



Meilee Rafe setting off on the second pitch of **Sea Groove** (VS 4b, 4b), White Tower, Pembroke, having placed those crucial early runners. All photos: Mike Robertson.

# Libby Peter's Climbing Essentials

## No. 10: Multi-pitch Essentials

OK, it's time to get adventurous and launch yourself at something longer. Maybe you're thinking of setting off on your first ever multi-pitch climb, in which case you'll want to find a venue with compact two-three pitch climbs that have easy access and descents. Perhaps you've already enjoyed success on a few such routes and feel ready to try something longer, more remote or more committing. Either way there's a host of additional considerations and decisions to make that threaten to make the outing stressful. A full understanding of what you're taking-on and a methodical approach will help you de-stress and you may even enjoy the experience!

### So what's new?

One of the many concerns all climbers have when they start tackling multi-pitch climbs is finding and then staying on the right line. For your first few longer climbs choose routes that follow obvious features, such as corner systems, long cracks or arêtes. Even if the word-by-word description leaves you a little baffled you can be confident that by sticking to the intended rock feature you can't go too far astray.

Needless to say you need to have the guidebook with you on the climb (tucked in a pocket or hanging from your harness in a neat pouch) and take some time at each belay to read the description and

► Despite the self-imposed time pressure during their **Hard Rock** challenge, Rich Mayfield and Mark Stevenson check the guidebook on **Central Buttress** (HVS), Scafell. They are wearing jackets already so carry their shoes and waterproof trousers clipped to their harness rather than climb with a rucksack.







◀ Rich, now he's sure he's on-route sets off confidently on the next pitch. Mark is in a good position to watch Rich attentively.

those loads that could be generated – from below if your second falls off, from the side if there's a traverse and from above if your partner takes a lead fall (with runners in) from the next pitch. Choose the anchors that will best cope with the most likely potential loading.

**Fine-tuning your belay position:**

Remember, you may be stood or sat there for quite some time so get as comfy as you possibly can. Don't allow any slack between you and the anchors and make sure if you do end up holding a fall the rope won't be crushing your leg.

**Stacking the ropes:**

On smaller ledges it's better to lap the rope over the anchor ropes or your foot than risk them slithering off down the crag to get tangled.

**Making room for your second:** While your partner is seconding the pitch think through the best place for them to stand and make themselves safe. As they arrive at the stance move to the side so they can join you easily.

**Slick and quick changeovers:** You can save many minutes here by being organised. If you're swinging leads the second who's about to lead need only clip in temporarily with a clove-hitch to one of the anchors, or on really large ledges the belayer simply ties an overhand knot in the rope behind the belay device so they can take their hands off. The new leader re-racks the gear while the new second takes the guidebook and starts figuring out where the route goes.

**Additional gear**

Don't underestimate how much extra gear you'll need; enough for two belays plus the pitch in between. A minimum of two sets of nuts and a set of cams or hexes plus a few extras that you think may be particularly useful – normally the mid-large size nuts. The second can always carry the extra ones. Also count up the number of screwgates you're likely to use; it could be three on each belay. A few extra long slings are also worth carrying. Plus an old sling and karabiner you won't mind leaving behind if you need to abseil off or a length of 'tat' that can be abandoned in a retreat.



Multi-pitch belays often require several anchors and a clever system to stop the ropes dropping off the ledge. Here, on *Central Pillar (E1)*, Esk Butress, Rich laps them into a sling on the belay.

compare the crag diagram/photo to what you can see. Normally the second carries the guidebook, that way if the leader needs some directions mid-pitch the second can take a peek and shout up.

On less well-featured climbs route finding is undoubtedly complex and as this is such a big and important subject we're going to look at it in more detail next month.

**Multi-pitch belays and stance organisation**

**Deciding where the pitch ends:** Most pitches finish on a ledge of some description but these aren't always flat or spacious and are often easily missed. But remember that there should be a

good reason for the pitch to end in a certain spot. It could be that the route heads off around a corner or makes a sharp change of direction, which is best left for the next pitch. Or it may simply be that it's the only decent ledge within the rope length. Your partner can help with the distance you've climbed by keeping a check on how much rope is left and shout out at halfway etc. Once you know a climb you may decide that short pitches can be run together but in general you have fewer problems (communication and running out of gear for example) if you keep the pitches short and in step with the guidebook.

**Choosing the most appropriate anchors:** Think about the loads and direction of

**What else to carry en-route**

On most long routes that have equally long walk-offs where it'll be far preferable to change out of your rock boots. In the



▲ **Diagram 1:** Supplied by Vertebrate Graphics from *Rock Climbing-Essential Skills and Techniques*, published by MLTUK.

(adjacent??) photo you can see Rich and Mark have their shoes clipped out of the way at the back of their harness and are taking no chances with the weather – rather than carry a waterproof they have them on already.

On chilly days you may want to tie an extra layer around your waist and tuck some snacks in a pocket. On those rare hot and sunny ones a sip of water from a hydration pack or bottle clipped to your harness will be very welcome.

**First runner**

People are always preaching about the importance of that first runner – but why? It's simple, if the leader falls with no runners – regardless of how far they fall, they put a slamming, high-impact force on the belayer, belay and themselves (See **diagram 1** and Meilee in Pembroke). This is a problem if the anchors are poor but more significantly the belayer may find the fall hard to hold because A) it's a massive load and B) you've probably orientated the belay device and brake arm in anticipation of an upward load.

The two situations combined can spell trouble so ALWAYS get that early first runner in even if the climbing is easy.

**Estimating how long it'll take**

It's a curious phenomenon that when you're leading time flies and when you're seconding it crawls by. Time yourselves to see how long it really takes. The following time estimations give you a very rough guide.

- Lead pitch: 20-40mins
  - Build belay: 3-8mins
  - Second strips their belay: 3mins
  - Second follows pitch: 10-15mins
  - Changeover for next pitch: 5-10mins
  - Total time per pitch: 41mins-1hr16mins
- Add time for the walk-in, the decent and walk-off and decide if you should add a headtorch to your gear-list! ☐

Libby has been climbing for over 20 years, she is a qualified Mountaineering Instructor and IFMGA Guide and is the author of *Rock Climbing – Essential Skills and Techniques* published by MLTUK. Her base is North Wales from where she runs the guiding outfit Llanberis Guides ([info@llanberisguides.com](mailto:info@llanberisguides.com))

**STOP PRESS:** Check out Libby and Neil Gresham's, brand new release - *Get Out On Rock* - the definitive instructional rock-climbing DVD.