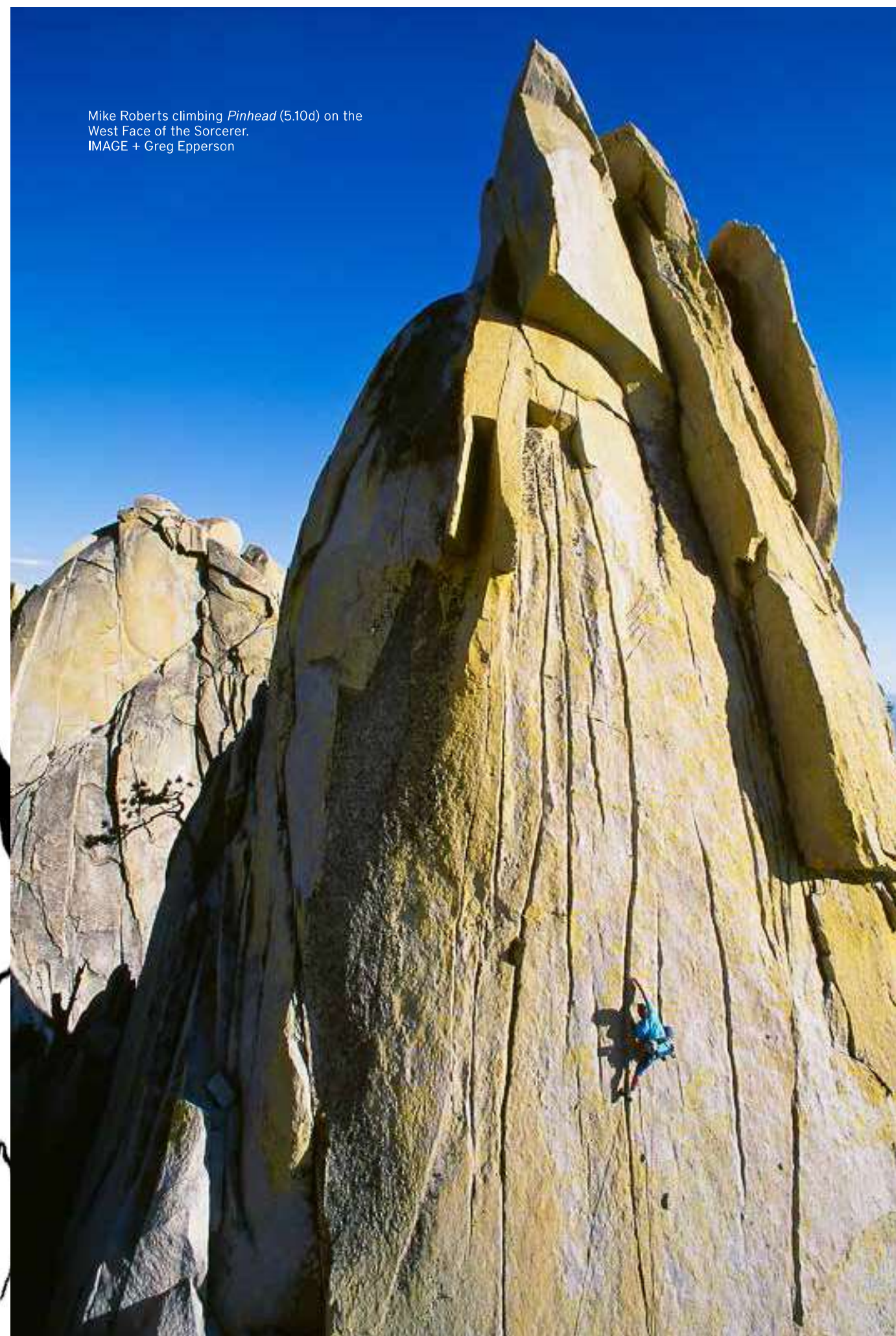
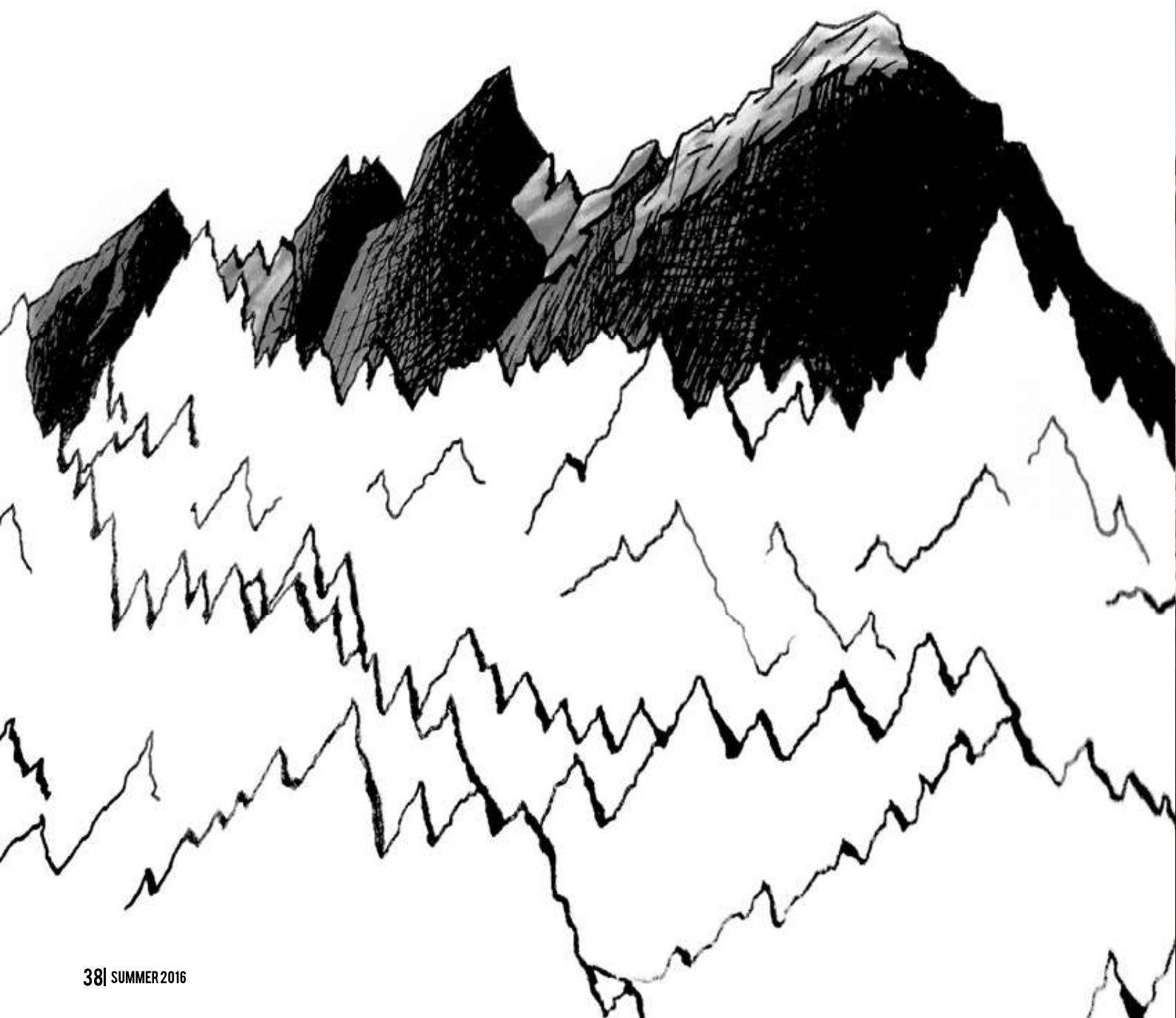
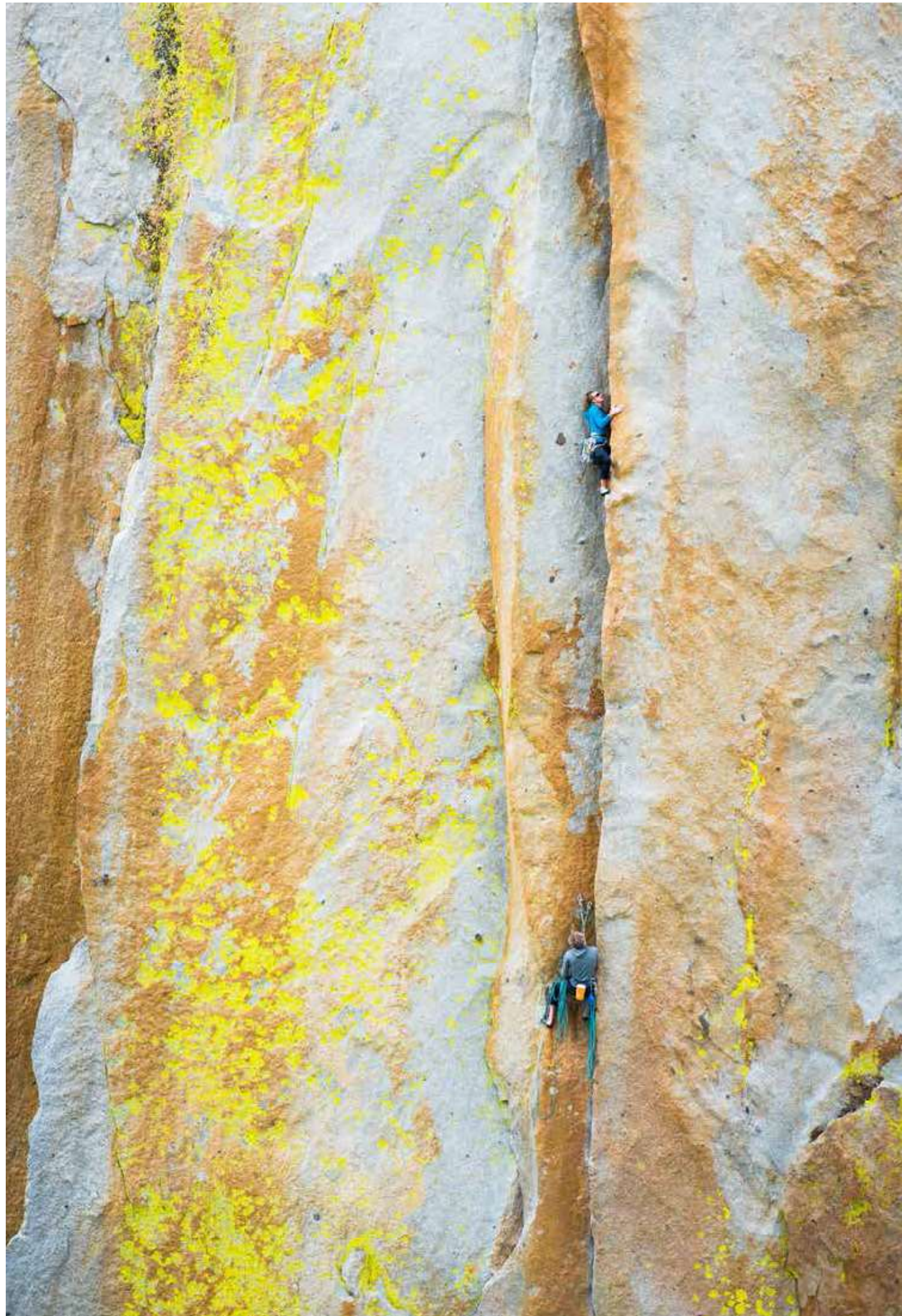


