

## **Buttermilking**

### *Stuart Stronach*

Tell someone you're a climber and they tend to automatically picture you clinging by your fingernails to a cliff face with 100 feet of air beneath you. However, one of the biggest developments in the sport of climbing in recent years has been a boom in popularity of what's called 'bouldering'.

Bouldering is climbing in its purest form. With no ropes, no harnesses and no hardware, the climber stays close to the ground, and the emphasis is purely on difficulty, on making hard individual moves between holds.

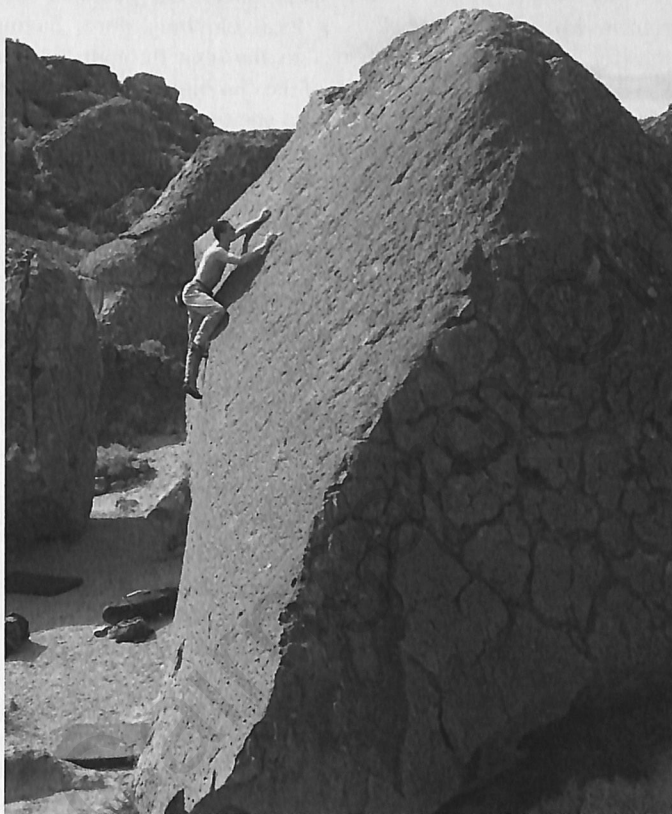
Bouldering is also a very sociable sub-sport. Boulderers tend to travel in groups, taking turns practising hard problems until someone (or everyone) succeeds. Safety is provided for through the use of portable crash-mats (dismissively referred to as 'cushions' by non-bouldering climbers), and attentive friends (called 'spotters') on the ground below, waiting to field the climber in the event of a fall.

And fall they will. By staying close to the ground, the fear of falling is removed. As the boulderer pushes towards their physical limits, falls happen frequently, until the problem is completed. Success on the first attempt is rare, and usually means that the climber is on something too easy!

Anyway, enough introduction. April 2003 saw me realise a long-standing goal by making a trip to Bishop, California. In the east of the state, Bishop is one of the bouldering Meccas of the world, nestling at an altitude of 4,000 feet at the head of the Owen's River Valley, which, with 14,000ft mountains on either side, is the deepest in the USA. The scenery is jaw-droppingly spectacular, with the flat desert of the valley floor contrasting with the pine-clad lower hillsides and snow-capped peaks.

Flying in to San Francisco, the next leg of the trip involved a three-hour drive through the vineyards and orchards of the San Joaquin valley and into the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. In mid-April, although the coast was bathed in warm spring sunshine, the road led upwards over a succession of 8,000ft passes, and walls of snow were piled higher than the car on either side. On the east side of the Sierras, I picked up the I395 highway which leads south from Reno, via Bishop, to Los Angeles, and a further three hours saw me arrive in Bishop.

For the next ten days, I was bouldering nearly every day. There are several areas scattered around the town, including the Happy Boulders, the Sads, the Buttermilks, the Druid Stones and Little Egypt. Despite the length of time, I hardly scratched the surface of what was available, but did have some very memorable days out with some amazing people.



