

Go For It!

Grade Tour 1: V.Diff

OK, so we've successfully negotiated the baffling array of techniques and terminology facing the debutante climber, now I'll take you on a grand tour of the grades from V. Diff to E3. Each month we'll describe in words and pictures the essence of a given grade; providing technical tips to make life easier; profiling a route that typifies the grade and of course giving you a hit list to tick including ones to be wary of as well as must do's.

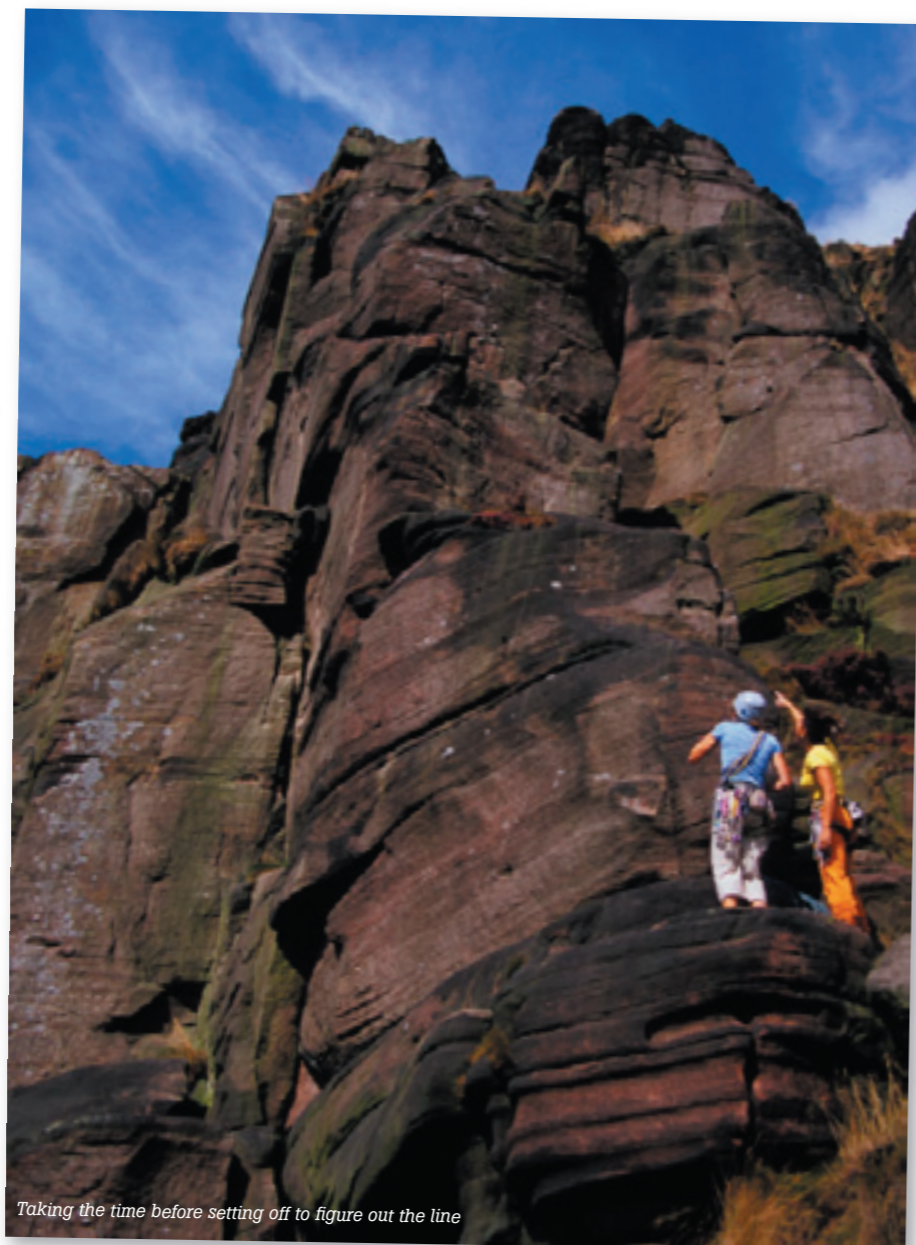
– Libby Peter

First time climbers are often surprised that their introduction to climbing is on a route given a grade of 'Very Difficult' when they were expecting something easy to start off on. Explaining that 'V. Diff' is in fact quite straightforward doesn't make sense. Likewise, when the time comes to aspire to your first 'Very Severe' or 'Extreme' the label is alarmingly explicit and straight away makes you feel nervous. Moving into the realms of a new grade is always daunting, even when you know a bit more about the grading system. It is a common scenario that climbers fair better on a route believing it to be a grade easier than it actually is or not knowing the grade at all. If it was possible to do away with the grading system and simply climb routes that you liked the look of I'm sure you'd climb harder than you ever thought possible. OK, there would be the odd epic too but I think you get my point.

In other words, grades aren't everything and can be a psychological hindrance, however, they do help you progress steadily and safely by picking the right objectives and giving you something to aim for.

How to climb V. Diff!

Our grand tour kicks off with the beautiful grade of V. Diff (Very Difficult), which of course is not where the grading system begins. Easy, Moderate and Difficult front up the British Adjectival grading system with those first two best described as scrambling. 'Easy' scrambling is often encountered when descending from the crag in stepped gullies and is the sort of thing you'd do in walking boots high on the trickier sections of a rocky peak like the North Ridge of Tryfan or Striding Edge on Helvellyn. 'Moderate' scrambling can feel tricky in walking boots (Grade 3 scrambles can have sections of Moderate rock climbing) but in rock boots it feels straightforward with a choice of big



Taking the time before setting off to figure out the line

section of cliff or rocky mountainside and it has vegetation interspersed with steps of rock and plentiful ledges it's probably Easy or Mod. If there are passages of continuous rock with footholds smaller than half boot size and handholds less than a full hand width it's most likely Diff. Don't forget, though, that grades are subjective and not always consistent!