Welcome to the Needles

WORDS + KRISTIAN SOLEM / ART + FANNY-JANE PELLETIER



Mike Roberts climbing *Pinhead* (5.10d) on the West Face of the Sorcerer.
IMAGE + Greg Epperson



Kate Rutherford climbing the *Don Juan Wall* (5.11b). The name of the route refers to the Don Juan made famous in Carlos Castaneda's writings.
IMAGE + Austin Siadak

“...cracks that run uninterrupted from the base to the top, the green and orange streaks of seemingly luminous lichen, and the dizzying exposure...”

From its source in the high country west of Mount Whitney the Kern River cuts a dramatic canyon, following an ancient fault line straight south for 60 miles. This canyon splits the Southern Sierra in half. To the east stands the Sierra Crest. To the west is the Great Western Divide summing at Mount Kaweah. Thirty-five miles south of Mount Whitney a prominent ridge juts out into the Kern Canyon from the Great Western Divide. The spires and domes of the Needles stand atop the eastern edge of this ridge, towering thousands of feet above the whitewater below. This setting treats climbers at the Needles to breathtaking exposure.

Tales abound of climbers doing ascents in the Needles as far back as the late 1940s, following the construction of the Needles Fire Lookout station in 1937. It is not known what routes these early pioneers climbed, but I can imagine them doing ascents of many of the spectacular summits. Speculation? Perhaps, but the lure of these lofty aeries must have been strong, and several summits are accessible by easy fifth class routes.

I try to imagine what it must have been like for rock climbers to explore the Needles at this time. I always enjoy walking down the trail into the main notch with a climber who has not been there before. They will be saucer-eyed at the sight of the vertical East Face of the Sorcerer and the expanse of granite of the Witch; by the cracks that run uninterrupted from the base to the top, the green and orange streaks of seemingly luminous lichen, and by the dizzying exposure.

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In 1969 two young men from Los Angeles completed the first documented climb in the Needles. Dan McHale and Joe Brown hiked up from the lower road and climbed the long fin of granite to the Fire Lookout. This feature was called the Whale's Back by locals. Today it holds the name given to it by climbers: the Magician. McHale and Brown named their route *Sidewalk Magic* (5.8).

In November of 1969 Dan McHale returned to the Needles with Fred Becky to establish the *South Face Route* (5.9) on Hermit Spire, the Needle's sister crag to the north. Climbers walking out the trail to the Needles cannot miss seeing this mysterious granite spire. If geology had placed it among the Needles it would be every bit an equal. Instead

it stands alone across the Freeman Creek Drainage, which is home to the largest un-logged Giant Sequoia grove outside of a National Park. Occupying 4,000 acres and home to many hundreds of giant trees, the Freeman Grove is a spiritually powerful place to visit on a rest day.

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It was in the 1970s that new route development at the Needles began in earnest. As climbers started to frequent the Needles they gave the formations mystical, perfectly suited names: the Wizard, the Sorcerer, the Magician, the Witch, the Warlock, Voodoo Dome...

1970 saw Beckey, McHale and Mike Heath back in action at the Needles, where they set their sights on the tallest and steepest of the towers, the Warlock. Their climb takes a bold natural line up the south-eastern aspect. As on Hermit Spire the name of their route is the South Face Route. This is typical Fred Beckey, as he has probably established and named hundreds of climbs the *“South Face Route.”*

At the top of their climb Beckey, McHale and Heath found evidence of the boldness of earlier pioneers. In their American Alpine Journal entries, Beckey and Heath mention the discovery of a cairn on the south summit of the Warlock.

In the mid-1970s outstanding climbs were low hanging fruit for climbers like Fred Beckey, Dave Black, Steve Eddy, Herb and Eve Laeger, Pete Steres, Mike Jaffe, Vaino Kodas, Patrick Paul, E.C. Joe and Richard Leversee. These early pioneers established classic routes like *Inner Sanctum* (5.9), *Igor Unchained* (5.9), *Airy Interlude* (5.10a), *Thin Ice* (5.10b), *Spooky* (5.9), *Fancy Free* (5.10b), and *White Punks on Dope* (5.8+).

