

Athletic tape protects a climber's hands against the abrasive volcanic rock.

STORY BY STEPHANIE FORTE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL CLARK

In this vast nocturnal landscape, granite boulders suggest creations of sand, water, and a child's imagination, sprawling for miles amid rolling, sandy hills. In the distance, standing nearly two miles above the valley floor, the Sierra Nevada keeps a close eye on the boulder fields of Bishop, California.

A brisk February chill greets us as we wake before dawn and think of our tent poles, four hours away in Las Vegas. Inside my sleeping bag, I'm thankful our oversight forced us to forgo the nylon cocoon that is a tent. I am mesmerized by the thick veil of stars overhead, like gift wrap on the treasure the morning sun will expose. Here is one of America's

most pristine bouldering areas, called the Buttermilks.

First light casts shimmering hues of gold over the boulders, hinting why this county was given the Indian name Inyo, said to mean the dwelling place of the Great Spirit. On its trails and peaks, beside its rivers and streams, and in its therapeutic hot springs, the surreal beauty of Bishop has captivated many.

When climbing legends Chris Sharma and Lisa Rands decided to call Bishop home a few years ago, news of the area saturated the climbing media. Glossy images of boulder fields cried out to climbers around the globe; come, look, climb. Bishop has become to bouldering what New Orleans is to Mardi Gras partying.

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Nestled between 14,000-foot peaks of the Sierra Nevada and White Mountains, the valley that houses the small town of Bishop, elevation 4,140 feet, is protected from most severe winter weather. Though nights are more than brisk and some days near freezing, the typical daytime winter temperatures are close to perfect for this energetic sport. Climbers flock here for sunshine, granite, and volcanic rock — and the company of others who speak the language and understand the passion of bouldering.

In bouldering, one does not attempt to reach a mountain summit, but concentrates on completing a short route to the top of some particular rock. Because the routes selected are usually difficult, they're called "problems."

This is the minimalist approach to climbing, requiring no more equipment than shoes, a bag of powdered chalk to keep the climber's hands dry, and a thick foam "crash pad" to cushion falls. Bouldering has been around for years, but today it is rock climbing's discipline *du jour*, and Bishop is the hot spot. So for the weekend climber, it's best to arrive ready to share the rock with the new friends you'll inevitably make.

But this time, sunrise showed me the Buttermilks just as I had remembered them from my last visit, six years ago — deserted and beautiful.

My fiancé, Steve Enger, and our friend Ryan Wolf were as eager as I to start climbing, so we rose with the sun, stealing a few hours of seclusion before the crowds arrived. The rock felt cold at first touch. Tiny cracks on the surface intersected in patterns suggesting spiderwebs. Each boulder tested our grace under pressure, demanding awkward movement to pull our bodies over the lip onto the top. "Stay cool, breathe, pull, and push your body over the edge": I mentally repeated the words like a mantra, a constant reminder that it's not over till the soles of both my feet are firmly gripping the boulder's uppermost surface.

Once warmed up, I wanted to climb a problem that was out of my league on my last visit, the Iron Man Traverse, V4 on the bouldering scale. (The scale goes from V0 to V14, the latter being most difficult.) Arriving at the Iron Man by midmorning, we found diver-

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sity: road-tripping Minnesota teens, a few climbing couples, a smattering of Bishop locals, and a pack of assorted dogs. A skinny, pale boy, in pants three sizes too large, used a toothbrush on the handholds of Iron Man to loosen chalk left by previous climbers. It was an act of courtesy, offering me the very best grip. Even so, I missed the last hold and fell to the crash pad in a flurry of frustration.

