



This is Abraham, a 2,000-foot sandstone mountain in Utah's Zion National Park. Visiting the desert will not be the most comfortable vacation choice you'll ever make. You'll face nightmare approaches and epic descents.

children of zion



The nailing is hard and the rock is loose. And then, of course, there's the heat. Sport climbing it ain't. **John Middendorf** recalls how he and Walt Shipley made the first ascent of The Radiator on Abraham's south face. Main picture by Bill Hatcher.

The current craze for sport climbing has definite advantages for the so-called traditional climber, namely, lessened competition for adventuresome unclimbed rock. Zion Canyon is an example, with its abundant unclimbed natural lines up huge steep sandstone rock walls. An area where the modern use of camming units, nuts, pitons and a few bolts can take a team 2,000 feet up a virgin, mostly overhanging clean and committing big wall complete with intense logistical aspects and much fear.

But one has to pause in order to ask, 'What's the point?'. I can understand the appeal of crags where the approaches are short, the commitment low and eventual success virtually guaranteed with time. Pushing a new wall route in Zion is the exact opposite.

Abraham, in Zion's magnificent Court of the Patriarchs canyon, is a huge mountain of sandstone with a completely sheer south face. Across the valley from Abraham lies the Sentinel, its north face resembling a cloaked spectre, dark and foreboding in the repose of a fearsome guard of its characteristically cleaner-looking neighbour, Abraham. The south face of Abraham first caught my eye after a summer thunderstorm, the wall shining with brilliant colours in the afternoon sun. It seemed on fire, charged with an unknown but abundant energy source and almost blinding in its radiant beauty. It drew me towards it, and I became instantly obsessed with the idea of climbing it. It reminded me of the intensity of emotion I felt upon seeing El Capitan in Yosemite for the first time, driving into Yosemite Valley on a full-moon night many years before. The chance to establish a route up this magnificent unclimbed wall inspired me and drove my life for the succeeding weeks.

After calling up my solid partner of many fine adventures past, Walt Shipley, we confirmed plans to meet in Zion. Walt and I have pulled off some good ascents

together: A new route – the Kali-Yuga – on Half Dome, the first winter ascent of Zenyatta Mendatta on El Cap, acid solos of various Yosemite 5.10s and 5.11s and assorted classic desert spires such as Moses, Zeus and the Titan. I had the suspicion that even as a strong team, this route on Abraham was going to push our limits of ability. Zion's intimidation factor aside, the wall was bigger and steeper than anything else in Zion, where the rule of thumb is to expect each 1,000 feet of sandstone to seem

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like 2,000 feet of granite.

Walt and I met in Springdale at the Rock House – the traditional staging ground – and after a few beers, went to scope the route. The mood was somewhat tense, as it often is before embarking on a major vertical journey. 'You gotta want those big jobs' is the mantra for the small circle of serious wall climbers in Yosemite. The pointlessness of committing to an extended trip in the vertical seems to encourage drinking in the nearest bar or venturing on shorter climbs instead of pursuing the transitory and sourceless inspiration to climb a big route.

With binoculars, we sat in the meadow below the route and viewed possible lines. We saw evidence of previous attempts up several crack systems near the base. One set of rappel anchors two pitches up the centre of the wall led to nowhere, obviously the result of an optimistic attempt to find some feature unseen from the ground. The main wall was entirely blank, completely devoid of any features. The huge buttress on its right flank looked promising, with obvious crack systems up either side. The left side of the buttress looked broken and serious, one 300 foot section

looking like vertical caving up a giant chimney filled with house-size loose blocks. We spotted a overhanging and beautiful thin crack system splitting the centre of the buttress. Investigating more closely, it appeared to blank out three-quarters of the way up. We hiked around to get a closer look and noticed rappel slings from high up on the right side of the buttress. Knowing Abraham to be unclimbed by any route, we were almost dismayed that someone had even gotten close, wanting the complete prize for ourselves. The right side looked all right, very long, not too steep and broken by a series of ledges and corners. The scale is immense, and seemingly small features looked like

general info

Legendary tales of loose rock, tenuous protection, epic descents, inhospitable climates, poisonous flora and fauna and wicked vertical bushwhacking keep most climbers from visiting Zion's sandstone cliffs. If you ever hear any of these tales, believe them and pass the word. But for those interested in true adventure regardless of objective hazards, Zion can provide. Zion National Park is host to many steep big walls, ranging from 600 feet to 2,200 feet, located along the Virgin River canyon and its drainages. The rock is sedimentary sandstone of many layers, each layer generally recognisable by its colour and varying widely in terms of looseness, softness and climbability.



several pitches on closer examination.