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I made my first visit to the Needles in the 1980s. I had more than a decade of experience at the Gunks, Joshua Tree, Idyllwild and Yosemite, but when I saw these stunning granite spires in the sky I knew I had found my nirvana. These were exciting years to be climbing at the Needles, and formative years for me as a climber. The prolific climbers from the 1970s were still active and at the same time a new group began to make their mark at the Needles.



“I studied the sea of granite above. The belay was up there somewhere and if I didn’t find it I would be in real trouble.”

In the 1980s Mike Lechlinski, Tom Gilje and Mari Gingery were the core of an ensemble of strong, bold climbers that included Dave Bruckman, Ron Carson, Erik Eriksson, Roy McClenahan and Andre Olobri. These climbers sought out steep athletic lines at the Needles and climbed them in bold style. Routes like *Straight to Hell* (5.12X), *the Predator* (5.12bR/X) and *Liquid Sky* (5.11c/dR) stand as testaments to their no nonsense ethic.

As if the 1980s weren’t exciting enough already, two of the best climbers in California showed up at the Needles: Tony Yaniro and Randy Leavitt. These two quickly established *Atlantis* (5.11c), *Davey Jones Locker* (5.12b), *Ankles Away* (5.11c), *Sirocco* (5.12a), *Pyromaniac* (5.13a/b), *the Avenger* (5.13a/b), *Romantic Warrior* (5.12b) and the *Sea of Tranquility* (5.12b). These climbs represent some of the highest achievements of Needles rock climbing.

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s I climbed one classic Needles route after another. I felt like a kid in a candy shop. I also watched the route development at this time, and I knew I was witnessing something special. On one occasion I had just lead *Ankles Away* (5.11c), a technical thin crack on the West Face of the Witch. While belaying my second I watched Erik Eriksson, Mike Lechlinski, Mari Gingery and Dave Bruckman complete the first ascent of *Superstition* (5.11dR). This grade might not seem impressive compared to today’s high numbers, but the cool head and traditional skills a climb like this demands are another story altogether.



OPPOSITE PAGE TOP

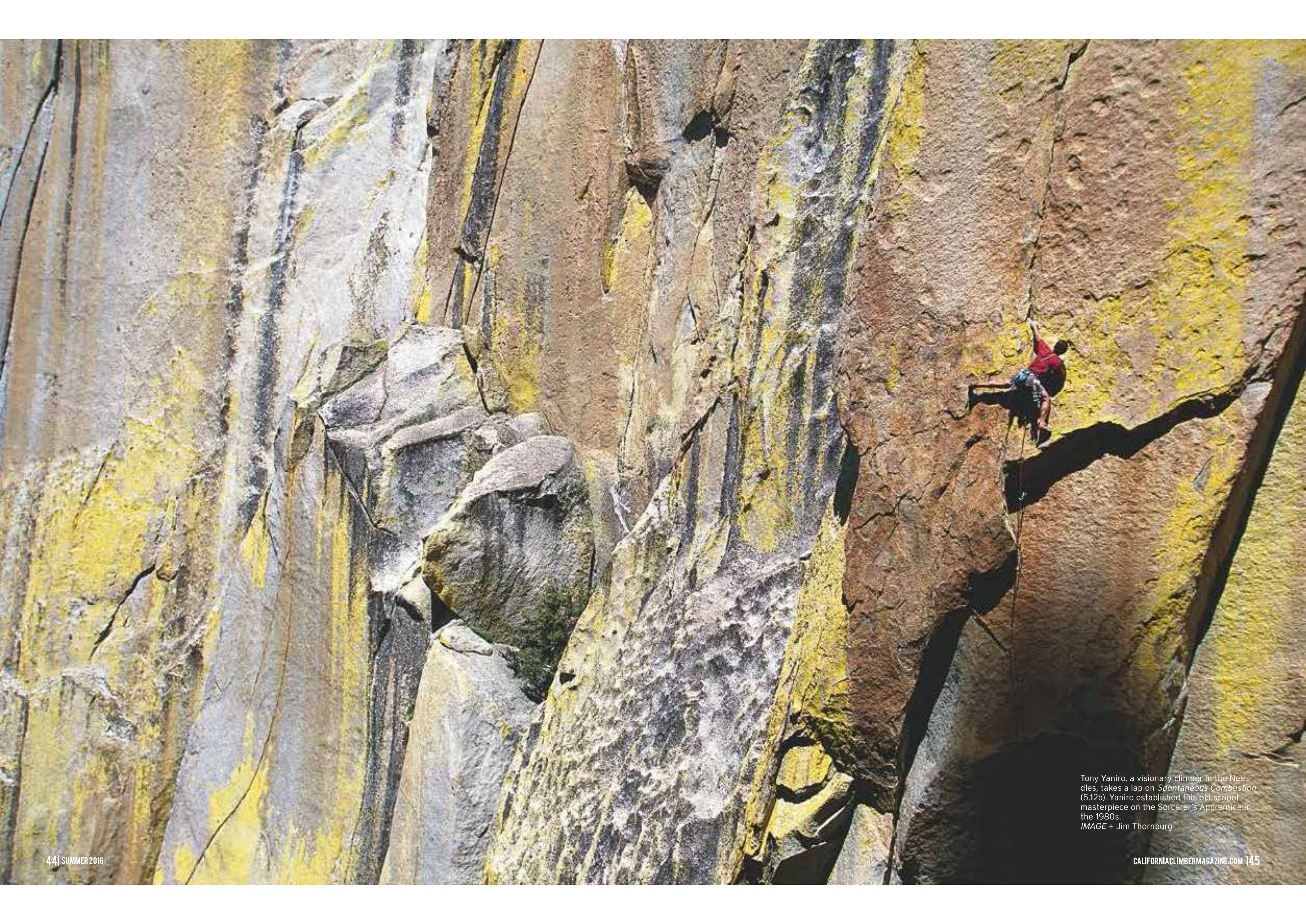
With granite splitters everywhere, Viren Perumal and Maarten Harris find their place on *Fancy Free* (5.10).
IMAGE + Ken Etzel

