

CHARLOTTE DOME

The Sierra Nevada

The South Face 5.8



BY TODD VOGEL AND
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The Sierra Nevada range is a treasure trove of alpine climbing as well as the home of well-known road side destinations such as Yosemite Valley, Tuolumne Meadows, and the Needles. Squarely in the middle of the range sits Charlotte Dome, home to what we humbly submit is the best rock climb at its grade in the range, probably in California, and perhaps the west. With characteristics representing the best of the best climbing areas in the state, a beautiful approach hike, and an unrivaled view from the climb and summit Charlotte Dome is a grand adventure, a climb to be savored and remembered long after you take that last look back from the trail home.

Charlotte Dome is situated nearly smack in the center of the Sierra, roughly the same distance from the eastern approach out of the tiny Eastern Sierra town of Independence as it is from the western approach of Kings Canyon National Park. Either way one approaches there is a twelve mile approach hike.

Most parties use a full day for the approach, a full day on the route, and a full day return to the trailhead.

The South Face of Charlotte Dome has hundreds of different variations. We have provided a topo of the easiest way to climb the face. However, because it is easy to get off-route, you should be confident leading 5.9 before climbing this route. You should also be confident placing gear and working to get it since the cracks on the dome are discontinuous and devious. The rock and the climbing are reminiscent of Tuolumne Meadows: long, smooth faces that appear to be impossible from a distance are actually covered with knobs and texture, allowing for relatively easy climbing. Many water grooves and solution pockets make the climbing additionally manageable and totally unique (how often do you get to climb "furrows"?).

WHEN

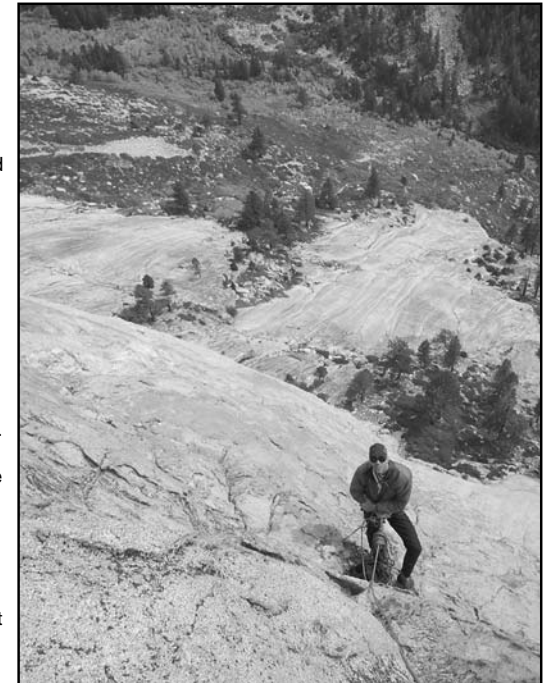
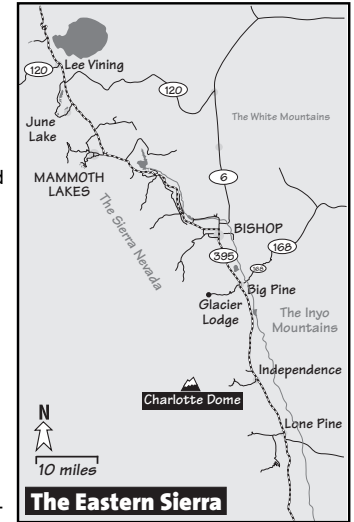
Generally the trails are snow free from mid June through the first fall snow storms, usually late October. The summit elevation is 10,690 ft and so even after the first few big snow storms of the fall it is generally possible to have good climbing conditions. The route faces south and dries quickly and mid winter ascents using skis to approach and return, though rare, are not unheard of.

Mount Gardiner is one of the classic peaks of the High Sierra. If you can afford to tack on one extra day for ascent of this peak it would be worth your while. (If you like classic knife edge alpine ridges).

PERMITS

You will need a permit for an overnight stay. Contact the Mount Whitney Ranger District, PO Box 8, Lone Pine, CA 93545, telephone 760-876-6200, for additional information about this trailhead the relevant web information can be found at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/inyo/wild/>

Bearproof food canisters are required to get a permit. They are available for rent at the roads end, at any Ranger station and outdoor shops in Bishop and Lone Pine.