But then we saw it, the missing link for the awesome centre route, a right facing corner system, invisible from our previous viewing angle, that connected the lower crack system to the top. From no single vantage point can both crack systems be viewed clearly, but from different spots, the route became clear and continuous, albeit unrelentingly thin and technical. Committing, we fixed a pitch in a light Zion rainstorm, sheltered from the overhanging wall above.

We planned for four days, somehow not believing the wall was as big as it seemed. We brought a small bolt kit, limiting ourselves to 40 bolts to lighten our load and to increase our sense of commitment. We carried two haulbags which consisted of bivouac gear, portaledge, food and water for four days, and the usual big-wall monster load of hardware. Getting to the base of most Zion routes consists of bushwhacking up vertical gullies, and this route was no exception.

Location & details

Zion National Park is near the sleepy town of Springdale, Utah in the south-western corner of the state. It is a three-hour drive from Las Vegas, Nevada and a four-hour drive from Salt Lake City, Utah. Zion is a national park with its own rules and regulation system. It is up to the climbers to maintain good relations with the rangers to ensure future climbing in this beautiful area. Permits from the park service are required for any ascent requiring more than a day. Request a backcountry permit with exact details of the planned ascent at the Visitor's Centre which is also the home of the Zion climbing guidebooks, two volumes of semi-organised notes, comments, topos and

route information on most of the established routes in the park. There is no published Zion guidebook. Good camping is found at the National Park Campgrounds, located inside the park and at private campgrounds in Springdale which have showers available for two dollars. Water for filling water bottles is available at the Zion Lodge in Zion Canyon. Food is available in Springdale but for major shopping it is economical to go to a major supermarket in St George or Cedar City – about a one-hour drive. The Bit and Spur in Springdale – known nationally for its fine Mexican food – is a most excellent spot to drink and feast before and after a good wall ascent.



Our first day on the route went well. Four pitches up we were faced with our first major logistical problem. We had to cross over a huge corner and gully system in order to gain the base of the crack which split the centre of the overhanging wall above. Walt led across a bold unprotected 5.10+ section which led to the base of the crack which would take us 1,500 feet to the summit. But instead of hauling this section, which would have surely resulted in major snagging of the haulbag in the broken gully below, we left our bags perched on a ledge, and hauled after finishing the next pitch.

The next day I led a 5.9+ off-width for breakfast, unprotected and pumper in the hot Zion sun. The wall changed to overhanging, and already retreat was looking like a challenging potential in itself. We came to the realisation that we had underestimated the length and seriousness of the wall but continued on as all good climbers do in the face of uncertainty.

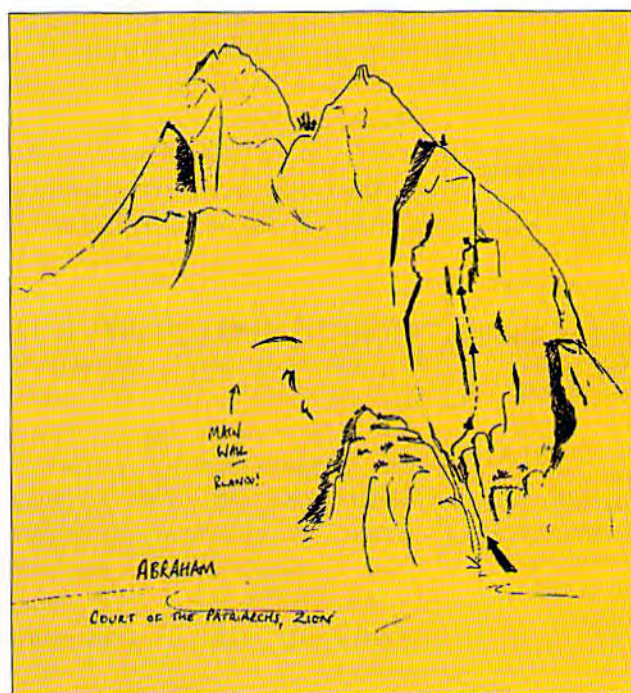
The next 1,000 feet looked like steep knifeblading up thin cracks. One soon learns, especially after cleaning a Zion sandstone aid pitch, that what would be an A1 placement in granite becomes instant A3; that is, even longer pitons are removed with merely a few hits from the hammer. Yet we revelled in the climbing, nailing our coveted knifeblades and birdbeaks repeatedly as we ascended.

Day three seemed like day four, or was it still day two? Time became surrealistic as we ascended. On pitch nine, after leading a thin expanding knifeblade pillar, I placed the first bolts of the route for a belay. Even though the previous five belays were in overhanging sandstone thin cracks, it was a point of pride between Walt and myself not to place any extraneous bolts, though we sacrificed both comfort and peace of mind because of this. Though the climbing had been consistently A3 or A3+ knifeblading – Zion sandstone ratings – we had been blessed to find belays in A1 or A2 sections at intervals concurrent with our rope length. It became a test of the mind to ignore the fact that any shockload from a fall on these natural belays would have likely ripped them out.

