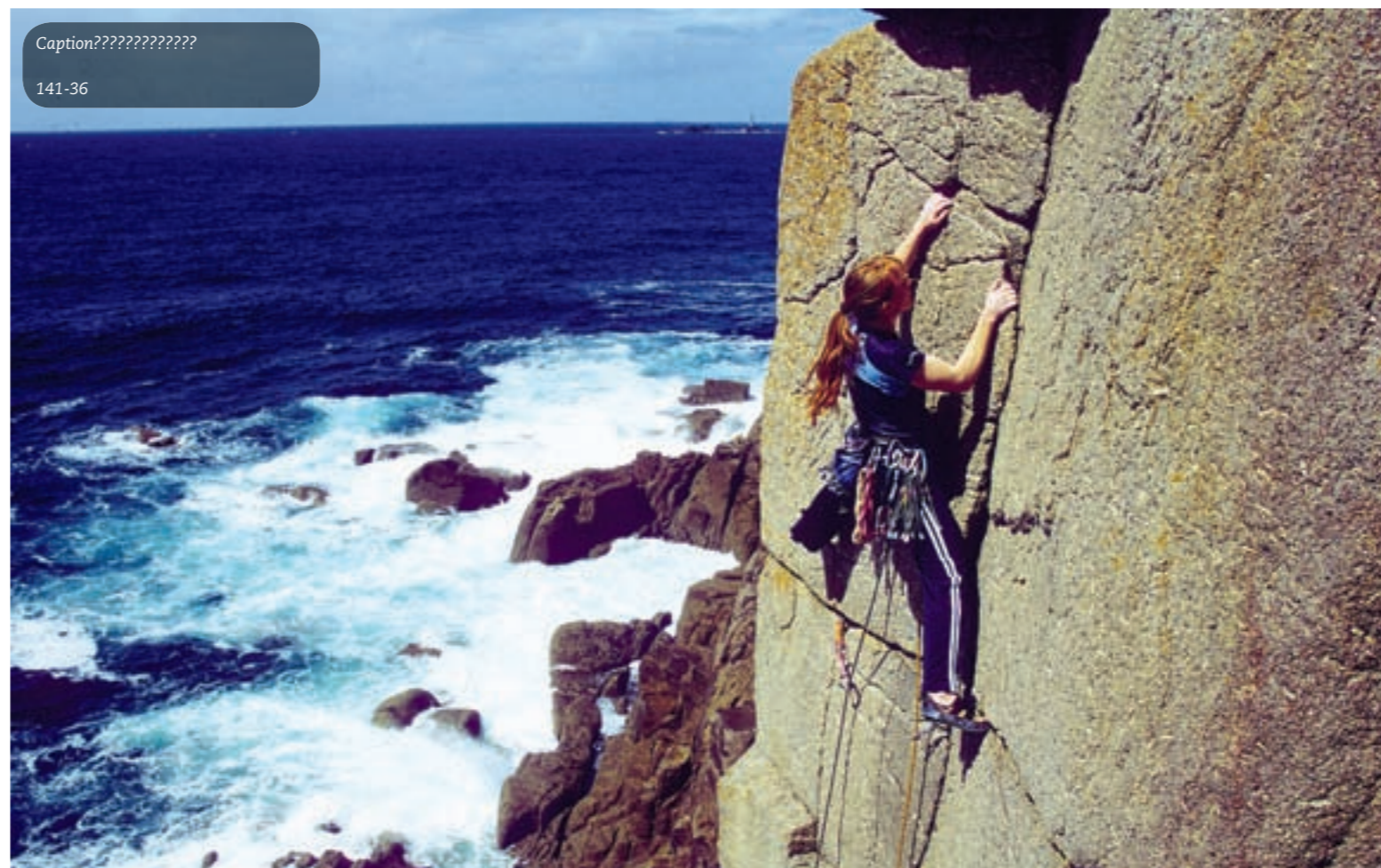


Libby Peter's Rock Essentials

No. 4 : Granite



Ruth Taylor on *South Face Direct* (VS 4c),
Chair Ladder, Cornwall.
All photography: Mike Robertson



Caption???????????????

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How granite is formed

Granite is an igneous rock originating from the slow crystallisation of molten magma cooling deep beneath the Earth's surface. It forms great pillow accumulations called batholiths, which once uplifted and exposed, create great undulating plateaus punctuated by the sheer cliffs carved by glaciation. The word 'granite' is derived from the Latin *granum*, meaning grain and describes the granular texture of the rock. Granite always consists of the minerals feldspar and quartz, which give granite a light colour ranging from pinkish to white. But that light background colour is peppered with darker accessory minerals, such as the black mica – biotite and the black amphibole – hornblende.

Granite is a strong rock because its mineral grains have been knitted tightly together during a very slow cooling period and the quartz and feldspar that compose it are harder than steel. It's highly resistant to weathering and acid rain so it's no surprise that granite is used widely in buildings and more importantly, makes such awesome cliffs.

Geographical spread

To find the best granite you should travel to either end of the country. The tip of Cornwall has exquisite granite cliffs, plunging dramatically into the restless Atlantic.

The settings are beautiful and the rock immaculately clean. Several hundred miles to the North, in the Highlands of Scotland, there are world-class crags in abundance; the Loch Avon (pronounced A'an) basin, in the heart of the Cairngorms is one of the most magical places you'll ever climb (summer or winter). The glacially gouged loch plunges deep into the heart of the granite massif, giving a focal point and grandeur to the five separate big granite cliffs that overlook the head of the loch, each one with a clutch of classics to work your way through.