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM

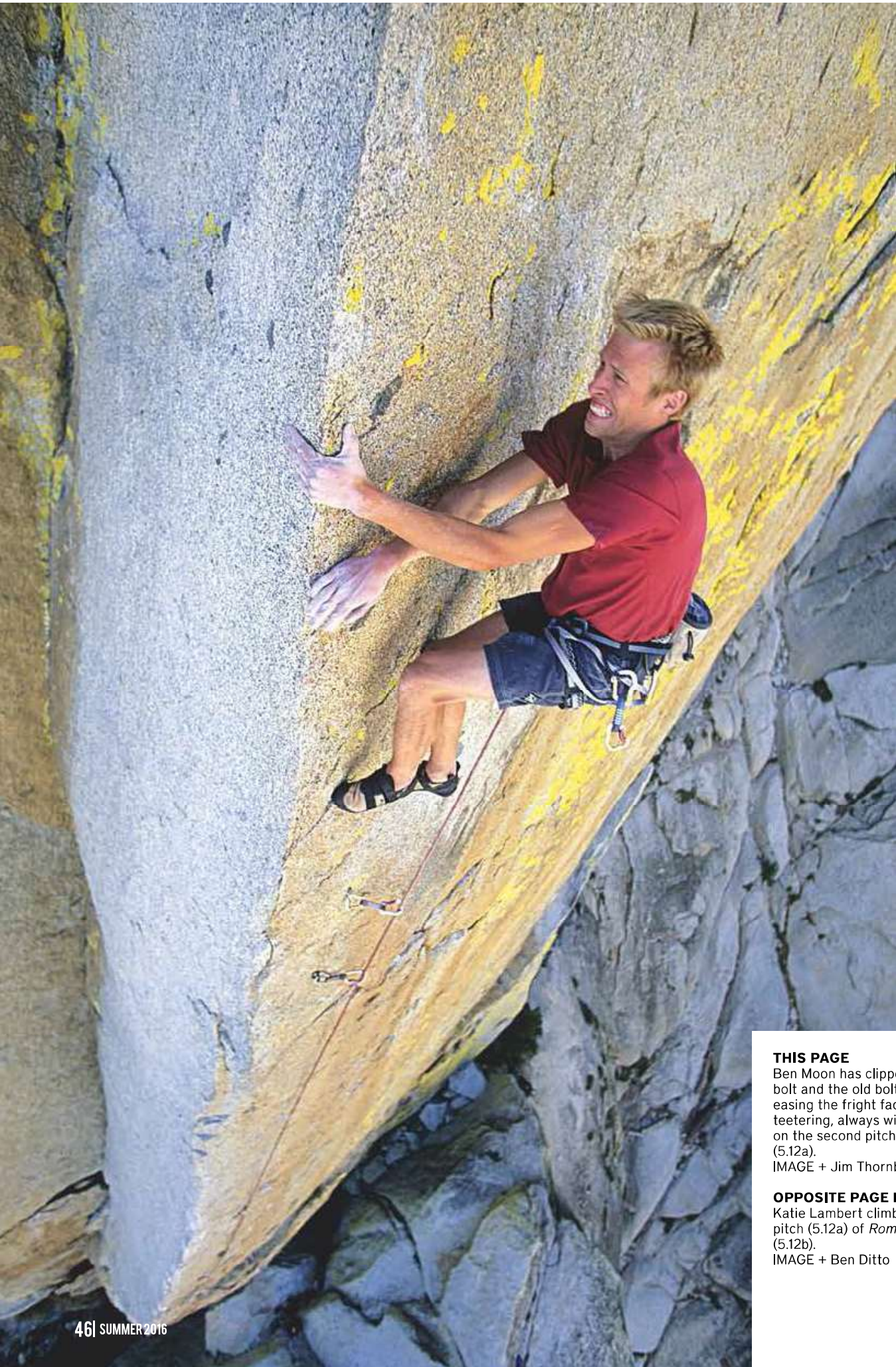
Jim Herson entering the crux of *Davey Jones Locker* (5.12c).
IMAGE + Jim Thornburg

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Jeff Schoen climbing *Prescription* (5.11+), Charlatan Needle.
IMAGE + Greg Epperson



Tony Yaniro, a visionary climber in the Needles, takes a lap on *Spontaneous Combustion* (5.12b). Yaniro established this old school masterpiece on the Sorcerer's Apprentice in the 1980s.
IMAGE + Jim Thornburg



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Ben Moon has clipped the new bolt and the old bolt in hopes of easing the fright factor on the teetering, always windy crux on the second pitch of *Scirocco* (5.12a).
IMAGE + Jim Thornburg

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM

Katie Lambert climbing the 5th pitch (5.12a) of *Romantic Warrior* (5.12b).
IMAGE + Ben Ditto



One beautiful fall day in 1995 I found myself walking out the trail with Erik Eriksson. He had proposed that we do No More Mr. Nice Guy; a face climb on the Necromancer graded 5.10c. We'd been climbing hard for a few days so I welcomed the idea of kicking back on something more moderate. The fact that Erik wanted to do it should have made me suspicious. The fact that it was put up by the Gilje / Lechlinski posse should have been a red alert.

The route climbs four pitches up the perfect granite on the south face of the Necromancer, a fat pinnacle which stands as a sentry at the bottom of the main notch. When we arrived at the base Erik looked up at the climb. "I want to lead the second pitch. It has a reputation." I feigned disappointment, but he would have none of it. "Dude, you're pipe."

I led the first pitch, a nice 5.9 crack. Erik led the money pitch, 160 feet of 5.10c with three bolts. As I watched Erik climb the steep, thin, technical moves I could see that this rig was a serious sandbag. Following the pitch I knew that if I fell it would spoil the day. Erik has a strict code; if either climber falls, the ascent is tainted. Arriving at the belay, I complimented Erik on his lead.

The next pitch is a rope-length of 5.8 with no protection, ending at a bolted belay. I climbed quietly, sneaking up the face, following a line of least resistance. I studied the sea of granite above. The belay was up there somewhere and if I didn't find it I would be in real trouble. The call "30 feet" drifted up on the wind. I was running out of rope. I kept climbing. The belay had to be up here. I moved up into a shallow depression in the rock which featured a walnut sized knob at head height. Delicately pinching this knob, I leaned out looking for the anchor. Nothing. Then I saw it, a bit of sun-bleached webbing lifted up and showed itself in the breeze. Jesus, I had passed it. It was eight or ten feet below me and

about 15 feet right. I could climb back down easily enough, but getting across looked hard. Falling here meant certain death. A tumbling, flailing, shredding death ending with a long red streak down the rock face.

It's a wonderful feeling, in a situation like this, to know with absolute certainty that your partner will not fall. I hung a thin runner over the knob and clipped in. I was standing on my toes facing the rock.

"Off belay!" Being careful not to weight the knob I gingerly pulled up the slack.

"That's me." Calm and steady. Erik knew something was up.

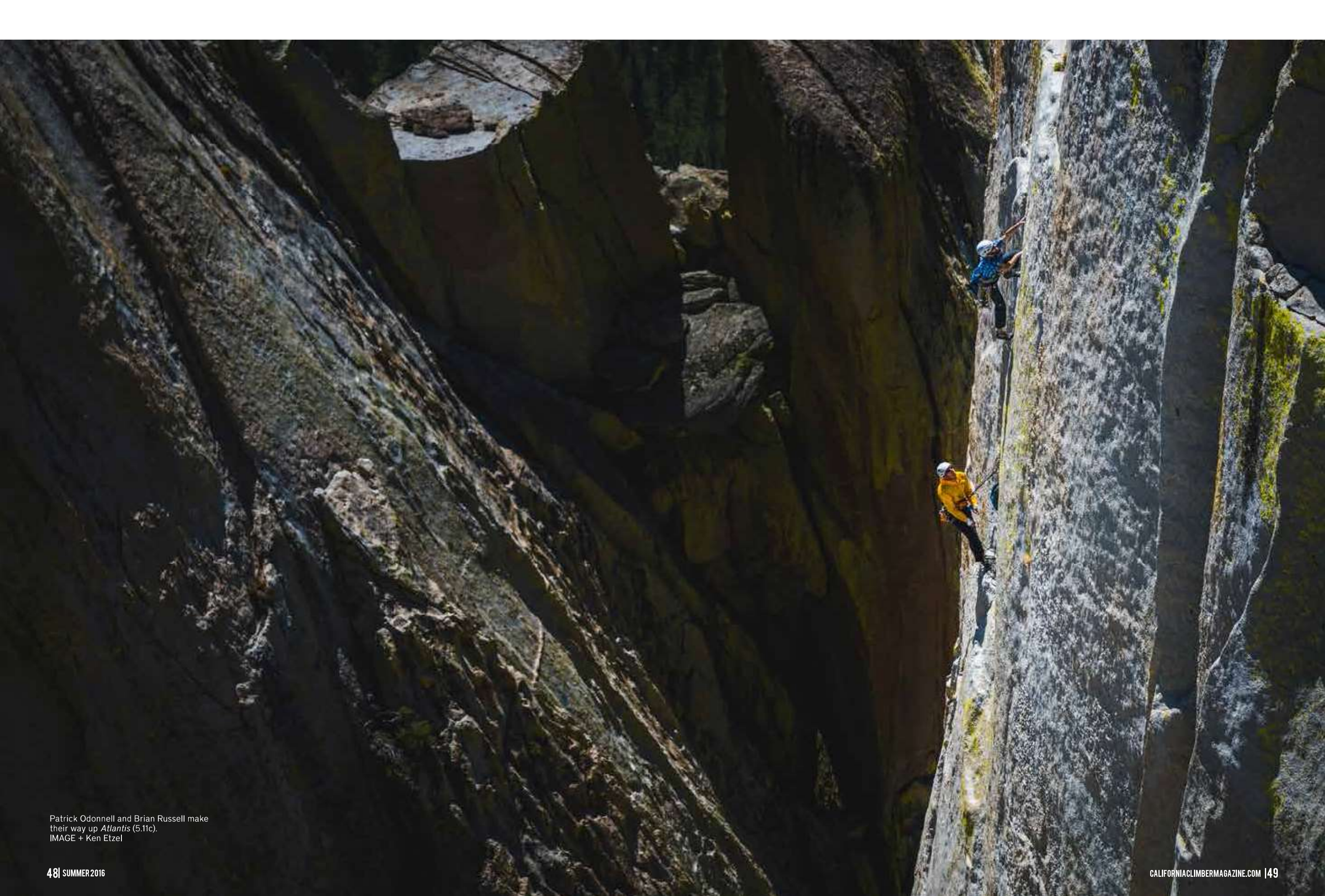
"On belay!"

