

Commuters on Chiquito Dome

THOMAS HIGGINS

MY ENJOYMENT OF CLIMBING begins long before the climb. I tingle as I think about Chiquito Dome. While I scamper around the little bouldering outcrop, Indian Rock in Berkeley, I imagine climbing the golden surface of Chiquito. At my desk, I shove away memos, sketch topos and scrawl route names for the last route I did with Chris Vandiver on Chiquito Dome, and the one to come. I peer into our slides of the dome, imagining how this knobby section will go and the next and where to belay.

There on the July calendar are three free days. I wonder if Chris can meet me at Chiquito Dome to finish a new route we started last year, but had no time to finish. We have planned and cancelled a trip several times this year. Chris has been busy building house additions, selling skis and teaching climbers. I'm busy consulting with cities on transportation problems. The work hustle heightens concern about climbing on Chiquito Dome. Maybe someone has already done our route? Maybe the dome, all ours up to now, is covered with routes? We talk nervously on the telephone, I in Oakland, Chris in Donner Summit, near Lake Tahoe. He's puffing his cigarette and says, "We've got to do it, man. It's too damn good to last." Finally, we find a window of time from July 19-21. Chris will meet his climbing class on the 22nd. Like Himalayan climbers worried about the monsoon season, we have a small window of time. I love it. Give me a little time to climb and I burst along full of energy and drive. Give me too much, and I waste it. I climb in three- to five-day stints, with long drives on both ends. I'm a commuter climber.

My rendezvous with Chiquito Dome has become a familiar little ceremony. I pull out the bolt kit, count the drills, have several sharpened, buy twenty more, count the bolts, and look for fracture lines. I pack the pasta, prosciutto, clams, garlic, cayenne, wine, tomatoes, nuts, and other good food we enjoy. I put in a loose-knit, long-sleeve, white cotton shirt given to me by a friend from India. It's a pajama top, perfect for screening the sun and letting in air on a hot dome. In go the sunglasses, lip lotion, and baseball hat. In go the Kronhofers, superb hand-made leather climbing shoes, made in Austria. They are tight but rarely painful. They edge magnificently on high-angle rock and friction well enough.

PLATE 39

Photo by Barbara Vandiver

**Tom Higgins on CHIQUITO
DOME.**



All these things, and the usual things of car camping, go tightly into the trunk of my old Porsche, each into the same place every time. I check the oil and tire pressure. I'm as persnickety as they come.

At Lake Tahoe, Chris gets ready to take an airplane to Fresno. I plan to meet him there. His preparation ceremonies are less elaborate than mine. Chris packs cigarettes, shorts and EBs. He likes to turn brown, doesn't worry much about lung cancer and somehow smears his feet on high-angle knobs and flakes. For all his nonchalance, the flight still stokes him up. When I arrive at the airport and pull up to the loading zone, Chris excitedly waves me inside. Has he a surprise climbing gadget or shoe to show me? No, there is a beautiful woman simply walking along, luggage in hand. We're ecstatic, and nearly offer to carry her baggage. Our flight into adolescence is cut short when I realize my car might be towed. We rush from the lobby and drive into the Fresno dusk. The air is an acrid combination of smog, dust and crop sprays. The traffic is intense. What relief to begin the twisting, dark drive to Chiquito Dome! I drink in the air, starved for the scents of the mountain night. We move along quickly, each sharp turn winning more distance from the haze and turmoil below. At one A.M., buzzed from the road work, we pull into the campground. The night is cool and swept with stars. I step from the metal machine onto a bed of pine needles. A mile away is Chiquito, a steep fist of granite waiting in the woods, barely lit by a dim, silver glow. I feel a praise well up inside and know again why I climb.

The first move is pretty hard on our new route. As with the last route we did here, *Elegant Inclinations*, we take the steepest part of the face where a few depressions, flakes and undulations seem to lead somewhere. Chris leads up, looking for the bolts we placed last year. I wonder if this route will drain us like the last.

