



OFF BELAY, DEANO!

John Middendorf, king of the vertical, on stinky feet, his dream wall-rat, and life without floors **BY CRAIG VETTER**

"BIG-WALL CLIMBING ISN'T FOR EVERYBODY," says 35-year-old John Middendorf, the sport's leading practitioner, a six-foot-two 175-pounder whose muscles lie across his bones like hawsers. "I can't imagine why anyone would want to try.

"Of course," he continues, pretty much contradicting himself, "I find the vertical life extremely addictive."

A quirky mix of rock climbing and alpine-style mountaineering, big-wall climbing, for the uninitiated, entails pulling yourself, hand over hand, up the tallest, sheerest rock faces in the world and, by necessity, spending nights and sometimes weeks cuddling granite instead of going home. Often, it also entails working like a hod carrier in heat or blizzard, cowering while boulders rain cats and dogs, actually growing to like the smell of fermenting socks, and sleeping on a hanging cot that resembles nothing so much as the stretcher that will be used if, God forbid, you screw up. It's not for everybody? Thanks for your candor, John.

In his 17 years of living "on the vertical," Middendorf, a tournament-rated

chess player, computer wizard, juggler, and tightrope walker, has taken a minimalist's approach to more than 100 big walls—defined roughly as any rock face 2,000 feet tall or taller—including what is generally considered to be the world's hardest and highest, Pakistan's 20,470-foot Great Trango Tower. The book *How to Rock Climb: Big Walls*, which Middendorf cowrote with fellow climber John Long, is the how-to bible of the sport, and he's largely responsible for inspiring, instructing, and equipping America's small but devout subculture of big-wall climbers. Almost all of the 1,000 or so practitioners sleep in the hanging tents, called Portaledges, that his company, A5 Adventures, manufactures. Middendorf recently headed to the Himalayas to ascend Meru, an unclimbed 3,500-foot wall in northern India. Before he left, *Outside* caught up with him in the Court of the Patriarchs, a formation of soaring sandstone faces in Zion National Park, not far from his horizontal abode in Hurricane, Utah. At one time or another he's called virtually all of these sheer slabs home.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, you and several other climbers lived in Yosemite National Park and worked on the search and rescue team so that you could climb big walls whenever you had the urge. Is it true that you prided yourself on being "king of the dirtbags"?

Yeah, I used to sleep in the dirt. I was focused on the walls and staying in shape for them and little else. Bathing just didn't seem necessary. Another regular, Derek Hersey—Dirty Derek, they called him—gave me some competition for a while. We climbed the Nose route on El Cap together and for weeks traded compliments on each other's smell. But I really don't think he had my stink endurance.

A role model for all the dirt-loving boys and girls in the sandboxes of America...

Sure. Though actually I haven't gone unbathed for months at a time since Yosemite. But I still enjoy the feeling of having my pores clogged every once in a while. Somehow it feels healthy.

Hygiene aside, how would our lives be different if we all lived on a vertical rather than horizontal plane?

It would definitely change the way people moved around. Just to visit your

neighbor, you'd have to perform acrobatic pendulums using ropes. And we'd all have mondo giant arms. Yes, humans would definitely evolve into a different sort of species. Spindly legs would be another attribute. When I finish a serious climb, I'm always struck by how useless my legs feel. I basically have to relearn how to walk.

Big arms. Little legs. What else does it take to master the big walls?

You have to be technically minded, you have to be able to work very long, very hard days, and you have to have strong problem-solving abilities. In some ways, this sport reminds me of chess—you have to think three moves ahead. The chess pieces are your hardware, rope, food, and water. The opponent, obviously, is the rock and the weather.

And don't tell us—one false move and the game's over?

Well, yeah.

How do you get through each day with such a hefty existential burden hanging over you? Are there times when you just want to curl up in a ball in your sleeping bag?

Actually, you have plenty of time for curling up in a ball when a Himalayan storm hits and chunks of ice and boulders peel off the wall and head for your Portaledge. A broad sense of humor can be a big help. But basically I think you have to write yourself off before starting a big-wall climb. Not that you need to be morose about it. I guess those of us who do this for fun adopt a paramedic's sense of humor. Our jokes, I'm sure, aren't that funny on flat ground, but they can be hilarious, albeit in a twisted way, if you've just taken a big fall and survived.

Does that mean you'd rather climb with Woody Allen than Arnold Schwarzenegger?

Absolutely. You don't want to get up there with macho characters, because too much one-upmanship can lead to problems. Competitive people tend to want you to express your fear first. Although Woody Allen would probably do a lot of whining. Dean Martin might be better. I like his happy-go-luckiness.

A lush?

A lot of the wall climbers I know are usu-

Middendorf (in the circle) bivying on Great Trango Tower

ally half-drunk on the ground anyway. I think we have a hard time dealing with the mundane. When I left Yosemite, it took me years to adjust to an apartment where I had too much room and no big inanimate objects in my routine. Goals in ordinary life are never as pure or powerful as a big wall.

There's something absurdly comical about a pair of grown men living on a cot several thousand feet above ground and having to deal with daily rituals—cooking, cleaning, saying good night—as if they were sharing an apartment in New York. Do you get on each other's nerves? Haven't you ever had the urge to toss your partner out of the "house"?

I remember, on El Cap a few years ago, my partner kept asking me if he could borrow my Swiss Army knife, because he was too lazy to find his own in his pack. He borrowed it again and again, and it was really getting to me. Then, one night after he borrowed it, I heard him say, "Oops." I didn't speak to him for hours.

Tell us about "the top." Does getting there bring about spiritual catharsis? What about when you meet a day hiker up there, somebody who took the mule trail up the back side?

I don't worry too much about whether or not a climb lives up to expectations. Every big wall delivers a beautiful moment or two. Such moments can be life-threatening or seemingly very small, like at the end of a hard day when you've accomplished what you set out to do—then you find that cigarette you didn't think you had. Either way, such moments are always fleeting.

So is life really better on the vertical? I mean, what are the clear-cut advantages?

Oh, man. What are they... Well, you don't have to sit at a desk and fill out tax forms. And the views are nice. Yeah, very nice views.

And the disadvantages?

It's best not to drop anything. ○

Craig Vetter, a contributing editor of Outside, wrote about the BOC Challenge yacht race in the August issue.