*Stuart on the Crux of Heavenly Path (VI)*

One day was spent in the company of Dean Fidelman. Hardly any non-climbers know of him, and even amongst climbers his name is probably unfamiliar until you tell them: "He's the guy who takes the Stone Nudes photographs!" Stone Nudes is a company run by Dean which sells posters and calendars of black and white photographs of nude climbers (male and female) bouldering - all in the name of art, of course! Check out the website ([www.stonenudes.com](http://www.stonenudes.com)) if you want a better idea of what he does. Anyway, my companion for the trip, Anni, had volunteered to be a model, so we spent an afternoon at the Buttermilks searching for a suitable problem to climb, and waiting for the right evening light. The results of that day will be available in next year's calendar, but I was left full of respect for Dean's professionalism and Anni's bravery on a chilly and rather busy day!

Another couple of days were spent under the guidance of ex-pat Yorkshireman, Mick Ryan. Mick is a local climbing guru, having been responsible for many of the guidebooks to the area through his company, Rockfax. He was able to take us on tours of the climbing areas, always pointing us at the best, most spectacular problems, and spotting us carefully when things got tricky. He also makes a mean curry!

One day's bouldering was finished off with a game of soccer (call it 'football' in the States and people look at you funny!) in the local park, involving Mick, myself, Dean, Kevin Thaw (another ex-pat Brit) and 'Jeff from San Diego', as well as Mick's son and friends. It soon showed that no matter how fit you think you are from all the climbing, 15 minutes charging about a field like an idiot will soon suggest that you've been enjoying the beer and Mexican food a little too much!

One thing I quickly realised is that bouldering in Bishop requires a rather different mental approach to bouldering in the UK. In America, they say that everything is bigger, and that goes for their boulders as well. Whereas it's unusual in the UK to find many boulders bigger than four or five metres in height, in Bishop eight to ten metre problems were commonplace! Suddenly, the crashmat started looking very small and a long way down! The boulder problems were graded using the American 'V' system, going from V0 to V15. The tendency was to think of V0s and V1s as warm-ups, until you realised that on the bigger boulders, a V1 could easily be the equivalent of an E1 5b in the UK!

A rest day from all the climbing was taken to fit in a day's skiing at Mammoth Mountain. We were lucky in that an unusual late-season storm was dumping a load of fresh powder on the mountain, so that although conditions overhead were very similar to those I'm used to from the Scottish ski centres, the snow conditions underfoot were fantastic. The unbroken fields of knee-deep powder offered skiing unlike anything I've ever found before. My guides for the day were a couple of locals, Ray and Lesley (Anni's cousin and his wife), both superb skiers. I found myself following them with trepidation down runs such as the 'Avalanche Chutes', on slopes which, were they in Scotland, would be steep enough to warrant being graded as a technical winter climb. But I loved it! Skiing off-piste through trees, learning how to cope with this unfamiliar powder, surviving the day with only one fall - although it was intended as a climbing trip, that day's skiing has given me some of the best memories of the holiday.

Much of the land north of Bishop is owned by the City of Los Angeles, who purchased it in order to obtain the rights to the river water, which is now carried by pipeline and aqueduct to provide the population of Los Angeles with their water supply. Unfortunately, the loss of the river water was responsible for turning much of the lower Owen's Valley from fertile farmland to a parched

desert, with the dried-up bed of Owen's Lake providing the source material for fierce dust storms. The situation has become so bad that the locals are forcing Los Angeles to return some of the water to continually damp down the lake-bed.

On the plus side, roads built to provide access to the Owen's River Gorge north of Bishop, where much of the water is originally siphoned off, are now used by climbers to gain access to the steep sides of the gorge, where over 700 climbs have been documented. Just to prove we could still remember how to put on a harness and tie a knot in a rope, we had another break from the bouldering to climb in the gorge for a morning. Routes up to 25 metres in length on vertical sun-kissed rock provided a sublime contrast to the brutal thuggery of the bouldering, with stamina counting more towards success than brute strength, and fixed bolts providing permanent anchors and a safe environment in which to climb.

The final day's climbing was spent back up at the Buttermilks. A late-season winter storm was shrouding the Sierras in cloud, and though it was mild at lower altitudes, snow flurries were occasionally blown off the hills onto us, while coyotes howled somewhere off in the distance.

Eventually, all good things have to end, and the drive was made back west to spend a little time with friends in San José (yes, I knew the way...). From there, a day trip to Santa Cruz saw me finish the trip paddling in the Pacific, watching the pelicans fly past, skimming the waves.