Erik arrived. He gave the knob a quizzical eye. "Dude..."

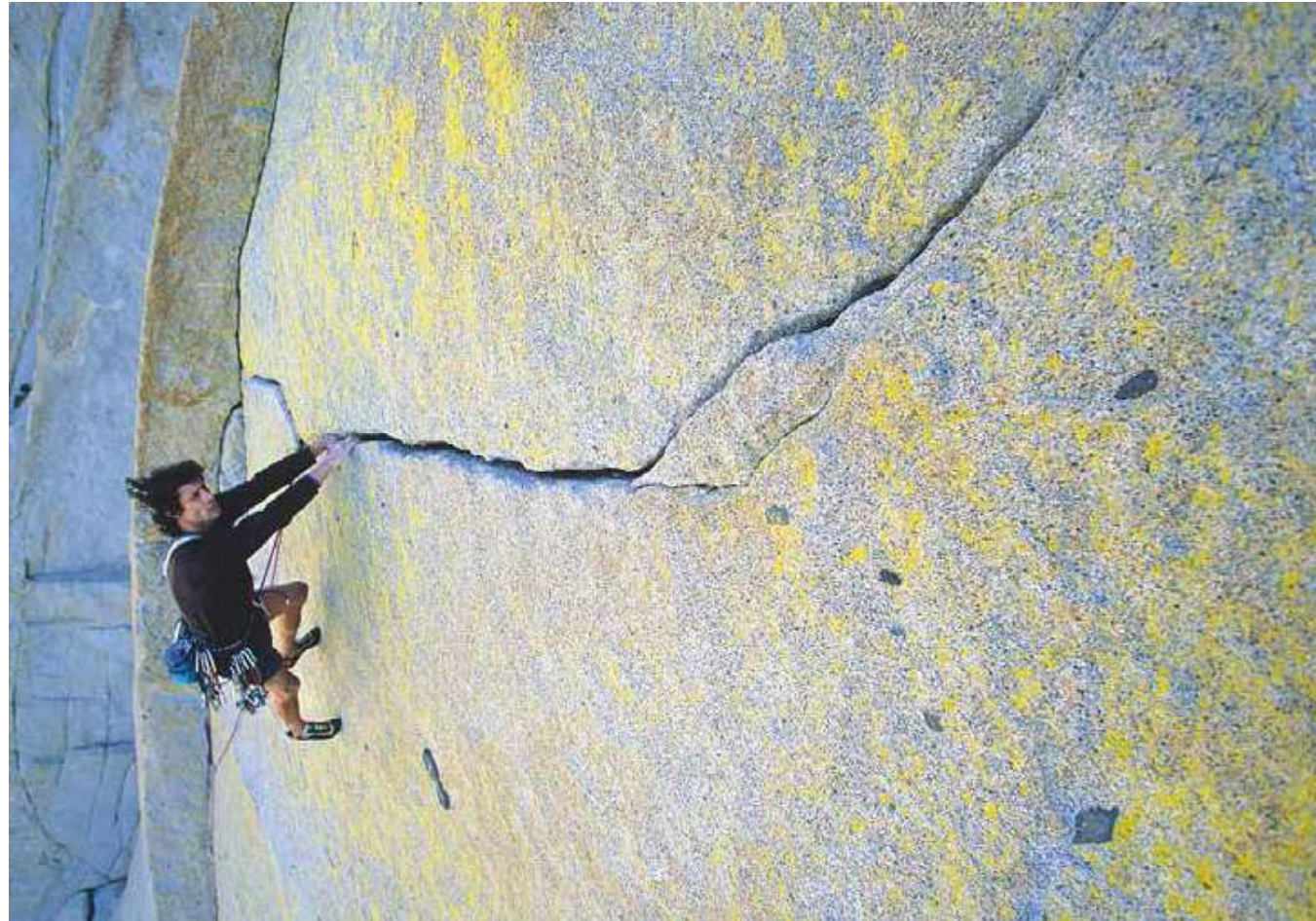
Without another word he wandered up one more unprotected pitch to the top.

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The Needles demanded that I step up my game. I wanted to lead some of the area's challenging routes. The easier ones like Atlantis (5.11c), Ankles Away (5.11c), and the Don Juan Wall (5.11b) were within reach and I did them several times with different friends. John Bachar once said "work each grade horizontally until you're solid, and then move up." I was following his sage advice. Randy Leavitt said that he and Tony Yaniro approached their climbing like it was a job they loved. I could relate to that. My alternate life required professionalism, and I brought that attitude to climbing.



Patrick Odonnell and Brian Russell make their way up *Atlantis* (5.11c).
IMAGE + Ken Etzel



“Today The Needles host more than 200 routes ranging in difficulty from 5.6 to 5.13. The majority of climbs fall in the 5.9 – 5.11 range.”

In 2009 I began work on a new guidebook for the Needles. For several summers I spent weeks at a time living in the campground. I hiked out to all sorts of spots to take pictures, met and hung out with climbers from around the world, and did some of the obscure and easier routes I had ignored in the past. I had a great time. I also began to get a picture of where climbing at the Needles is heading.

