

Washington Column

To the east end of the Valley juts out an impressive prow of overhanging rock. Washington Column bears its name from a supposed resemblance to our first president. 1100' of golden granite is divided into two distinct faces. The east face sports long, clean, continuous, cracks on a steep and intimidating wall. The lower angle South Face features are more varied and vegetated with a surprising number of trees. Making convenient anchors, these trees inspired one of the first serious roped climbs in 1933. Though unsuccessful, the attempt opened minds to the possibilities of Yosemite's Walls.

Approach

From the Ahwahnee Hotel parking area, hike east along a dirt road (through the Valet parking area) until reaching the bike path. Continue east (left) for about 0.5 mile to a point where the bike path and horse trail (on the left) nearly meet. At the point where the bike path turns right, head left, cross the horse path, and continue into the trees. A climbers' trail winds up to the base of a wall and then continues up and right to the base of the East Face of Washington Column.

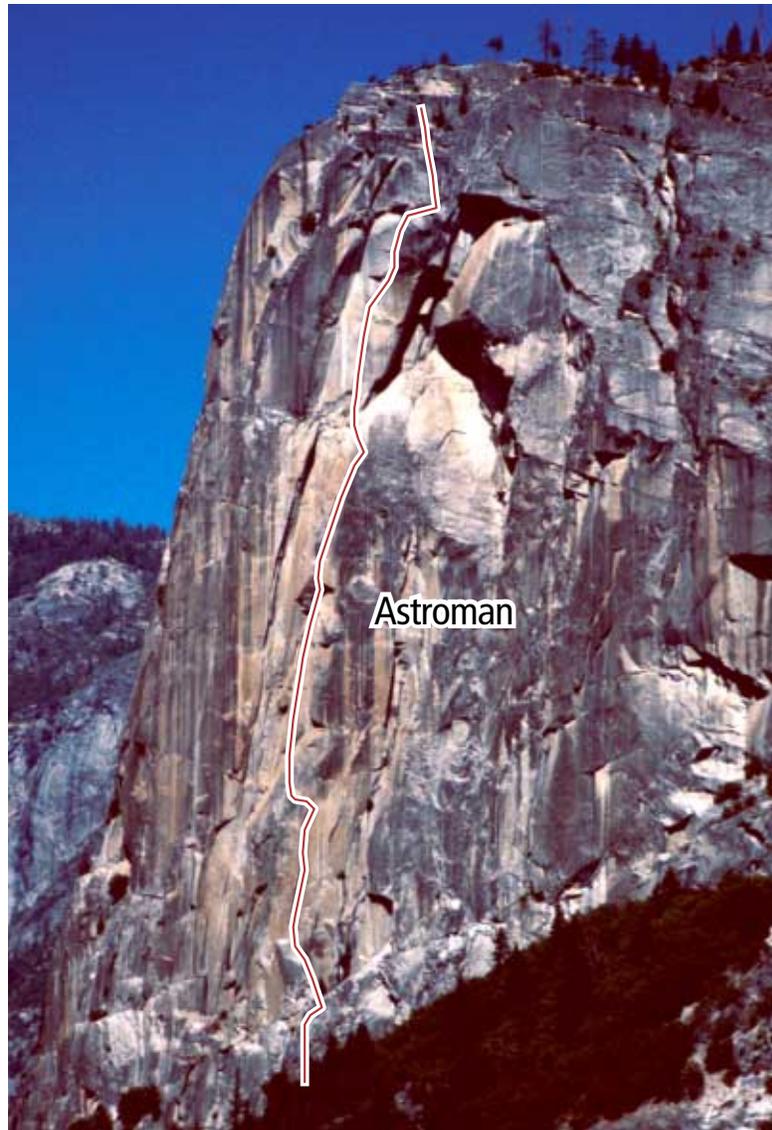
Descent

From the top of Washington Column there are three descent options:

North Dome Gully

Though by no means enjoyable this is the best and fastest descent option. Allow 1-2 hours if experienced with the descent and 2-4 hours if it is your first time. Do not attempt at night unless familiar with the descent.

For this descent, refer to the SuperTopo North Dome Gully Descent.



Royal Arches Rappels

This option depends on your ability to find the top of the Royal Arches route. This is a difficult task unless you have already climbed the Royal Arches. This options takes 2-4 hours.

North Dome Trail

This is the longest and most grueling descent but may be the best option if you are descending in a storm and are unfamiliar with the North Dome Gully. For this descent, walk northwest until you pick up the North Dome Trail. Follow this for about eight miles until you reach Camp 4.



Astroman V 5.11c★★★★★ v12.21.00

- Time to climb route: 10 hours
- Approach time: 40 minutes
- Descent time: 1.5 hours
- Number of pitches: 11
- Height of route: 1100'

Astroman is one of the best long free routes in the United States. When first established, this climb was the domain of only the most honed climbers in the world. Today, still considered a Valley testpiece, Astroman has lost little of its stature or mystique. Climbers who have the skill and nerve to attempt Astroman will find tremendous exposure, flawless rock quality and mostly solid protection. The climbing involves every technique imaginable from balancy face moves and boulder problems to sustained hand jamming and a squeeze chimney.