The essence of V. Diff

V. Diff encompasses many of the long mountaineering routes on our lofty hills, where scrambling merges with more challenging pitches of continuous rock. These routes often follow elegant natural lines that incorporate a mix of exposure and difficulty. You'll come across moves that force you to stop and ponder for a moment; ledges that allow sociable re-organisation and route finding that

holds and rarely anything too steep. 'Diff' climbing can be found on easy angled slabs, long rock ridges (such as Tower Ridge on Ben Nevis in summer) or on steeper sections of rock if the holds are plentiful and large.

As a rough gauge, if you scrutinise a

► Getting an early wire in to prevent a ground fall; the attentive belayer is prepared for a slip.

can range from blindingly obvious to deviously complex. These long mountain V. Diffs can be climbed in big boots 'alpine style' or in rock boots having changed footwear at the base of the climb. There are pros and cons to both approaches. Climbing in big boots can add considerable difficulty if you're not used to it, the sensitivity of where you're placing your foot is lost and there isn't the friction of sticky rubber to rely on. That said, there is a distinct satisfaction and simplicity in completing the whole journey in one footwear mode. There is also a fantastic choice these days within the walking/mountain boot category, so a neat-fitting light but stiff boot will feel precise to climb in compared to a wide, bendy walking boot.

Climbing in rock boots avoids these issues but means you'll probably be carrying your boots up with you, along with your other mountain day essentials (waterproofs, food and drink, map and compass etc). This added weight and bulk should not be underestimated. Climbing with a rucksack on takes a bit of getting used to. The weight pulls you off balance slightly until you learn to compensate for it and it tends to catch on the rock in confined spaces. You also need to get used to accessing the gear on your harness with a sack getting in the way. In particular there are two things to watch out for. The first is the waist belt blocking access to your gear loops; the rucksack waist belt needs to sit above the harness or you should clip it to itself behind the rucksack out of the way. The second is to make sure you don't trap slings underneath the shoulder straps of the sack.

At the other end of the V. Diff spectrum and in complete contrast are short, single pitch V. Diffs which often feel a great deal trickier and can be steep and intimidating – no more so than on gritstone.

Technical talk – simple systems

- **KEEP THINGS SIMPLE** is always the best approach and this should always be possible on V. Diffs. A single rope is nearly always the best choice and the nature of the terrain (especially on long ridge routes) often lends itself to good ledges and natural rock anchors (blocks, spikes and threads).
- **ONLY** if you've assessed the anchor



Big holds albeit on steep ground typifies V. Diff on grit.





Take a deep breath and go confidently.



The final crux rockover in completion; the cruise to the top is next!

to be 100% solid should you use just one, otherwise use as many as it takes until you feel reassured that your belay would hold you and your falling partner.

- **AVOID** belaying to single nuts or cams. You need at least two bomber pieces and if one of these is suspect use a third.
- **DON'T FORGET** that if the anchor is too large to take a sling you can use the rope directly around it and tie the end off back into your rope loop with a clove hitch on a HMS (pear shaped) screwgate or by tying a figure of eight on a bight (see photo).

Profile of a V. Diff

Name: The Arête

Crag: Hen Cloud, Staffordshire

Length: 30m

No of pitches: Can be done in one but it's best split on the second big ledge.

Rock Type: natural gritstone

Guidebook: Staffordshire Gritstone (BMC), Western Grit RockFax, On Peak Rock (BMC)

Character: An intimidating line with an alarmingly steep and technical crux high on the route. Protection is good where it's needed and the rock is immaculate. A route to aspire to once you have some V. Diff mileage under your belt.

Although this route wouldn't be a good choice for your first V. Diff it can be

attacked in manageable sections with huge ledges in between to rest and ponder on. An early wire protects the first tricky moves (see photo) then the climbing is steady until an obvious impending wall stops you in your tracks. Bomber runners can be arranged and it's a good example of a place where it's wise to cluster two or more pieces of protection as the gear below this seems far away. Once you're happy with the gear you can step back down to rest and have a careful look at the moves. Get up high and go on a fact-finding mission by having a feel around, step down again if necessary then go confidently- the holds appear where you need them – the rest is a breeze!

The V. Diff hit list

Here's a few classic's around the country to seek out, but remember that any graded list is subjective. Have fun!

Soft touch: Bramble Buttress, Craig y Gesail, Tremadog. A gentle and often quiet day out

Benchmark: Scratling Crack, Baggly Point, Devon. The first ever sea cliff classic? Put

up way back in 1898.

Flying Buttress, Dinas Cromlech, Llanberis Pass. The difficulties increase the higher you get but are never excessive. Superb position.

Troutdale Pinnacle, Black Crag, and Little Chamonix, Shepherds Crag, Borrowdale, Lake District. Even the polish doesn't detract from the quality.

Meaty: Heaven Crack, Stanage, Peak District. If you get it right the climbing flows and is simply heavenly!

Cioch Nose, A'Cioch, Applecross, N. W. Scotland. A wild setting and intimidating climbing make for a memorable experience.

Bowfell Buttress, Bowfell, Langdale (Hard V. Diff). A great mountain day out.

Agag's Groove, Buachaille Etive Mor, Glen Coe. Perhaps the finest route of the grade in Britain. Unmissable.

Tough for the grade (sandbag?): Flying Buttress, Stanage, Peak District. Fierce!

Terrier's Tooth, Chair Ladder, Cornwall. Simply great climbing after a hard start..

Peel Crack, Carn Barra, South Cornwall. A great crack in the upper wall, high in grade. □

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