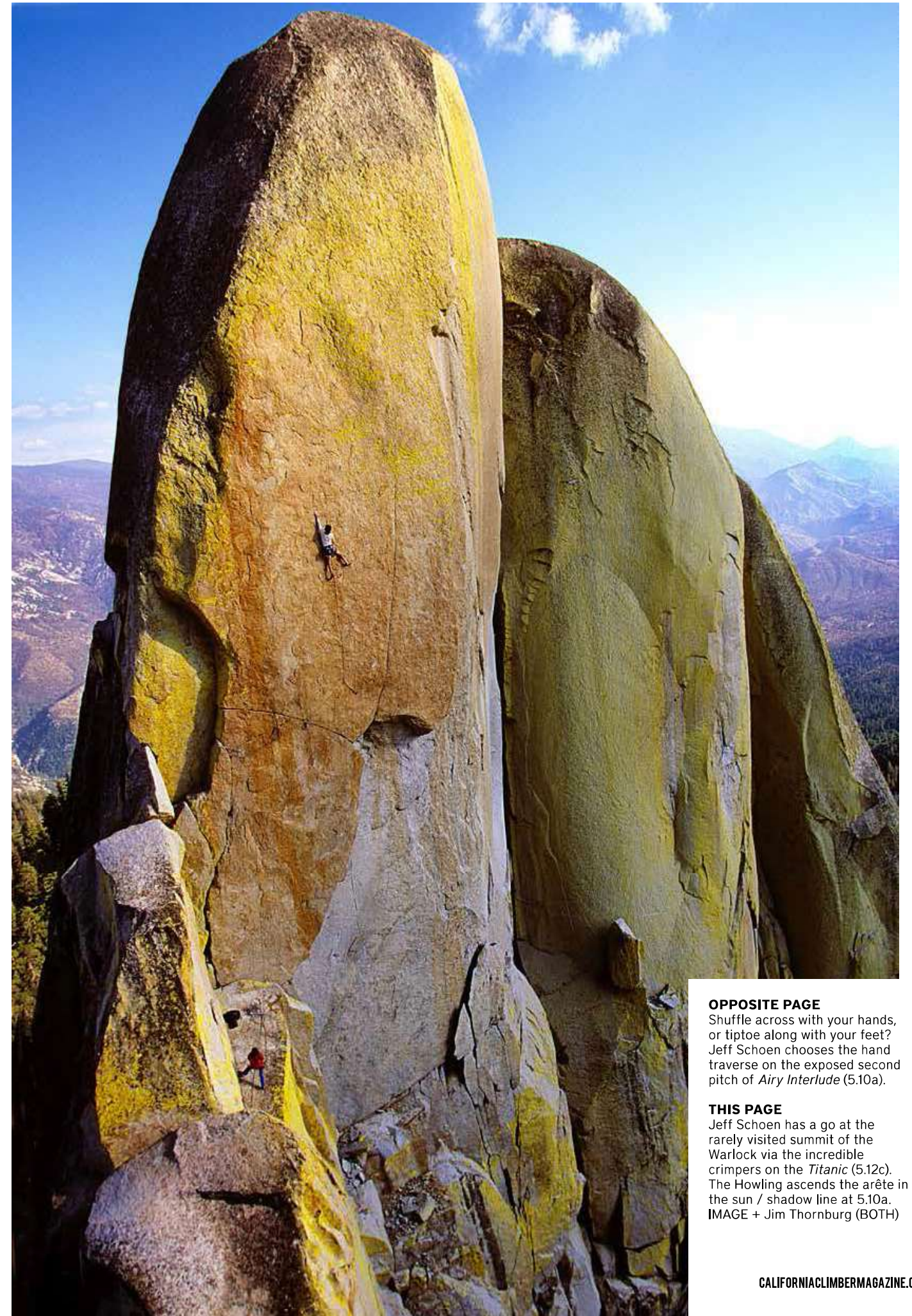
There will be no more explosions of new route activity at the Needles. Climbers might find a new line here or there, but short of doing squeeze jobs there's just not much that hasn't been done. One interesting newer route is *Pulp Friction* (5.12+R), a very bold route done in 2008 by George Ullrich and Mason Earle on the west face of the Witch. "As for the grade, we settled on 12+," said Earle. "The route felt miles harder than the *Romantic Warrior* (5.12b), which we onsighted without much trouble."

Today climbs like the *Romantic Warrior* (5.12b) and *Pyromaniac* (5.13a/b) which even in the 1990s saw very few ascents, get done many times each season. In 2010 a pair of climbers did the *Romantic Warrior* (5.12b) and *Don Juan Wall* (5.11b) in a day.

If you think about it, there are some pretty fine link-ups to do at the Needles. How about starting with *Love Potion #9* (5.9) on the Sorcerer's Apprentice. A 60M rap takes you to the base of the south face of the Wizard. Next, do the *Demon* (5.10) and its alternate finish to the summit of the Wizard. From there a short rap gets to the notch from where you can take the easy 5th class ridge to the summit of the Sorcerer. A 35M rap sets you up to finish on *Spooky* (5.9).

While the "golden age" of discovery, the chance to climb one new route after another cannot repeat itself, the Needles will always offer climbers adventure and an opportunity to test themselves.

A day of climbing at the Needles begins with a scenic hike of two or three miles. Then comes a full day of heady climbing followed by the hike back to camp, perhaps guided by the light of your headlamp. The day ends as you enjoy the comradery of your friends, and perhaps that of climbers from faraway places. If this is your idea of fun then the Needles is where you belong.

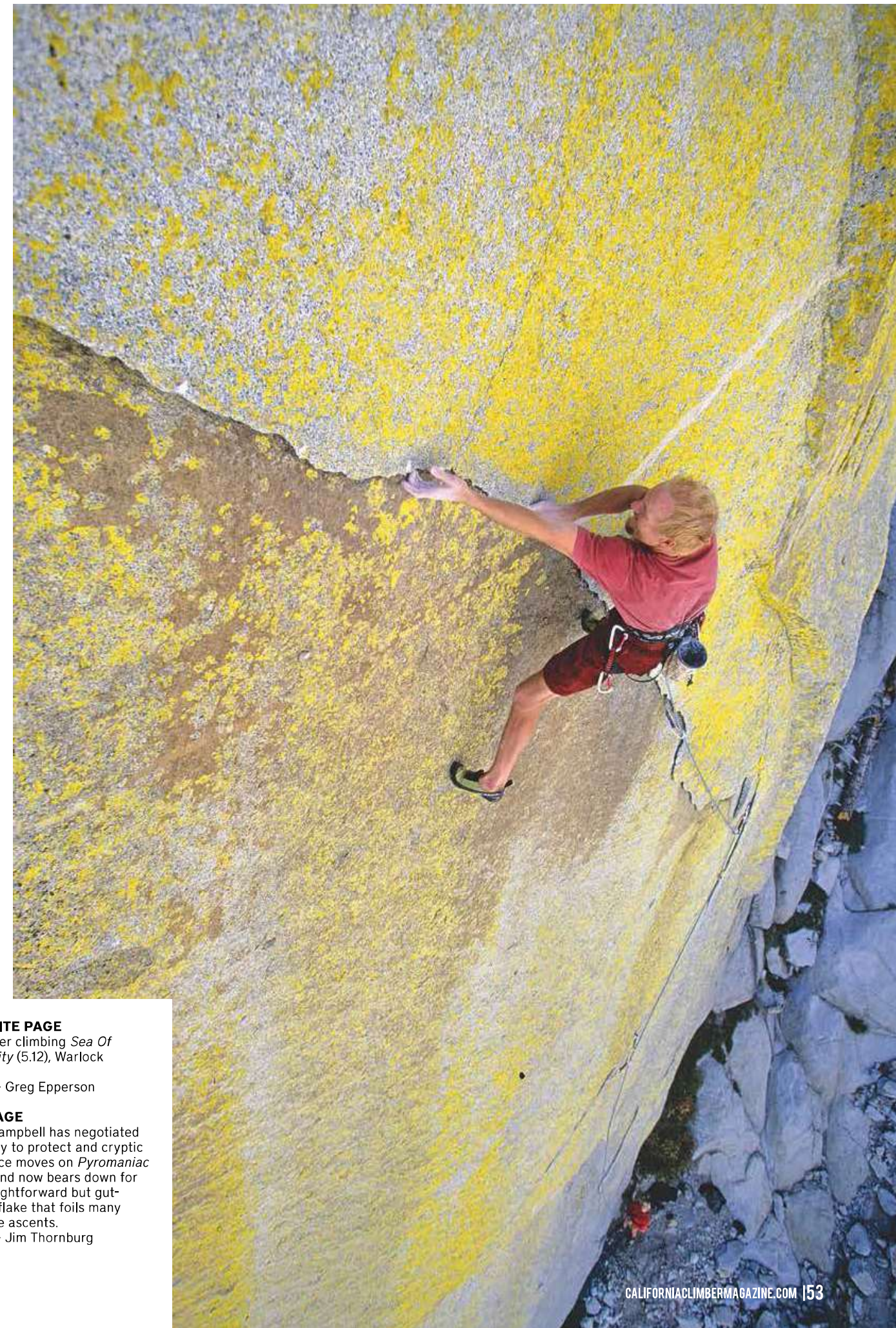


OPPOSITE PAGE

Shuffle across with your hands, or tiptoe along with your feet? Jeff Schoen chooses the hand traverse on the exposed second pitch of *Airy Interlude* (5.10a).