History

I was not too happy with the route name Astroman when I first heard it. Sure, the word itself had a fabulous ring to it, but the newly named route *already had a name*. This was what disturbed me. Never mind that the old name was pedestrian: the East Face of the Washington Column. This was back in 1975, and the arrogant notion of re-naming a route once it had been freed was fairly new. (I'm still not thrilled by this dying trend—and pleased that Lynn Hill didn't re-name the Nose!) And yet the climb christened Astroman, so radically different from the East Face route of 1959, perhaps demanded a new name.

When John Bachar, Ron Kauk and John Long topped out on that afternoon a quarter-century ago, they knew they had done something remarkable—the most continuously difficult free climb in the world. Of the 12 pitches, two were easy, five were 5.10 and five were 5.11!

The original ascent, done by Warren Harding and

Chuck Pratt, had been a fixed rope effort from bottom to top—a yearlong adventure. In addition, the trio had used aid on virtually every pitch—probably 225 aid placements altogether. The route overhung for much of its 1,100' height and it leaned annoyingly to the right on many pitches, making even the aid strenuous. Pratt and I, along with Eric Beck, made the fifth ascent in 1967 and used about 150 aid placements. The idea that the route would ever go free was ludicrous. Even that great crack specialist Pratt never harbored such a thought, though he did some scary and innovative 5.10 climbing on this route.

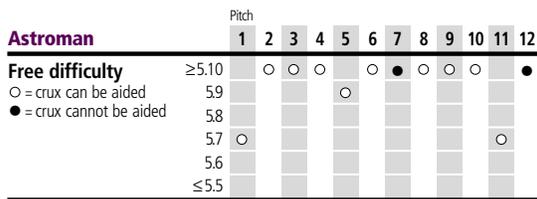
Kauk and Bachar, both 18 years old, went up on the route early in 1975 to see if a long, steep corner low on the route could be freed. Incredibly continuous, the corner (soon named the Enduro Pitch) did indeed go free at 11c. Kauk later called this severe pitch the "key to the door." The remainder of the route didn't look much worse, and when John Long heard this news he persuaded the pair to head back up with him.

Bachar led a short but fierce 11c "boulder problem" near the bottom for the first time. Kauk led both the Enduro Pitch and the 11a section just below the fabled Harding Slot in great style, but aid climbers above slowed the party by mid-afternoon. The trio descended to a bivy ledge, leaving a few ropes fixed. The next morning saw Long tackling the horrendous difficulties above the Harding Slot, including a harrowing mantelshelf at 11a, and, higher, a short section of 11b. A few hundred feet of "moderate" crack climbing followed, then Long led the summit pitch, a loose, unprotected 10d face.

Climbing historian Jim Vermeulen sums up the achievement: "In two short days, the trio had changed the rules of wall climbing." From this point onward, the lure of a first free ascent was just as powerful as the idea of a first ascent, and the Valley's hard men and women soon turned to even more intimidating walls, knowing that anything was now possible.

Kauk and Bachar both returned to Astroman within a year, and the climb quickly became a testpiece for climbers who wished to test their crack skills and/or gain notoriety. Werner Braun, who has lived and climbed in the Valley for 30 years, has done the route some 50 times. At least two climbers have soloed the wall unroped: Peter Croft (in 1987—and he did it several times) and Dean Potter (in 2000). Croft's ascent stunned the climbing world as the boldest ascent in Valley history. It goes without

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saying that only climbers capable of leading high 5.12s—and who have vast experience soloing more forgiving moderate 11s—have any business contemplating such madness. More appropriately, generations of roped climbers will find the route strenuous, historic and more than enough exercise for a day's outing.

— *Steve Roper*

Strategy

Although Astroman has many crux sections, the main difficulty of the climb is linking the many consecutive pitches of 5.10 and 5.11. Despite its fame, difficult and sustained climbing keeps traffic on the route to a minimum.

Pitch three, the Boulder Problem, is the most technical section of the route requiring powerful lieback moves with thin protection. The Enduro Corner is steep, powerful and sustained and sets the pace for the demanding pitches above. The Harding Slot, the Astroman's most notorious pitch, has reduced many an expert climber to curses and whimpers (it may help you slide upwards if you tie

in for this pitch so that the knot hangs well below the waist and out of the way). This pitch is wet in the winter and early spring. The last pitch is the most runout on the climb and is protected largely by fixed pitons and copperheads, and is sometimes wet. Try to find out the condition of this pitch before heading up on the route.

Sun hits the route first thing in the morning and leaves the face at 1pm. Spring and Fall are the best times to climb. During the summer, only exceptionally fast teams are able to climb the route while completely in the shade and even then heat may be a problem.

Retreat

Two 50m ropes are needed to retreat. The route can be rappelled easily from Pitch 1-6. Beyond Pitch 6, retreat is difficult due to the steep and traversing nature of the route. Above Pitch 8 you will need to leave gear in order to retreat.