The other main granite areas in the UK are Dartmoor, where the uniquely weathered tors sit proudly amidst a wild and windswept landscape, and the Mourne mountains in the South East of Northern Ireland, which boast over a thousand routes on 20 separate crags with every grade covered.



Photo: Rich Mayfield.

Worldwide, granite geology provides us with some of our most inspiring rock walls and climbing arenas. The Yosemite Valley in California is perhaps the most famous of all with the 3000ft El Capitan and the distinctively carved Half Dome.

How to climb it

Climbing on granite for the first time can be a humbling experience. The great sweeps of rock, whether slabby or steep, are often devoid of obvious looking holds and the moves can be hard to read. Though much of the time you're climbing in-balance, there are frequent unusual moves that require ingenuity and above all else, confidence.

Granite slabs are notoriously sustained, with move after move identical to the last. Though the friction is good, it's often hard to trust it and the prospect of the long grating slither undermines confidence and good technique.

Many steeper cliffs and tors have characteristic deep horizontal weathered cracks and breaks with rounded edges, requiring big open handed moves that once again respond best to a confident approach. These are coupled with vertical cracks that are, more often than not, wider than you'd like. The climbing is physical and often inelegant.



Caption?????????????
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How to place gear in granite

We don't bolt granite (very much) in this country so you need a standard rack plus the addition of both micro gear and big pieces. Granite crack systems come in all sizes, from tiny seams to off-width. You'll use everything from the tiniest micro wires in

vague widenings in the seams, to the biggest cams you can carry (4s and even 5s). Cams do work wonders in granite but be wary of cams sitting against crystals inside cracks. These same crystals may also prevent nuts from seating fully.

Special features and particular hazards

Tors are a wonder of granite. Though they are rarely higher than 10-15m, these natural hilltop crags sculpted by years of weathering produce intriguing climbs.

Feldspar knobs are perfectly engineered hand and footholds protruding from otherwise smooth granite faces. There's a particularly memorable knob pitch on the evocatively named *Lotus Flower Tower*, above the Fairy Meadows in North West Canada's Cirque of the Unclimbables.

Granite's rough 'cheese grater' texture is legendary; wearing shorts and granite lobs just don't mix.

The **sustained** nature of many granite pitches, both slabs and cracks, is exhausting. The off-width 'stove-leg' cracks on El Cap's *The Nose* are a good example.

Best loved crags and routes

The Cairngorms in Scotland is without doubt THE place to go for granite. In the Loch A'an basin you'll find something for every occasion. *Afterthought Arête* is a delightful Mod on Stag Rocks, *Auld Nick* is a great Severe on Hell's Lum and *The Needle* (E1 5b) on Shelter Stone is excellent, but *The Steeple* (E2 5c) on the same cliff, is without doubt one of the best E2s in the country.

The Northern Corries, though less remote have some great climbs dotted amongst the looser sections of cliff. *Magic Crack* (HVS 5a) in Coire an t-Sneachda, and *Savage Slit* (VD) in Coire an Lochain are both 3 star quality.

For remoteness seek out *Squareface* (VD) and *Mitre Ridge* (HS) on Beinn a' Bhuid. Then make the trek to Creag an Dubh-loch where there's at least a lifetime's climbing, *Black Mamba* (VS 4c) is a good place to start. And while you're over there nip up *Eagle Ridge* (S) on Lochnagar – it's brilliant.

The Etive (Trilleachan) Slabs near Glen Coe are uniquely sculpted and uniquely terrifying. Get a feel for it on *Spartan Slab* (VS 4c). If that goes well get on *Hammer* (HVS 5a) and if you haven't terrified yourself enough take a look at *Swastika* (E2 5c).



Mike Robertson high on *Snake Dyke* (5.7R), Half Dome, Yosemite, California. Photo: Will Jones.

Cornwall: Sennen, Bosigran and Chair Ladder are all world-class crags with umpteen classics to their credit. *Demo Route* (HS) on Sennen is a must-do, as is *Doorpost* (HS) on Bosigran, *Terrier's Tooth* (HS 4b), *South Face Direct* (VS 4c) and *Bishops Rib* (E1 5b) on Chair Ladder are all faultless.

Dartmoor's Hay Tor and Low Man are amongst the best hereabouts with a spread of crags to suit most tastes.

The Mourne Mountains are a compact range of hills with an eastern seaboard that adds an exotic flavour. You can walk in or not, climb long routes or short and find every grade. Lower Cove in the Annalong Valley is high quality and south facing, Pigeon Rock is very accessible and also south facing, whilst Eagle Rock is one the most extensive, but rather north facing, crags in The Mournes.

Yosemite's 8 pitch *Snake Dike* (5.7) climbs an amazing granite rail feature to the top of Half Dome – sheer brilliance. □

Libby has been climbing for over 20 years, she's a qualified Mountaineering Instructor and IFMGA Guide and is the author of *Rock Climbing – Essential Skills and Techniques* published by MLTUK and recently produced *Get Out On Rock* – the definitive instructional DVD. In late April/May she'll be on tour with Lucy Creamer to deliver a series of rock climbing lectures and practical masterclasses, organised by the BMC and sponsored by Cotswold Outdoors. For more info check thebmc.co.uk