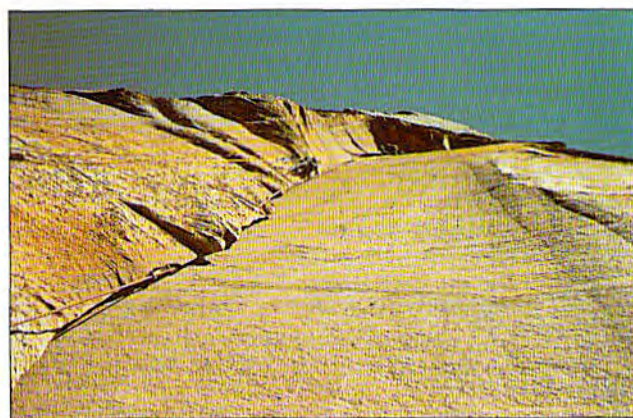
Three-quarters of the way up, we traversed right into the right facing corner system and Walt led a fabulous 5.10 hand crack, a nice reprieve from the endless knifeblading. We were not long for the summit, which loomed 500 feet above us



Above: Middendorf cleaning a pitch high on the face. Middle right: Abraham — left — and Isaac in Zion National Park, both offering scope for adventuresome climbing. Bottom right: Walt Shipley leading the excellent 5.10 hands pitch. Below: A topo outlining the route taken by Shipley and Middendorf.



BILL HATCHER



MIDDENDORF COLLECTION



Left: Middendorf rolling a cigarette during a recent trip to Europe. His ascent last year of The Grand Voyage on Great Trango Tower was the highlight of 1993.

but our provisions were definitely getting low. We recounted the days, and discovered that we would possibly top out on day four but that our water would never last that long. It was May in Zion, and the temperatures exceeded 100°F. We had planned four days, Yosemite rations; that is, a half gallon per person per day. But in the Utah desert heat, we needed more, though we were rationing and were severely dehydrated as it was.

Late on the fourth day, we reached the top of the buttress and drank the last of our water. We had only started out that morning with a half gallon for the two of us, making our consumption for the day about a pint

each. Not too good for the extremely hot conditions. Dehydration was starting to take its toll as our bodies became stiff and sore from lack of water.

The next morning we tossed one of the haulbags, sure it would be lost forever in the steep brushy gullies below. It disappeared out of sight, hit the wall, and rocketed outward to land smack on top of a boulder at its base. It was a shot in a thousand. Before the morning heat arrived, we made a dash for the summit, soloing 5.6 sandy slabs. The summit view was excellent, and we peered down the overhanging south face, wishing we had the gear and the experience to base-jump it for a quick descent.

Instead, we made our way down, clumsily due to the heat and the effects of the acute dehydration we were now experiencing. Which way down? After collecting our gear at the top of the buttress, we started what was to be fourteen long and tiresome rappels down the east flank of Abraham. We were in danger of running out of bolts, and sometimes only placed one bolt for an anchor in the soft and sandy rock. At one point the ropes got stuck. In our delirium of dehydration, we sat motionless on a small ledge for a while, wanting to sleep and be done with it. Then Walt, unanchored, suddenly got up and manically started jumping on the rope. Without warning the anchor pulled and Walt careened backward, almost falling off the ledge with the ropes. Unable to help, I had the grim vision of being stranded on this small ledge, unseen from anyone on the ground with Walt's broken body lying in the

hanging valley below, and waiting to die of thirst – which wouldn't have taken more than 24 hours. Walt did a couple of off-balanced hops on one leg at the edge of the cliff and somehow miraculously regained his stance. Wordlessly, we resumed our descent, realising that we had been given a second chance from a higher power.

After an eternity, we made it to the hanging valley, only to be tempted by stagnant, undrinkable pools of stinky water. Three more rappels from the hanging valley took us to a *bona fide* natural spring, and we gorged ourselves on the best water in Zion until we couldn't move. We named the route The Radiator, VI, 5.10+, A4. A name and grade which summarised a truly grand and extreme adventure. ■