Peter Coward photo: Andy Hyslop



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EQUIPMENT

I usually take small wired bd #'s 3-12, Camalots .5 to 1-#3 one each, 0.5-2.5 tricams are useful, 6 - 8 shoulder length runners, two 'biners for each of those, two double length runners. Leave the quick draws at home. 165' ropes are fine on this route but several times you will be out of rope when you reach the belay.

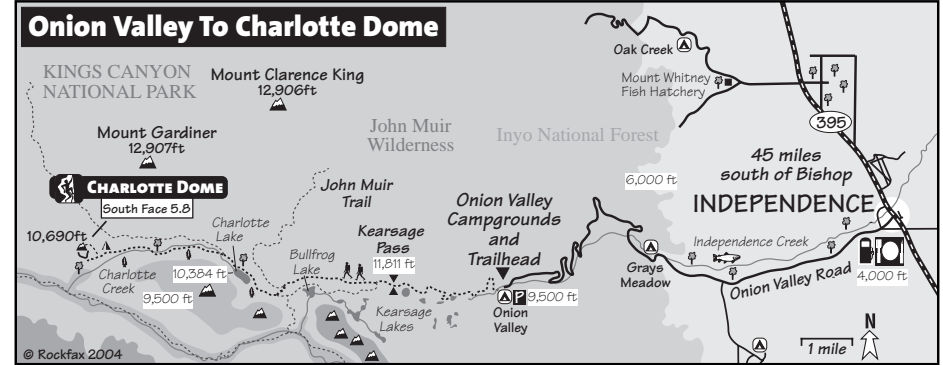
APPROACH - THE EASTERN APPROACH

There are two approaches: from the east side of the Sierra out of Onion Valley or from the west side of the Sierra out of Kings Canyon National Park. The western approach is slightly shorter than the eastern approach but involves much more elevation gain (from the west you start at 5,000 feet and from the east you start at 9,200 feet).

The eastern approach takes most climbers 5 -7 hours from the trailhead to the camping spot and another 45 minutes to the base of the climb. This approach involves about 8 miles of travel on trail and 4 miles on climbers' trail and cross-country travel. You gain about 2,500 feet to get over Kearsarge Pass and lose about that much before reaching the base of the climb. This means the hike out is about as difficult as the hike in. This eastern approach is described here.

Find your way to the small Eastern Sierra town of Independence (45 miles south of Bishop down Hwy. 395). Last minute supplies can be found here but if you need anything more than basic food your best bet is to go all the way to Bishop, 45 minutes to the north. From the center of Independence, drive west on the Onion Valley Road for 20 minutes (14 miles) to Onion Valley and the end of the road, which is the trailhead. This is another trailhead where you don't want to leave anything in your car. Food lockers are provided at the trailhead but they are often full and you won't be able to fit coolers and the like in them anyway. The bears here are determined. No food scraps or anything resembling food packaging should be left in the vehicle. Do your final packing down in town and clean out the car afterwards.

The Kearsarge pass trail is all up hill but it goes quickly and before you know it you will come out above tree line and the final switchback to the pass (11,811 feet). It's five miles and about 2,500' of gain to the pass from the trailhead. From Kearsarge pass the first hint of Charlotte Dome can be seen down the valley to the west. Only the summit of the climb is visible, just to taunt you on. The descent off the pass begins steeply but quickly mellows out. Avoid the Bullfrog Lake trail (no camping there anyway and better views from the main trail) and continue towards the intersection with the Muir trail. You're only on



the Muir trail for a few minutes before leaving to head west to Charlotte Lake. This is a great place to hang out for an hour or two but don't plan on camping here unless you want a really long day tomorrow. Rather, continue to the outlet to the lake and keep heading west.

This is where the approach starts to get interesting. Reset your altimeter for lake elevation (10,384 ft). Go 200 yards past the lake and cross the outlet on the well defined use trail and continue downstream. The trail crosses a talus slope, an open meadow, and heads back into forest. Soon it crosses the creek and starts to quickly deteriorate. This trail is the start of the old Gardiner Pass trail that was used back in the 1930's but which has seen little use other than climbers since then. Sometimes you'll have a great series of cairns to follow, and good trail, other times it will disappear for hundreds of feet, only to reappear as good as it was before. It is never necessary to drop below the 10,000 ft mark (3040m) although off route trail may convince you to do so. You'll pass several good water sources as you head west on the south facing slope below Mount Gardiner. These water sources are accurately portrayed on the 7.5 minute map "Mt. Clarence King", 1994 ed. As you cross the last of these water sources, at about 10,000 ft elevation the trail leaves forest and comes out into open brushy slopes. Looking west, towards Charlotte Dome you should be able to see a system of benches east of the dome, at and slightly above your elevation. These benches or small plateaus are your camp destination. The trail generally degenerates into bushwacking briefly through this section but watch that altimeter and keep heading towards those plateaus and you should rediscover a pretty good trail as you head back into denser forest. Camp is at about 10,300 ft so you do gain some elevation on the last little bit of the hike. The water source is the creek that comes off the south side of Mount Gardiner and good camps can be found on either side of the creek at the 10,300 ft mark. Even in late September in drought years this creek has water.

