

Go For It!

Grade tour 4: Very Severe

Very Severe (VS) is without doubt an inspirational grade for a very large number of climbers. It has a grown-up aura and seems to hold the key to a whole new world of amazing climbs. There is suddenly a wealth of climbs to choose from as well as untold diversity encompassing every aspect of rock architecture including remote mountain crags, adventurous sea cliffs and inaccessible sea stacks. Where ever you go it seems that there are VSs in abundance. It is no surprise therefore that VS is the grade that would-be Mountain Instructors (see box) need to be able to climb as it is the level of difficulty that the majority of climbers reach or aspire to.

The essence of Very Severe

So you've finally made it to the foot of your first VS – it's a big day. You've probably been anticipating this moment for a very long time, having spent months or more likely years getting comfortable on easier climbs. Like most climbers you'll have spent time wondering what's in store and agonised over whether you're ready to take it on.

Knowing what you're taking on is crucial in order to be able to make the decision that you're up to it. Whenever you move into the realms of a new grade all you have to go on is previous experience. If you relate VS to the time you've spent on Hard Severe you'll find that the difference is in how sustained the difficulties are. A typical HS has sequences of 5-6 moves at 4b whilst a VS may have whole pitches where every move is 4b or above. Hopefully you already know you can make 4b/4c moves so it becomes a question of being able to link a long run of them whilst also stopping to rest and being able to get comfortable to place runners.

You may even encounter the odd 5a move at the end of a tiring 4c sequence. It's important to be able to break the pitch down into manageable chunks by spotting and making use of places to rest. These may be no more than a positive foothold combined with a good handhold where you can shift your position until you get the weight off your arms for a while.

Technical talk

▼ Always choose a ledge well above sea level to get started. Climbers: Libby Peter and Meilee Rafe.
All photography: Mike Robertson



One of the appeals of climbing VS is the world of adventurous multi-pitch climbing that opens up to you. To begin with, the added complexity of changing over at the end of each pitch can add considerable time and ample opportunity for 'faffing'.

Stance organisation: This somewhat formal term merely describes what you need to do at the end of each pitch so as to make things as safe and tangle-free as possible. You can save yourself time and avoid frustrating 'spaghetti' moments by adopting a few simple strategies.

1. Choose the best possible but closest anchors available so you use least rope or even have the option of equalising the anchors with slings.
2. Position yourself so you can see your second and are in line with the anchors but also anticipate where you want to be positioned for belaying the next pitch.
3. Stow the rope on the ledge next to you but if there's no room to do this don't let the rope drop down the crag – it often snags. Lap it back and forth in decreasing sized folds over the top of the anchor ropes.
4. On really steep (semi-hanging) belays fold the rope over your foot or into a sling clipped into one of the anchors.
5. If one person is leading all the pitches or there are 3 of you, it helps to use slings to centralise and equalise the anchors to a single point (see diagram).
6. A simple way to secure your partner at the belay while sorting out the change over is to tie an overhand knot in a bight of rope behind the belay plate.

The Mountain Instructor Award (MIA) is the highest level rock climbing and summer mountaineering qualification in the UK. It covers teaching all aspects of rock activity including taking take others multi-pitch climbing and scrambling. If you're looking for an instructor to teach you on the rock then this is the qualification to look out for. For more information about the MIA visit mltuk.org

Profile of a Severe

Name: Sea Groove

Grade: VS 4b

Length: 140ft

Pitches: 2

Rock Type: limestone.

Crag: White Tower, near Mother Carey's Kitchen, Lydstep, South Pembroke.

Guidebook: *Pembroke Part Two* (Climbers' Club), *Pembroke RockFax*.

Character: Sea Groove is found in a fantastic



setting on the friendlier angled side of the famously steep White Tower promontory. The climb starts just above sea-level on good ledges. You can walk around to the neighbouring headland to get a good look at the line and state of the tide. At low tide it's possible to scramble down around the base of the cliff underneath the incredible smooth shield of The White Sheet (where all the impossible-looking routes go). If the sea is too high or rough abseil from the top of the tower down the line of the route taking care with loose rock. Looking up the route it appears to be disappointingly vegetated but don't let this put you off as the climbing is excellent and improves the higher you go. Never hard but thoroughly absorbing Sea Groove provides a gentle introduction to adventurous multi-pitch VS.

▲ The first pitch is a little vegetated but this doesn't detract from the enjoyment!

VS – the hit list

A VS hit list is virtually impossible to compile as there's a lifetime of fantastic climbing at this grade. Here are a few ideas to wet your appetite. Have fun!

Soft touch

Lighthouse Arête, *Castell Helen*, *Gogarath*. An intimidating abseil approach, splendid setting and



gentle climbing make this a justifiably popular outing.

Benchmark

Lavaredo, Carreg Alltrem, Lledr Valley, North Wales. A small route with a grand feel in a pastoral setting.

Eliminate 'A', Dow Crag, Coniston, Lake District. A magnificent journey, one of the best VSs in Britain.

The Crack, Gimmer Crag, Langdale, Lake District. Classic, powerful line.

Fall Out Corner, Coire an Lochain, Cairngorms. A high mountain outing that guarantees to be memorable.

Clean Sweep, Hell's Lum, Cairngorms. Every climber should do a route in the Loch A'an basin at some point in their life. This one is a great choice; granite climbing at its finest.

Eagle Ridge, Lochnagar, NE Scotland. Remote mountain setting, historic climb, big day out.

Meaty

Little Brown Jug, Bosigran, Cornwall. A famous

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◀ It's all in the name – the spectacular **Sea Groove** (VS 4b), on the White Tower, near Mother Carey's, South Pembroke.

classic and rightly so.

South Ridge Direct, Cir Mhor, Arran. Superb, well worth the walk.

Direct Route, Dinas Mot, Llanberis Pass, North Wales. The best VS in the Pass?

Old Man of Stoer, Lochinver, N.W. Scotland. A sea-stack adventure not to be missed. □

▲ Runners need to be closely spaced as you leave the ground. An attentive belayer is worth their weight in gold!



◀ The top pitch provides superb climbing in the steep, but well protected, groove.