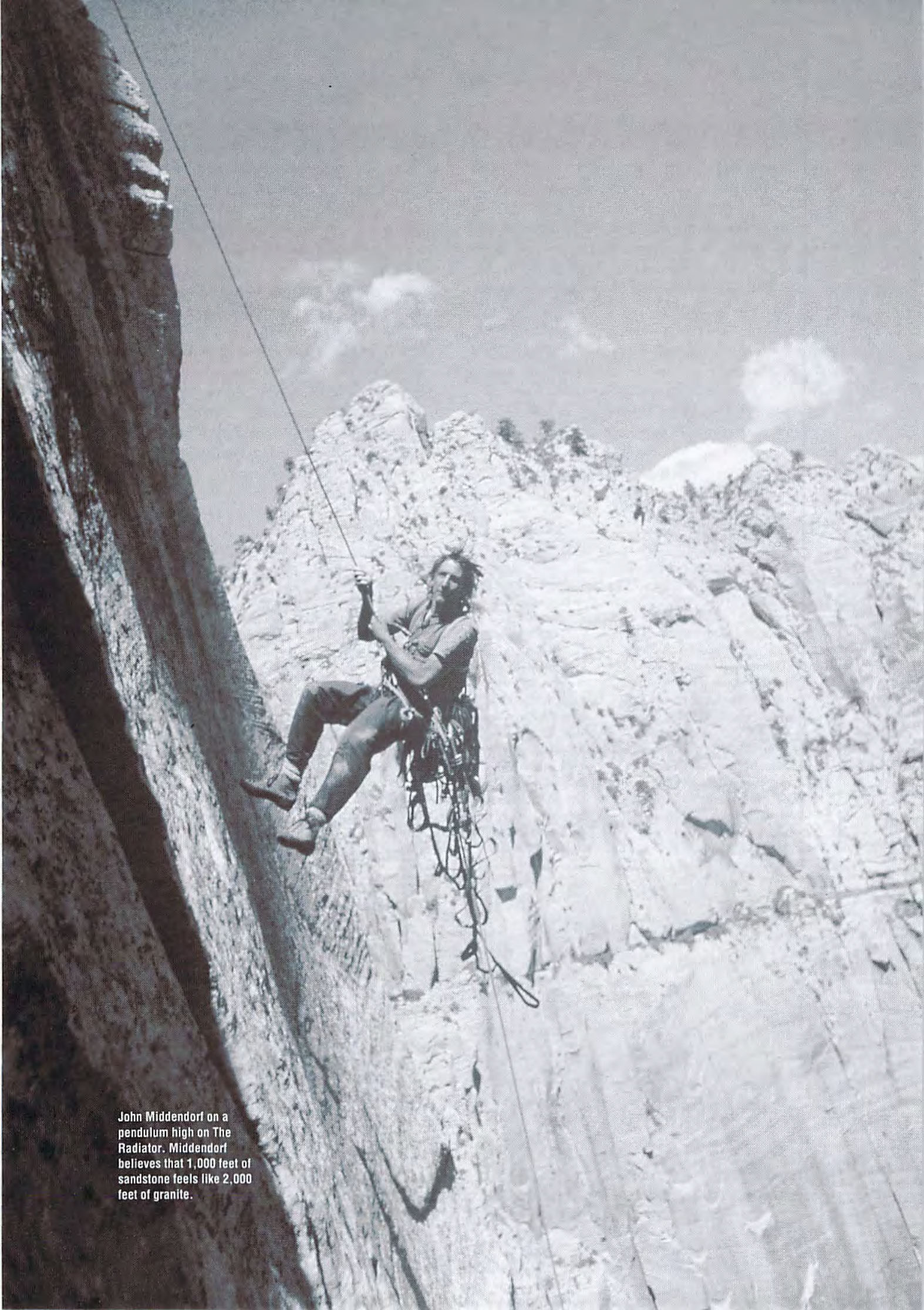
climate & environment

The weather in Zion goes to extremes. Average summertime temperatures – June through August – exceed 100°F and from November through December the average lows are below freezing. Winter ascents are possible, but beware of the serious immobility that snow-covered sandstone presents to the vertical adventurer. The best seasons are the spring and fall, the latter possibly being preferred. In late fall, the north face of Angel's Landing sees very little sun during the day. After a thunderstorm it is good policy not to climb on the rock for a few days as wet sandstone is very fragile.

Zion is a very well preserved wilderness area and climbers need to be aware of the impact humans have on the fragile desert landscape. Pack all trash up the

routes. Be aware of rock damage on the nailing routes when climbing in Zion, the rock often scars from careless or poor pitoncraft.

The easier routes do not require either pitons or a bolt kit. The nailing routes generally do not require any additional drilling, except perhaps at an occasional belay – some of the older bolts may need replacing. A small three-eighth inch bolt kit – two drills, five three-eighth inch by three and a half inch bolts and a few baby angles – suffices for the occasional anchor. Be prepared for very high nailing standards on the harder routes, the ratings used are subjective and are generally given modest ratings compared to the equivalent difficulty of a climb on granite.



John Middendorf on a pendulum high on The Radiator. Middendorf believes that 1,000 feet of sandstone feels like 2,000 feet of granite.