

Snake Dike 5.7 R★★★★★

Time to climb route: 3-4 hours

Approach time: 3-4 hours

Descent time: 3-4 hours

Sun exposure: late morning to sunset

Height of route: 800'

A dramatic setting with clean and exposed climbing qualifies Snake Dike as one of the most glorious moderate climbs on the planet. The long and aesthetic approach will take you past two beautiful waterfalls, through the backcountry and past an isolated lake to the southwest toe of Half Dome. The route climbs an 800-foot salmon-colored dike that wanders up the dramatic southwest face of Half Dome. The combination of a 6-mile hike to the base, eight pitches of climbing, and a 9-mile descent back to the Valley makes for a full adventure and may require more than one day.

History

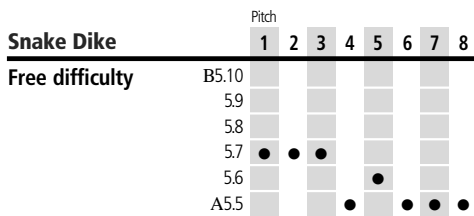
Climbers who made the long trek up to the base of the massive Southwest Face of Half Dome before 1965 went there for one reason only: to do the classic Salathé-Nelson route. This demanding aid line wandered up unconnected crack systems, but it was the only way to the top since everyone knew that the rest of the wide face was crackless, and obviously impossible. When Camp 4 inhabitants heard in July 1965 that a second route had been put up nearby, the sense of disbelief was audible. When the first ascensionists—Eric Beck, Jim Bridwell, and Chris Fredericks—bragged that their route was trivial, disbelief turned to disdain. When they claimed that they had placed only two pitons and about

six hurried bolts, disdain evolved to thoughts that the three men should be committed. A far easier route than Salathé's? But it was true. Beck had been the instigator of the route soon named Snake Dike; he had spotted a potential route on a reconnaissance and had talked the two others into making the horrendous approach. To their great surprise they put up the new route in a day from Camp 4 back to Camp 4.

Years later, Beck reminisced about their climb. "We were expecting a much harder route and only had twelve bolts, so we did our best to conserve them where the climbing was easy. What I really imagined happening was that we would get up a few pitches, fix the ropes, and return with more bolts. Also, our original choice of line was to follow a dike leading up and right on Pitch 3. This was Bridwell's lead and he climbed up about 20 feet, got in a bolt, but didn't like it. This caused more uncertainty about routefinding and wasting our bolts. I then gained the lead and had a look to the left. This proved to be the best way."

Two years later I grabbed a stranger named John Gibbons and we set off at dawn from a campsite in Little Yosemite, armed with a hefty bolt kit. Ordinarily, taking a bolt kit for an easy second ascent would have made me a laughingstock. But Beck, Bridwell, and Fredericks, feeling that they had created a potential death route for beginners, had given me permission to replace their bad bolts and stick in new ones where I deemed necessary. This was the first time in Valley history that first ascensionists had given someone permission to add bolts to their route.

At the end of two pitches Gibbons and I realized that the Dike was truly a splendid route, and I made sure my bolts were bombproof and properly spaced. That is, I did this for a while. My fingers and arms soon began to throb from all the hand drilling. Morning turned to afternoon. I inspected my dulled drill bits. I listened as Gibbons called up anxiously, "You finished?" Soon I simply ran out the pitches



and relied on the sporadic and wretched first ascent bolts. We rappelled the route and staggered down through the brush to our camp below, arriving just as the owls began to hoot.

Snake Dike hadn't been totally retrofitted, but it had been a good day and a good start. We spread the word and within a few years many more bolts had been added, and Snake Dike became the most popular climbers' route to the top of the most spectacular hunk of granite in North America.

– Steve Roper

Strategy

Start early, as the day will be long. Snake Dike is extremely popular even during a weekday. Prepare for crowds, unexpected weather changes, and a late finish. A 60m rope allows more options for linking pitches, but is not required. Many of the belays are at uncomfortable stances, so roomy climbing shoes are recommended.

On the first pitch crux it's possible to climb high up and right to set pro, then back down before moving left to 5.7 friction. The third pitch crux is both the technical and psychological crux of the climb: an exposed 5.7 friction traverse. At the end of the traverse is an alternate belay/rap station with two bolts. To better protect your follower on the traverse, clip these bolts with an extra long sling, or skip the bolts and climb up the dike to the next bolt, which offers a better rope angle for the follower on the friction traverse. From here on up, easier climbing wanders up the salmon-colored dike for four pitches with very runout 5.4 R and 5.3 R sections. On the worst runouts, you will climb as much as 75 feet of 5.4 R without any protection, clip a bolt, and then climb another 75 feet of 5.4 R to the anchor. Climb carefully on these amazing, secure, and dangerously runout sections.

