



Long mountain routes - how to speed things up

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Speed is everything on long mountain routes. Always think...Fast! Fast! Fast!

Help save time firstly by not carrying heavy rucksacks. Keep emergency overnight gear and food to an absolute minimum. Remember that IF you spend the night out you need to stay alive and not in the lap of luxury. Save time by having the whole party stop at the start of the rope work and sort everything out once and for all, before the climb begins. Much time can be wasted by people calling a halt to adjust straps, tighten boot laces and put on sun-cream on some wild and exposed stance. The rucksack must be packed with the food and foul weather gear in an accessible place, harnesses adjusted correctly, chalk bag fill and then go!

When the leader finishes a pitch and shouts "off belay", immediately sort the stance out and generally get ready to climb. This is so that as soon as the "climb on" signal is given, the pitch can start to be seconded. I have spent much precious time waiting for seconds as they shout up things like ", hold on I have not got my shoes on yet or the classic," please lower the ropes back down, I haven't tied on yet! ".

If at all possible avoid sack hauling as this can cause much frustration. On easy to moderate multi pitch routes, always try to alternate the leading to save time. When seconding a pitch, rack the gear onto yourself as you will want it for the next lead. Arriving at the stance with a bird's nest of gear that then takes a half hour to sort into a lead rack is asking to come home in the dark. Also remember that, if in a party of 3, you might as well remove the gear from the third man's rope as well unless he needs it for protection in the case of a traverse. In parties of 3 or more, or when only one person is doing all the leading tie into the stances with either slings or a cordelette. This frees both ends of the ropes and makes the change-overs easier. It also makes more rope available to run the next pitch with. Which brings us to the next point: time can be wasted by having to scramble or walk between the end of one pitch and the start of the next. This is a very common thing on routes in South Africa. So instead of stopping your lead at the proper stance, carry on walking the rope out to the actual start of the next pitch. This will mean one less situation where ropes have to be resorted.

Many old classic routes were climbed with short pitches by today's standards. Often these can be linked into a single pitch. Lastly, to save time, use clove hitches at the stances, they are quick to make and dismantle.

Party size

Remember that two is fastest. Three or four is not much slower. To save time in a party of three, it is worthwhile for the leader to put in a really bomb proof belay and bring the second and third up simultaneously, climbing a few meters apart. However, this is not a good idea on traverses where if one seconder falls their rope could also pull the other off.

When there are 4 climbers it is fastest to climb in one party than to split up into two independent pairs. A well co-ordinate party of four is much faster AND lighter. The key here is that leading takes the time on a climb, not the seconding. That means as little leading as possible and the lead ropes need to be going out in front as much of the time as possible. So in a party of two pairs, each pitch is having to be lead twice and seconded twice. In party of 4, each pitch is lead once and seconded three times. In addition, the last two people up have no gear to clean and similar climbing can also take place. A party of four needs only carry on lead rack plus a bit extra for the stances and three ropes while two pairs need four ropes and 2 full racks.

Example: 4 climbers. The leader takes 20 minutes to lead a pitch and each seconder takes 5 minutes. This equals 35 minutes for the whole party to complete the pitch.

Versus

Example: 2 pairs of climbers. Each leader takes 20 minutes and then the two seconders take 5 minutes. Equals 50 minutes.

Running a 4 man party is very simple. Remember this simple sequence. First person leads pitch 1. The next person up the pitch must be the one who is to lead the pitch 2. (He takes out all the gear and rakes it for the next lead as he climbs.) On arrival at the top of pitch 1 he starts getting the belay set up for pitch 2 and finishes sorting his lead rack. While this is happening the next climber has been coming up also and starts belaying the next lead. He also needs to drag a third rope which he hands to the first leader to bring the last man up with. This sequence also means that the lead rope is almost continually being pushed out in front.