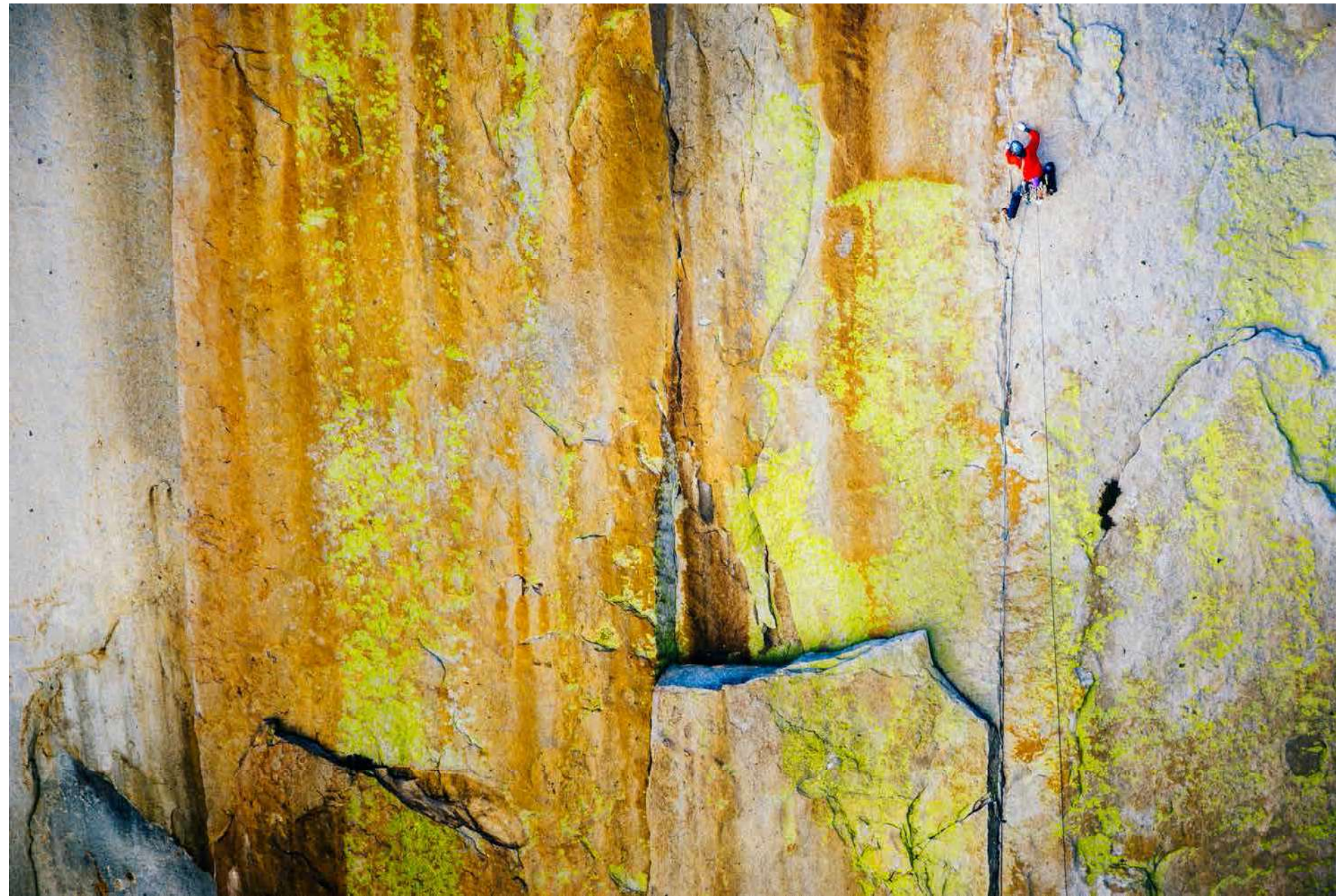
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Jeff Schoen has a go at the rarely visited summit of the Warlock via the incredible crimpers on the *Titanic* (5.12c). The Howling ascends the arête in the sun / shadow line at 5.10a. IMAGE + Jim Thornburg (BOTH)



OPPOSITE PAGE
Rob Raker climbing *Sea Of Tranquility* (5.12), Warlock Needle.
IMAGE + Greg Epperson

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Jason Campbell has negotiated the tricky to protect and cryptic lower face moves on *Pyromaniac* (5.13a) and now bears down for the straightforward but gut-busting flake that foils many would-be ascents.
IMAGE + Jim Thornburg



OPPOSITE PAGE

Tiffany Campbell climbing the first pitch (5.10c) of *Atlantis* (5.11c). With varied climbing through strenuous laybacks, tips cracks, flakes and roofs, this beautiful four-pitch route is widely considered among the best climbs in the Needles and is likely one of the finest climbs of its length and grade in California. Pitch one begins in an overhanging right-facing flake a few feet to the right of the start of *Thin Ice* (5.10b). *Atlantis* briefly joins *Thin Ice*, but quickly traverses on flakes to the right to a bolted belay below the crux pitch. The crux third pitch is an amazing tips crack that leads to a gorgeous hand crack and a belay at a ledge. The fourth pitch involves a steep bulge to a corner that leads to the summit of the Sorcerer Needle. A highly

recommended variation to the fourth pitch of *Atlantis* called *Lost at Sea* (5.10d) follows a gradually thinning flake that arches delicately up the smooth granite headwall. IMAGE + Jim Thornburg

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Brian Russell treads lightly on the first pitch of *Thin Ice* (5.10b). This spectacular three-pitch route is steep and physical, yet is also the easiest route to reach the summit of the intimidating Sorcerer Needle. Pitch one is the crux and starts in a right-facing corner that climbs past a ledge to an incredible splitter on the steep, colorful headwall. Above, a strenuous flaring V-slot (5.10a) and a low angle 5.9 hand crack lead to the exposed summit. IMAGE + Ken Etzel