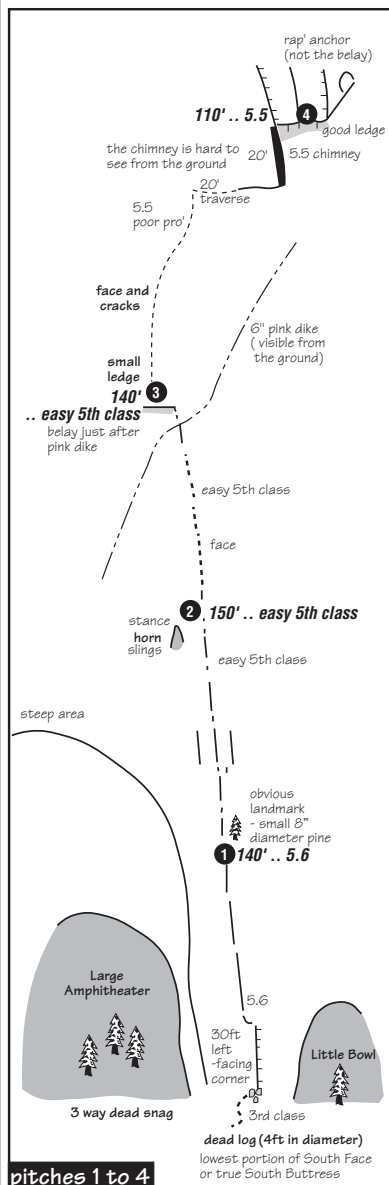


Peter Coward photo: Andy Hyslop

South Face 5.8

Charlotte Dome (10,690 ft.)

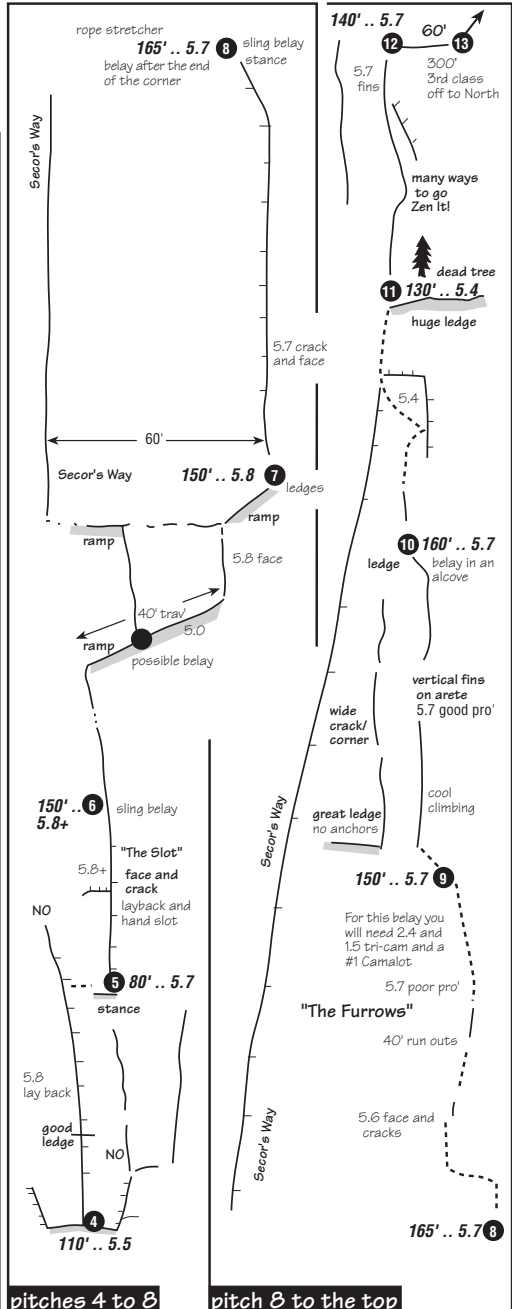
FA. Galen Rowell, Chris Jones, Fred Beckey,
October 1970



pitches 1 to 4

Retreat

Retreat by rappelling the route with two 50m or 60m ropes (with only one rope you will have to leave a ton of gear). There are usually fixed rap anchors on the first five pitches. Above here, you will have to leave your own gear.



pitches 4 to 8

pitch 8 to the top

INITIAL APPROACH

To the route: start by being on the west side of the creek coming off of Gardiner. Head down through the woods, trending right and you will leave the forest and come out onto slabs. About 200' is lost initially, until it is easy to head hard right and begin climbing back up to the lowest point of the south face of Charlotte. Occasional scrambling up and down will be encountered.