The sun hits the climb by mid-morning and temperatures range from very hot to



Mark Koese

Endless 5.4 jugs (and a big runout) on Pitch 4.

windy and cold. During the summer, afternoon thunderstorms are common and lightning strikes on Half Dome's summit have killed. Be respectful of approaching thunderclouds and do not hesitate to retreat if the risk of lightning arises.

Many climbers give themselves more time by camping at either Lost Lake or Little Yosemite Valley the night before starting the route. Consult the Wilderness Center for permits and information or visit www.nps.gov/yose/wilderness/permits.htm.

Wild-at-heart climbers are sometimes found climbing this route by full moon.

Retreat

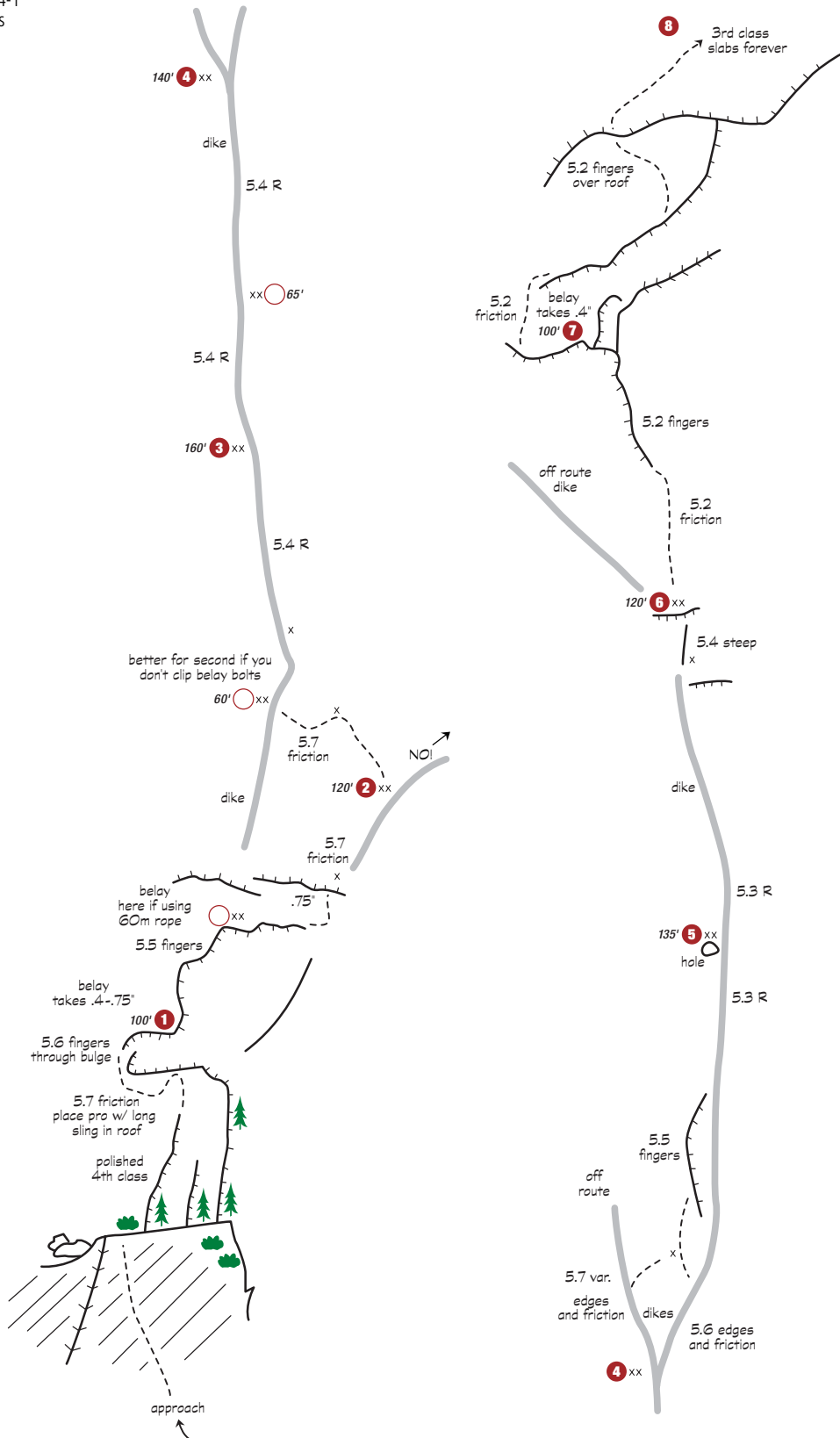
The route can be rappelled easily from any point using two 50m or 60m ropes.

More at SuperTopo.com

View a photo gallery of Snake Dike at www.supertopo.com.

Rack

nuts: 1 ea med, lrg
 cams: 1 ea .4-1"
 6 quickdraws
 slings



The Final Pitch

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Chris McNamara

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Thanks again,

Chris McNamara

Founder and CEO
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