us. The valley floor is covered and El Cap and the Cathedrals stick out, the full moon illuminating the scenery.

I wake up the next day feeling like a train rolled over me. Four days of climbing from dawn till dusk took its toll, I'm exhausted. We only climbed one pitch that day, the Golden Desert, a strenuous layback crack that I followed. A much needed rest-day follows. Temperatures plummet and it begins to snow. We snuggle into our sleeping bags in the cozy portaledge, covered by the rain fly. It is fascinating living in the vertical, a world where the only dimension is up and down and the only elements are stone, iron, and nylon. In our home, everything is right within reach. Sure, there is not much space but we're pretty happy just lying down, chatting, drinking tea, and looking at the topo over and over again while the clouds race through. Okay, one more hard pitch, we got this!



Left: Thomas on the Tower To The People, our bivy for three nights. Right: Me, dangling in the air after rappelling down from the Golden Desert pitch.



A slow rest day staring at our hands, the topo, and eating food. One more hard pitch. One more.

Our seventh and last day on the wall is cold. Peel out of the sleeping bag, make coffee, eat oats (I am so looking forward to not eating just oats and water for breakfast soon!), and jumar up to the beginning of the “A5 Traverse.” It’s windy and we’re wearing all layers. But better cold than hot because this pitch has very friction-dependent, slopy holds. Our hands numb out, painful, but a familiar feeling. I set off, flow through the first part of the traverse, try to get blood into my blocks-of-ice, formerly fingers, for the last difficult section. Screaming, I fight to the belay. Thomas sends right behind me. Yessssss, let’s go!



The exposure of the A5 Traverse is outrageous.

We rappel back down, pack up camp, and continue climbing to the top. Somewhat scary climbing follows, I’m pretty trashed but we’re super stoked and that leads us up. We top out in the evening light, the sky is burning. All let loose now, finally getting out of the harness that we were wearing for seven days, enjoying throwing the shoes just behind us, not worrying that they would fly down to the valley floor, and eating through the rest of our supplies. So happy.



After sleeping on top, we make our slow way down, carrying heavy loads. But that's all forgotten by now, one zones out on the suffering and keeps only the good memories. Classic type-2 fun. Down in the Valley, we're not Jim Bridwell or the Hubers but, what the heck, we climbed the big stone so might as well take the classic El Cap Meadow picture.