FINAL APPROACH AND THE ROUTE

The route has a reputation for difficult routefinding, but if you can find the start you'll probably do okay on the route. The climb begins just west of the lowest point on the center of the south face.

There's a large amphitheater to the left and a small depression to the right. Scramble over one four-foot diameter fallen dead tree 100 feet below the start. Three or four live pines are at climber's left of the actual start. Also look for a double forked dead tree near the start. Start by climbing a 30-foot-tall, 4-foot-deep left-facing corner that lead to an 8-inch diameter pine at the end of the first pitch.

Two pitches above this go more or less straight up via cracks and face.

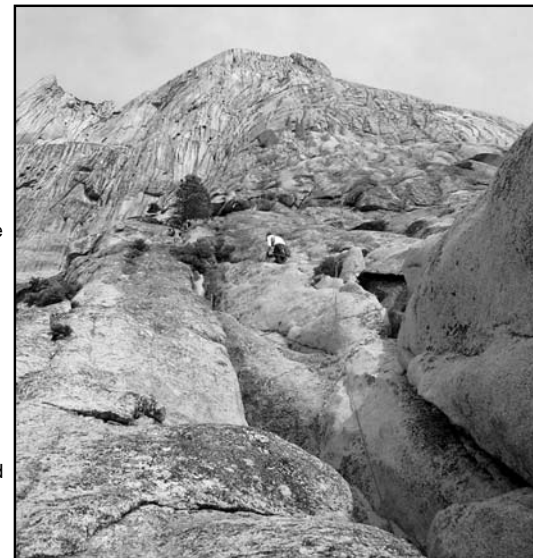
On pitch four, poorly protected face climbing up and right leads to an easy, 20-foot-long chimney. The pitch ends on a nice ledge (enjoy it), which is the last of the fixed rap anchors (sometimes there are none at all). Making a short fifth pitch up the beautiful 5.8 lieback will set you up nicely for the crux fifth and avoid a hanging stance.

The sixth pitch is know as "The Slot" and takes a hand crack through a steep area to a small stance atop a dike. For pitch seven follow the dike to the right and step right off the dike to a hidden crack that leads to a good ledge on the far right of a sloping ledge. Some 5.7 will be found as you approach the sloping ledge, where you can belay at the base of a straight up crack/ chimney. Pitch eight offers interesting 5.7 face climbing in a chimney type feature. The exposure is tremendous with thousands of feet of air down to Bubbs Creek. Mount Brewer dominates the southern skyline. With 50m ropes you'll barely make the hanging belay at the end of the crack system. Above the routefinding is a bit of a Zen affair where just about everything is climbable. The best line goes pretty much straight up, with rare detours for protection (bizarre and questionable nut and cam placements; knob tie-off), to a hanging belay. If the common mid-day winds kick up, get ready for some excitement.

The hard stuff is behind you now but you still have three or four pitches to go, the first two of which is the famous Furrows. Head up and left to the cool and easier-than-it-looks prow which is grooved by the giant furrows. These are deep erosional features with sharp edged fins and deep pockets between them. Climb straight up the prow for a full rope then another pitch continues up the prow and heads left to a left facing corner and a huge ledge system. (Bivvy spot, dead tree for reference). The final fifth class pitch has many options and is moderate 5th class. Climb straight right of the lower angled slab and on the left side of the steeper wall through wind-sculpted fins and knobs to the summit ridge. The summit is but a scramble away and hopefully you'll have time to enjoy the amazing view of the high peaks of the Southern Sierra.

DESCENT

Descend by first scrambling due north on third class terrain until you can gain the slabs that head back to the east. If you camped on the 10,300 ft plateau you've got about 45 minutes of descending from the summit. If you're down in Bubbs Creek take a handful of ibuprofen and keep heading down that hill.



Peter Coward photo: Andy Hyslop