Elegant Inclinations really wore us down. It took 22 bolts and four days to complete. We rappelled off each day, then climbed up again. Once, we left a fixed rope and jumared up to our high point. In so doing, I violated a personal rule against siege climbing. I paid for it just as I knew I would. I've only jumared once before in my life. Chris had to remind me about the rudiments on the spot. I trembled upward, sure the rope would break. Chris smoked several cigarettes and squinted at me in disbelief. It was the last time we fixed a rope.

Today, we're not worried about wear-down or logistics. We figure we have enough time for two more pitches after the first, completed last year. Suddenly, my complacency is shattered. Chris shouts down, "There's a bolt hanger missing from this bolt!" I can't believe it. I tie him off, pull out the camera and snap on the telephoto. It's true. The second bolt is without a hanger. Yet, I can see other bolts, and way up over a slight bulge, our belay anchors and rappel sling from last year. Maybe a hot-shot party has done the route and along the way decided the second bolt wasn't needed! I panic. We can't remember if we took the hanger off last year. Chris replaces it and climbs the steep grey knobs above. It's so airy up there no one would do it without clipping the second bolt. What's

happening? Finally, at the belay, Chris says there is a film cannister tied to the bolts. It has a note inside!

I'm devastated. Chiquito has been a sanctuary for me. It is beautiful and quiet here. We've never seen other climbers or evidence of routes on the big, bold south face. Chris and I love finding beautiful, obscure domes on which to try first ascents. We hate crowded climbing areas. Now, it looks as if all the preparation and excitement is for nothing. I yell up, "What's it say, Chris?"

"It says, 'We did your route, dummies. Thanks for doing the first pitch. Love, Fresno Jocks.'"

I've been had. Chris lets out a good laugh, pulls off his shoes, lights up and says, "No note. Get your ass up here." I guess we removed the bolt hanger for some reason, and forgot all about it.

The climbing is excellent. The rock is steeper than most Sierra domes, and improbable climbing turns to impossible climbing just off our path. No move is very hard, just 5.9 here and there. Holds are large, but far between, or sloping, or on rock steep enough to scare us.

Above Chris, I replace one poor bolt, get to our last carabiner still in place, and look over what's next. The familiar Chiquito psychosis returns. It looks so easy to go up and left. I start out, grab a good hold, but quickly find nothing for my feet. I'm hanging, unable to go anywhere. The move I just made is 5.6. The next might be 5.11. I back down, look up, look right, castigate myself for not being able to climb and pull up again on the same holds. This time, sloping footholds mysteriously appear to my left. They're not great, but at least they are there. I smear one. It feels slippery, weird. My attention fixes on the void below. My haul line isn't touching the wall. There's no use fooling myself—it is steep. I force myself to step out onto the holds. The feet stay, another handhold appears. The move seems no more than 5.9. I can't believe it. My mind refuses to climb. Now, I'm only ten feet out from my protection, and scared. What if I fall? I won't touch, I won't slide, I'll just fly. Calm down, calm down.

Chris can't read the mind warp from his nylon seat and bare feet. He's barefoot, soaking up the sun, and munching on a cheese, lettuce and tomato sandwich. I tell him I'm a little freaked, a considerable understatement. He says, "That's what you get when you drive out of the city after bouldering at Indian Rock and jump on a vertical dome." He's right. Commuter climbing has its drawbacks. Psychologists say neurosis can be resolved by getting the patient to do whatever he fears. The same seems to apply here. With each move I force myself to make, I loosen up. Soon, I realize it's possible to climb on this steep stuff. Now about twenty feet out, I'm on giant holds, in a little depression. Time for another bolt. The drilling goes slowly. The feet still go numb, even encased in my heavenly Kronhofers.

