



Libby Peter's Climbing Essentials

No. 9 : Sea-cliff Essentials

British sea-cliff climbing is unsurpassed. The sheer variety of rock types and volume of routes is staggering, there's something for everyone, from mellow single-pitch mini-gems to huge rambling adventures. Just being immersed in the rocky coastal environment is pleasure in itself but combined with world-class climbing it's an unforgettable experience.

However, even at the most seemingly non-serious venues there are additional considerations and on the big remote cliffs there is a seriousness that shouldn't be underestimated. This month we take a look at recognising and minimising the risks associated with sea-cliff climbing.

Getting in and getting out

You'll encounter every type of approach at coastal venues from easy footpaths to terrifying abseils.

Steep grass: This can be lethal, especially in rock boots, so it may be wise to rig an abseil or at least put a hand-line in place as a safeguard.

Abseil: First choice is to have an extra rope you can leave in place. As you don't need it to be retrievable the anchors can be further back from the edge where it's normally more solid. It also gives you a lifeline back up the cliff in case you need to retreat. As you'll be returning to pick up the abseil rope later in the day you don't need to skimp on the number of anchors.

In-situ abseil anchors: These are common at well-used venues and more often than not



1. Two stakes and overhand knot.



2. Two stakes and clove-hitch.

will be stakes driven into the ground. You'll encounter the full spectrum of quality so inspect them with a critical eye. ALWAYS use more than one and link them so they share the load; a few methods are shown in **photos 1-5**. Note the slings are clove-hitched to the stakes to stop them rotating and the cross of the clove-hitch is positioned at the back of the stake to further help it tighten.

Photos 1-3 show three good ways to link and equalise the load on two stakes with the rope; **photo 1** uses an overhand knot, **photo 2** a clove-hitch and **photo 3** an alpine butterfly.

Slings can also be effective as shown in **photo 4** – the abseil rope is then attached with a figure of eight and screwgate karabiner.

If you have to use a short stake and are worried about the rope jumping off you can add a clove-hitch above the figure of eight, as in **photo 5**.



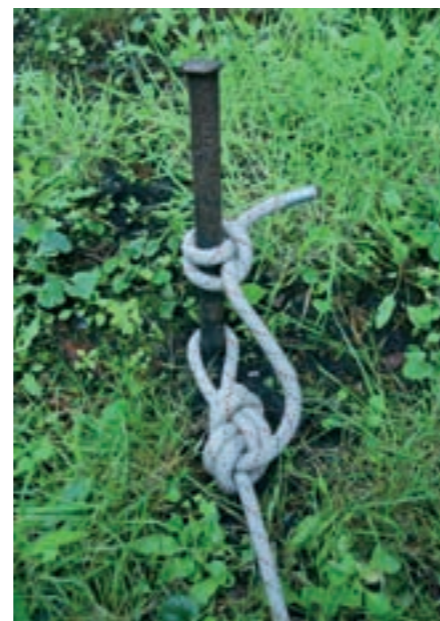
3. Two stakes and alpine butterfly.



◀ Libby belayed at the top of a typically loose Pembroke classic. Note how she's found anchors well back from the edge, but positioned herself forward to get a better view and also to avoid taking in the ropes over the loose ground.



4. Two stakes and black slings.



5. One stake, figure eight and clove-hitch.

▶ Never underestimate the power and unpredictability of the sea. A freak wave halfway up the Ivory Tower, Bosherton Head, Pembroke.

the day may have a hideous greasiness. This is common sea-cliff blight that isn't caused by rain – just by dampness in the air – of which there's always loads! It's invariably wise to let the sun hit the crag before you do, so check the aspect. Gogarth is a great example of a perfect afternoon/early evening cliff as it mostly faces northwest. It's common to see cold and unhappy teams on *Dream of White Horses*, who arrived early to beat the crowds only to find the delicate crux pitch a slippery horror-show.

Guano (bird droppings) frequently coats the larger ledges and adds to the fun (and slipperiness), especially on popular limestone routes, which get polished readily.

On less frequented cliffs lichen may be abundant. This brushes off easily when dry but provides terrifyingly insecure friction in the damp.

The conclusion of all this is that it's amazingly difficult to predict conditions on the crag before you set off. So choose an easy route for the first of the day, or have an escape plan.

Escape plan

The feeling of being totally committed is both exciting and terrifying. If you worry excessively you'll never get started, but it's wise to have at-least thought through your options. Leaving an abseil rope in-place provides a safe (if strenuous) line of retreat, so don't forget the prusik loops and make time to practise somewhere non-serious first. As you abseil in make a mental note of the state of the rock the rope will be rubbing against, looseness and sharp edges are significant hazards while abseiling but at least you can make



Whenever you abseil and especially at sea-cliffs ALWAYS use a safety back-up such as a French prusik auto-block. A popular set up is shown in **photo 6**.

Sea-level traverse: Once at the base of the crag you may need to traverse to the climb. This may turn out to be the crux of the whole day, as is the case on the notoriously damp and awkward traditional approach to *Moonraker* at Berry Head (see main photo). Don't underestimate how serious it would be to slip in with a full rack and rope weighing you down, and because of this it's essential to carry your rack on a bandolier, and ropes coiled over your shoulder without tying them to your body, so that both can be jettisoned quickly if you were to fall in.

Safety at the base of the climb

Once you arrive at the base of the climb quickly assess how safe you are. Check above you for other climbers and loose rock and spend some time watching the waves. Your first impulse may be to get a belay to prevent being washed off a platform but you need to weigh this against the advantage of being able to move around to dodge stonefall. You can guard against both with a long tether.

Guidebooks indicate when a particular climb or section of crag is affected by the tide so make sure you check tide times. It's also wise to understand how the type of tide (springs or neaps) as well as the wind and sea-state will augment any high-tide.

Condition of rock

Loose top-outs are very common so ALWAYS get some good runners BEFORE you enter this zone. Then climb carefully through the loose zone avoiding the temptation to place runners behind hollow looking blocks. Warn your belayer to enable them to take cover and be extra vigilant. If your top-out looks horrendous the safer decision may be to scuttle sideways to an adjacent route before topping out.

Often you won't get a view of your climb until you're standing underneath it so it's worth having a plan B in case it's wet. Lines that are prone to seepage are usually obvious and the guidebook may highlight this but it's incredibly hard to predict whether the rock on



6. French prusik on leg-loop.

your decent as smooth as possible. Keep this in mind as you prusik, avoid swinging and bouncing and keep your senses sharp.

If worst comes to worst and you have to swim out – you won't be the first! But spend some time thinking it through – which way to head and definitely ditch the gear, you can come back for it later. ☐

Libby has been climbing for over 20 years, she is a qualified Mountaineering Instructor and IFMGA Guide and is the author of *Rock Climbing – Essential Skills and Techniques* published by MLTUK. Her base is North Wales from where she runs the guiding outfit Llanberis Guides (info@llanberisguides.com)