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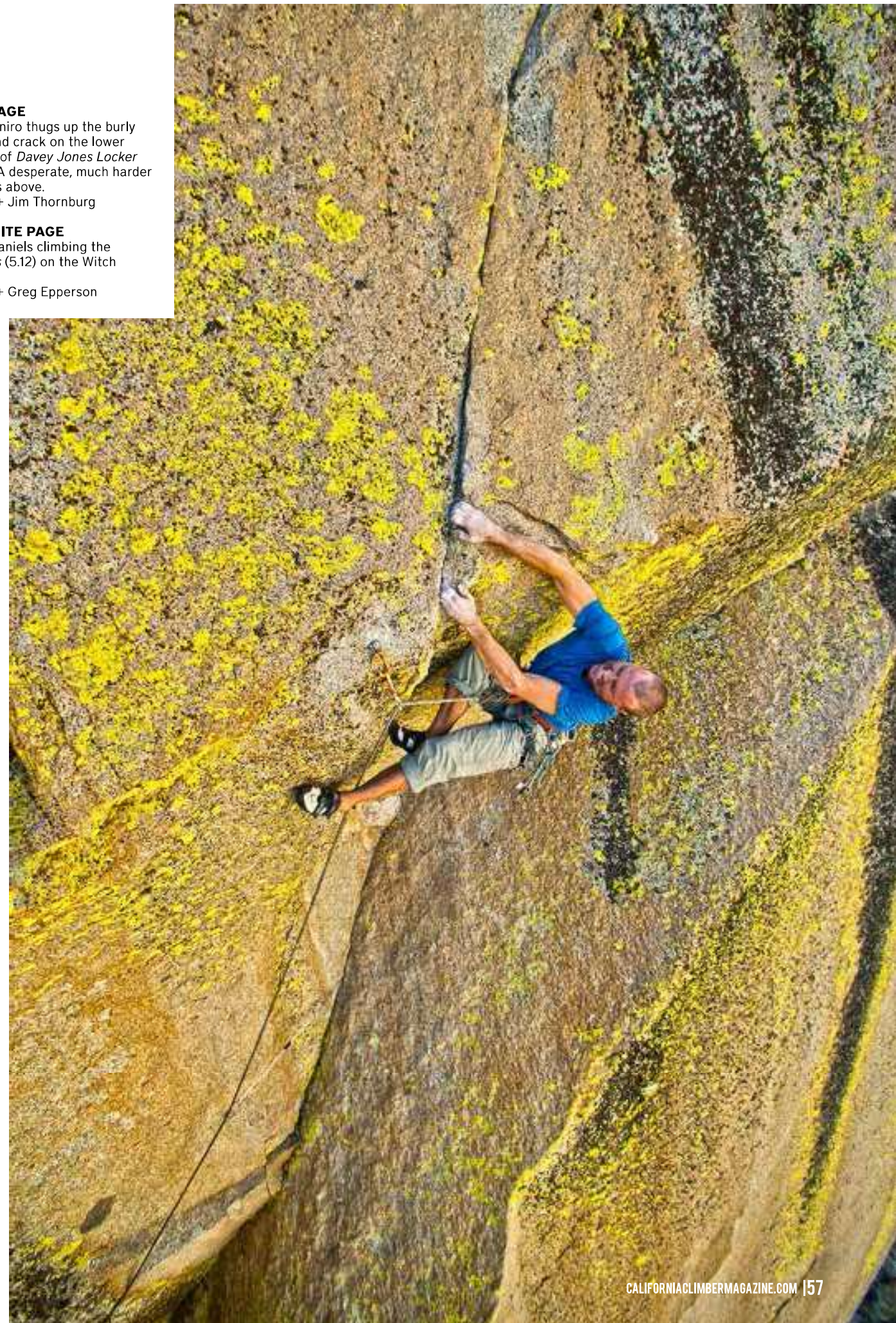
Tony Yaniro thugs up the burly 5.10 hand crack on the lower section of *Davey Jones Locker* (5.12c). A desperate, much harder crux lies above.

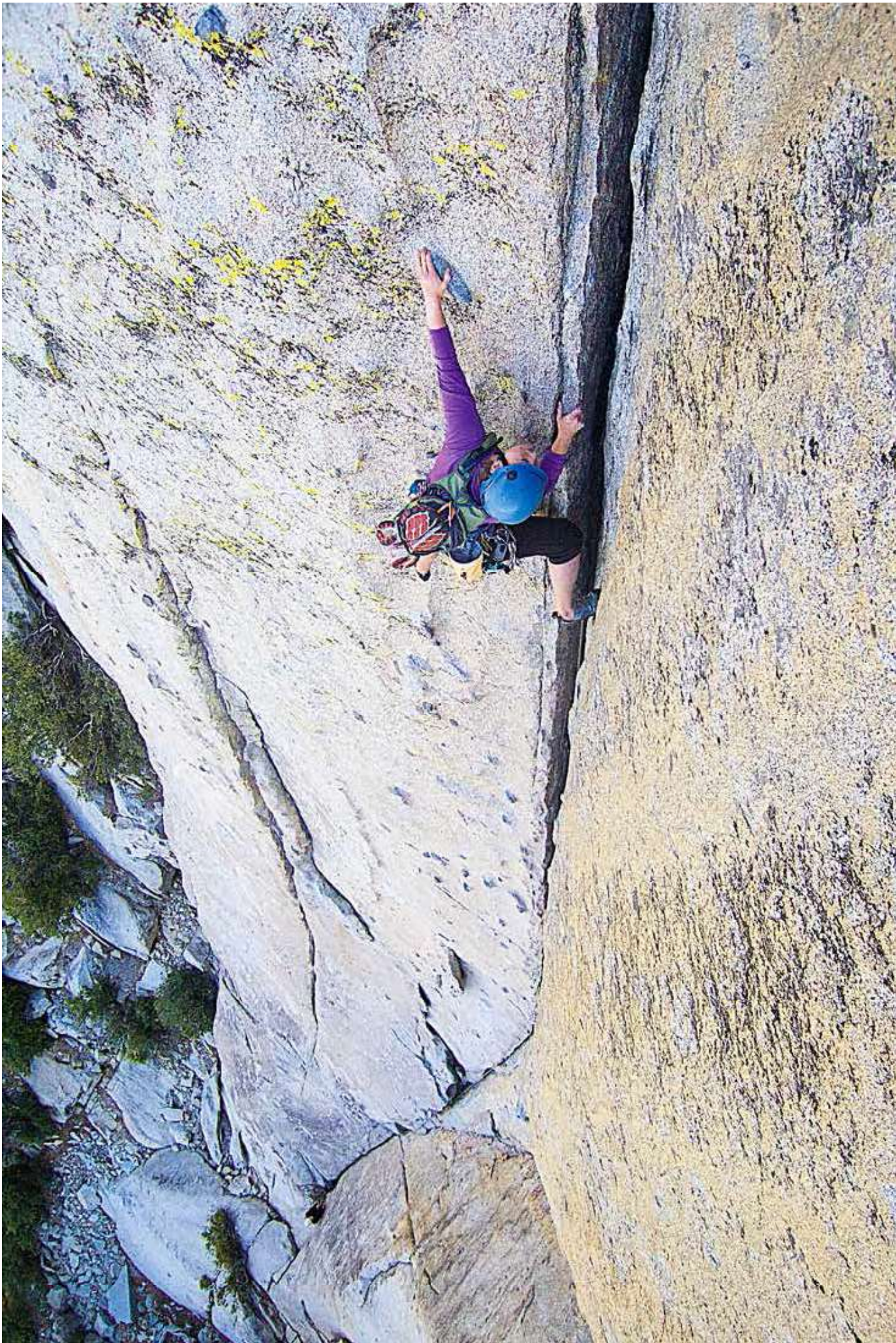
IMAGE + Jim Thornburg

OPPOSITE PAGE

Kevin Daniels climbing the *Nautilus* (5.12) on the Witch Needle.

IMAGE + Greg Epperson





OPPOSITE PAGE
Anne Kern climbing the first pitch of White Punks on Dope (5.8+). With featured cracks, chimneys, laybacks, gaping offwidths and heady slabs, this incredible six pitch route is widely considered among the greatest climbs of its grade in the Southern Sierra.
IMAGE + Jim Thornburg

THIS PAGE
Austin Siadak takes a lap on the Charlatan Summit Needle. IMAGE + Ken Etzel

THE BETA

GETTING THERE
From the city of Bakersfield head north on Kern River Road. Continue onto Highway 155 which eventually turns into the Kern River Highway. A turn north onto the Western Divide Highway leads you to Forest Service Route 21S05. Turn east on 21S05 and follow this dirt road for approximately three miles to the campsites and trailhead. A three mile hike on a well-worn path takes you to the crags.

WHERE TO STAY
Excellent free camping can be found at the ridge-top campground at the Needles parking area. Please respect all National Forest rules and regulations. This will be another hot and dry summer in California. PLEASE BE CAREFUL WITH FIRES AND RESPECT FIRE REGULATIONS AND/OR RESTRICTIONS.

GUIDEBOOK
“The Needles Climbing” by Kristian Solem

Welcome to the Needles.

5-STAR ROUTES

- Igor Unchained* (5.9)
- Airy Interlude* (5.10a)
- Thin Ice* (5.10b)
- Atlantis* (5.11c)
- Romantic Warrior* (5.12b)