

rock on

A first-time climber experiences the challenges of scaling the region's rocks.

by Tatiana Munoz



HALFWAY THERE: Some experienced climbers recommend looking up (not down) to avoid undue anxiety.

I LIFT MY RIGHT FOOT and feel sweat forming on my palms. I cling to the rock with the strength of every muscle in me, but my fingers start to slip. I keep telling myself that there are just a few feet left to reach the top of the boulder. I take a deep breath, raise my left foot, and push myself up. My arms and chest burn. My legs hurt like all hell. But I do it. I make it to the top on my first attempt at outdoor rock-climbing. I glance over my shoulder to take in the view of the river and surrounding woods. Shit, I think, I have to go back down.

"Welcome to the adrenaline rush," says Greg Boyer, half of my coaching team, as he belays me down the rock. My heart pumps with such force that I begin to think it might beat out of my chest. Sure, I didn't climb Mount

Everest, but my aching body feels like I did. In fact, Boyer estimates the climb to be only about 40 or 50 feet. While that may sound like a minor triumph, nothing has made me tremble with as much fear as trying to Spiderman up that rock. But as my guides explain a bit later, the thrill and rush of the sport come not from how high the climb, but, rather, the level of difficulty.

I met Boyer and Mary Giehl, rock climbers extraordinaire, under the lock bridge at Little Falls' Moss Island. After getting in touch with them through a friend, the couple agreed to show me the ropes. The afternoon sun beat down on me, and between the heat and my anxiety, I began to feel the gloss of perspiration on my face and arms. Boyer and Giehl seemed sweat- and worry-free. They smiled, collecting the gear from the trunk of their car, eager to get started.

Climbers consider Little Falls a great starter climb. In fact, some of the East Coast's best rock climbing sites reside in New York, according to Frommer's state guide. Experienced climbers prefer the boulders in and around the Adirondacks and Shawangunk Mountains, but Central

New York offers several locations suited for novice climbers, including Little Falls. Rock climbing boasts several "styles" — ways of climbing based on how and where the rope is secured. Little Falls is a "top-rope" location. This means the rope is fastened above you, to the top of the rock, unlike traditional climbs where the climber leads while the rope hangs below. Essentially,

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the rope leads the way. Boyer believes top-rope climbing is one of the easier and safer styles of climb.

"Have you ever climbed before?" Giehl asks as she hands me a bag of equipment. "Well, inside a few times," I reply, omitting the fact that the top of the wall inside my old gym always eluded me. "Actually, I think you'll find outdoor climbing is easier," Boyer says. "On the wall, you know where you have to put your foot next. If you can't reach it, you're in trouble. But outside, you can choose your next step." I let out a sigh of relief.

Boyer and Giehl, who have climbed for several years, count ascents in California, British Columbia, Sicily, and Australia. This August, a work trip for Boyer will take the couple to Brazil and provides an excuse to earn another exotic notch in their climbing belts.

STRAP IT ON: Get to know the gear before you go. Giehl (top left) secures Tatiana's harness, and Boyer (top right) assures her the rope and gadgets can support more than 20 times her weight. Equipment necessary for any "top-rope" climb include (from left to right): locking carabiners, a belay device, D-shaped biners, rock shoes, and chocks.

The **thrill** of the sport comes not from how **high** the climb, but rather, the level of **difficulty**.

The couple makes jokes about being old compared to the shirtless 20-somethings speed-climbing effortlessly on the next boulder over. As we hike to the top to set up the ropes, Boyer explains that they feel a bit tired after playing in an over-50 volleyball tournament the day before — they took home the bronze. They barely break a sweat leaping over rocks and dodging bushes, showing no signs of exhaustion as I struggle to keep up. At this point, I'm pretty sure I want to be them when I grow up.

As Boyer sets up the rope with gadgets that tuck into crevices tight enough to lock into, he explains rock climbing's death-defying notoriety lacks merit. "Really, with all the safety features that are out now, you'd have to be doing something really stupid to get hurt. Between the cams and the rope, you're good for about 2,500 pounds," he explains. "We could probably hold a car up if we wanted to. It's when you aren't paying attention or take shortcuts that you are likely to get hurt."



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While Boyer does some last-minute tucking and tightening, I take in the view. Small boats pass by in the river that runs adjacent to where we are. I look over to the right and realize we have company. At least a dozen other eager climbers and spectators stand around in small clusters. All fit, all tan, all ages. Per their matching climbing shoes, thermal coolers, and lawn chairs, I realize they probably do this often. Boyer and Giehl address several climbers by name, and this group of strangers starts to seem like a community.

After my climbing success, I'm aching with exhaustion. For Boyer and Giehl, the climb serves as a warm up. They plan to scale rocks for the rest of the day. For three hours, I tag along as they each make three climbs. After a not-so-successful second climb and ongoing muscle spasms in my arm and legs, I decide to call it a day.

In my car, I collapse in the driver's seat. On the ride home, I fantasize about scrambling up rocks with ancient ruins in the backdrop. Just like Boyer and Giehl. Then I move my aching arm to turn the radio on and wince in pain. It might be a while before I'm ready. 🌿

VERTICAL LIMIT: If you need another reason to try rock climbing, consider the health benefits. During the 15-minute ascent, Tatiana burned more than 150 calories.



WHERE TO GO

MOSS ISLAND

Climb routes of varying difficulty while taking in the view from the bordering Erie Canal. Expect at least a dozen other climbers, so an early arrival is advised. Great location to meet fellow climbers of all levels. Located off exit 29A on the thruway and onto Moss Island.

NINE CORNER BOULDER

Perfect location for "rock starved" climbers in the Albany-Syracuse corridor, the boulders here range in size and difficulty from "diminutive to monstrous." The trail runs alongside Canada Lake, making it another

location worthy of both climbing and sightseeing.

ALBANY'S INDOOR ROCKGYM

For rainy days or to take technique and safety courses, check out an indoor alternative. A.I.R. has various routes of all climbing levels. Landscapes and sunsets decorate the walls to give you the full feel of climbing outdoors. For hours, cost, and registration information, check out www.airrockgym.com.

For more information on how to get started, go to www.SoYouWanna.com and search "rock climbing."

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