Climbing up and out of the depression, my heart sinks. Above, there is a very steep section, looking as if it might require several bolts. I've only used about eighty feet of rope. I don't want to drill three or more bolts to get to the belay point. The climbing isn't hard, but where to go? I climb back and forth up

the vertical wall, trying to find the easiest path. The main problem is simply reaching from one set of grey mushrooms to another. Usually, the tops are sharp, but now and then I reach full stretch from some awkward position to find a sloping hold. At this angle, there's no comfortable way to reverse such tricky moves. I look down to find I'm now about forty feet from the last bolt. I test everything and clutch hard. Finally, after sixty feet of nervous climbing, I arrive at good grey chunks and slam in two belay bolts. Chris comes up, confirms the little hard section is 5.9, and zooms the rest.

We find ourselves in a familiar position. We are about 300 feet up the wall with at least one more pitch to go. The angle appears to taper off. Climbing up and left looks easy. It's about three o'clock. We're *sure* we can finish today, and chatter confidently about how nice the route is. I remove my shoes, tie them off, climb in the butt bag, drink some lemonade and belay Chris across the easy moves. The view is unobscured across miles of forest around us, all under bright blue sky. There are no climbers, hikers, or hunters disturbing the quiet. Soon, however, Chiquito psychosis returns. The easy moves are not easy. We are relieved to be over the dead vertical section, but soon realize the rock is still plenty steep. Chris moves up and left and begins fiddling with a section which looks like 5.6 from where I sit.

"How's it going, Chris?"

"Tricky here, man, tricky," he says.

We go back and forth, with me doing what Chris did at the last belay. I urge him on from the comfort of my belay. He moves cautiously and resists my discounting of the difficulties. Of course the drill breaks or bends or gets dull after only one use. Whoever does quality control at Rawl Company must sleep most of the time. The bolting tedium gets to Chris. I've taped the drill holder, to make it more comfortable. After all our drilling, the wad of tape has moved forward, blocking the slot in which the ejection pin goes. Chris is mad as hell, fumbling to find the slot so he can change drills. The sun slides behind the dome.

It's strange how much of the satisfaction in our new route is in the idea of it rather than the execution. Bolting is so time-consuming and painful we lose sight of why we're here. I'm already thinking about how the route will sit in memory, and what's a good name. Chris says he hates bolting and wants off this thing as fast as possible. Chiquito is testing our will and desire. Is the satisfaction of remembering the climb worth twenty agonizing drill stances? Thirty?

Chris hammers harder and harder and finally gets the bolt in. Next, he traverses left to the first little crack we've ever found on the dome. It's less a crack and more of a shallow rivlet. We've brought a few wire nuts and a #1 Friend. Nothing works, and now he's really mad. He starts to climb on without any protection, then backs down and reluctantly starts to drill again. At this rate, we'll have to return tomorrow and climb the entire route just to place the last two or three bolts! I can't believe it. Our little plum is turning sour. Chris curses about the drill, his mediocre stance, the incredibly hard rock and his sore feet.

I guess once this bolt is in, it will be his last. I'm right. He clips in and climbs one-hundred feet to the top of Chiquito Dome without stopping!

Following the pitch, I find myself going slow then fast just as Chris did. Where Chris had run out the lead, no moves are over 5.7. Elsewhere, what looks like 5.6 is a slow 5.8. Chris is smoking at the belay, back under control. He asks, "How did you like it, Sahib?" In my billowing cotton night shirt, I look the part. We like the sound of Sahib, and the masterly connotation. We feel masterly even after cursing the dome and ourselves only a few hours ago. We call the route *Sahib*. Everything is working out well in spite of our fluctuating moods. The route is one to be proud of. What it lacks in raw gymnastic difficulty it makes up for in stimulating climbing away from protection. We've been lucky again.

Chiquito has charmed us. It rises up all soft and yellow in the evening air, but is no more than dead stone. The routes done and to come are only experiences. We leave no creation for anyone to behold, just a tiny path of metal climbers some day may find. Yet, Chris will remember the dome through his winter of skiing and, before long, crave another rendezvous with Chiquito Dome. I'll draw my route topos while attending some transportation conference, or imagine Chiquito while bouldering on city outcrops. We'll forget the bending drills, long hours on minuscule holds and sore feet. We'll commute here again, or wherever a steep, golden face takes away our breath, far from the busy centers of California climbing.

