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Where Now?

Insider's tips for alpine and rock route-finding

By Michael Silitch



Route-finding can be sweaty, nerve-wracking business. It's no fun finding yourself runout and lost on moves that are way harder than they are supposed to be. Even if the climbing isn't difficult, getting off-route on a long climb can slow you down.

While guidebooks, topos and beta from friends are important tools to staying on track, they're no substitute for careful evaluation while you're approaching and climbing the route. Here are some skills to practice:

BEFORE YOU CLIMB

SEE THE BIG PICTURE Study the route as you approach. If it's not visible from basecamp, spend the afternoon gaining a vantage point so you know where the route starts and finishes. Numerous people heading to Colorado's Petit Grepon or the Grand Teton's Exum Ridge have started up the entirely wrong formation -- consider a topographical map for tricky alpine approaches.

DRAW YOUR OWN TOPOS From your vantage point, compare the guidebook topo to what you see, and annotate the topo with helpful landmarks. It's prudent to bring along topos of neighboring routes, so you can compare where your route goes in relation to the others.

Discuss the route with your partner to make sure you're in agreement about the route line. Equally important, identify your retreat options from various points of the route in case bad weather should arrive. Make sure both of you have a personal copy of the topo that you can carry in your pockets while leading.

WHILE CLIMBING

LOOK FOR TRAMPLED GROUND Worn vegetation, or a lack thereof, is often a sign of a popular route. If you are supposed to be climbing a three-star route and the crack is packed with grass or moss, you're probably off-route.

DON'T BE LURED BY FIXED GEAR Pitons or webbing slings aren't always signs of a thoroughfare -- sometimes they are just another team's retreat anchor from when they got off-route. Be sure the anchor slings you see above you are actually part of your route, not bad bait.

TRAVERSE If you are unsure of which way to go, try traversing 100 to 200 feet in either direction to gain a new perspective. Have your partner belay you as you scamper out -- often the key to unlocking the route will be just around the corner or ridge.

IF YOU'RE REALLY LOST

CONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS Ask yourselves: can you and your partner make do by climbing the terrain in front of you, or is it too difficult? Remember, the last thing you want is to end up on sketchy terrain when night falls. If going farther feels like a bad idea, consider rappelling to the last known landmark on the proper route and starting over from there. Or play it safe and rap the route -- you can always come back another day.

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Emergency rappel gear

If you're climbing an alpine route, be prepared to rappel at any time should weather or impending darkness force you down. The following gear is helpful:

*20 to 30 feet of 9/16-inch webbing or cordelette. This is in addition to two belay cordelettes that you should be carrying. This material is good for building and strengthening rap anchors, slinging horns or blocks, or extending the anchor over an edge so the rope pulls smoothly.

*Small knife to cut the cord to length.

*Two ropes. Either two half or twin ropes, or a single rope and a thin haul line -- you'll be thankful for the 200-foot rappels if a booming thunderstorm rolls in.

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