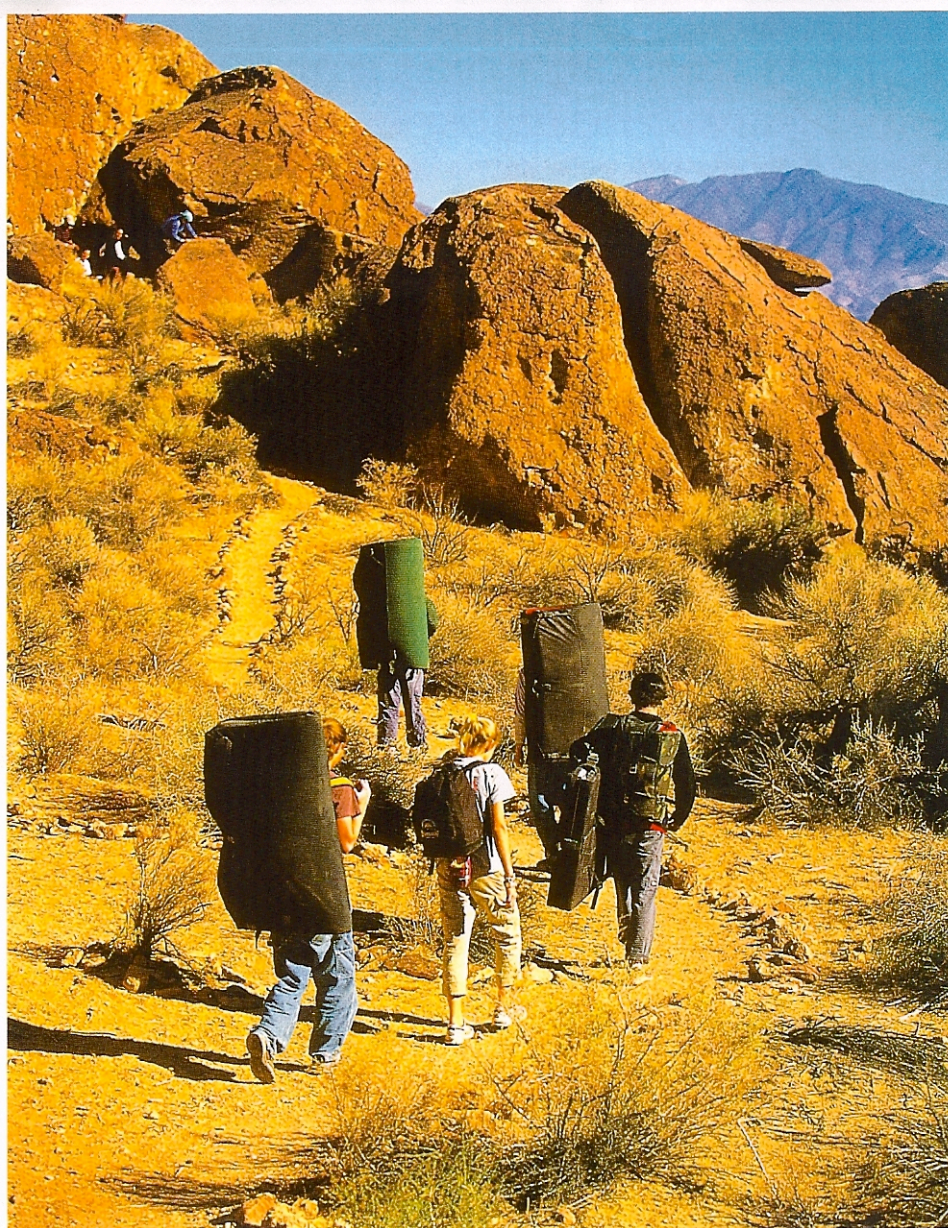
On try number two, I felt strong and focused. Arms crossing, feet cutting loose, I moved in a synchronized rhythm, traversing the boulder's sloping handholds using tiny edges to support my feet. The holds steadily decreased in size, and I found myself clutching a small edge, then staring at the final hold — a round sloping piece of rock whose outer edges offered a positive grip for my fingers. But it was out of reach for my 5 foot 1 inch body. I had no other option but to "throw." That meant springing from my secure perch on the rock to grab the elusive hold, Tarzan fashion, from midair. I caught it, draped my body across the rock, and groveled inelegantly to victory.

Eager for more despite our raw fingertips, the next morning we opted to visit the Happy Boulders, the area that catapulted Bishop into bouldering fame in the late '90s. The Happys are situated in a narrow canyon five miles north of Bishop on the Volcanic Tableland. A short, steep approach hike leads to the canyon. The volcanic rock, rhyolite tuff, presents more options for hand- and footholds than the smooth granite surface of the Buttermilks, yet is still abrasive. Use of athletic tape is highly recommended for climbing at either area. Problems here are typically pocketed — meaning the rock offers lots of holes big enough to get a finger or fingers inside — but also steep, requiring the climber to have very strong forearms. The level of difficulty varies widely.

The Happy Boulder itself, which gave its name to the whole neighbor-

THIS PAGE: Author Stephanie Forte ascends a boulder's overhanging rock face.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Toting crash pads, climbers at the Happy Boulders head for their next bouldering "problem."



hood, offered us interesting features and problems with amusing names like Big Chicken (V4) and The Hulk (V6). Who could resist a dance with Disco Diva (V8)? I showed off my greatest bouldering accomplishment on Chollas (V9), a steep and powerful line of pockets. Steve went to battle with its neighbor, Action Figure, a beautiful V7 that offers exciting movement to the last hold. Though these problems were physically challenging, the real gem was a V2, tucked quietly in a corner, Rio's Secret Arete.

An arete is a point formed by the intersection of two walls. In this case the angle forms a vertical knife edge, with intimidating potential for falling, so I graciously let the guys go first. After watching their sequence of moves, I hopped on. Passing the point where my crash pad no longer provided assurance, I took long deep breaths.

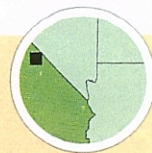
Reaching the final holds I wasn't surprised; here was another awkward top-out. I pushed, pulled, grunted, and groaned, while wiggling my belly over the rock like a seal. Hardly graceful, my vivid impression did receive applause from climbers on a nearby boulder.

As I stood atop the arete and watched the rock begin to glow in the late afternoon sun, and heard the laughter of climbers in the distance, I decided the Happy Boulders lived up to their name. Later, heading back to Las Vegas over Westgard Pass, I carried home at least some of the great spirit of Bishop. ♦

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Getting there



Location: Bishop, California, 266 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Directions: From Las Vegas, take U.S. 95 north through Beatty; continue 51 miles and turn left at Lida Junction onto Nevada Route 266. Shortly after crossing the California state line at Oasis, turn left onto California Route 168. At Big Pine turn right onto U.S. 395 to Bishop. **The Buttermilks:** From Bishop, take West Line Street (Route 168), for approximately 7 miles, making a right onto Buttermilk Road. Drive another 3.8 miles on the unpaved road, to a parking area on your right. **The Happy Boulders:** From Bishop, take U.S. 6 north for approximately 1 mile. Make a left onto Five Bridges Road, past a gravel plant. Turn left onto Chalk Bluff Road, and drive 2.3 miles to a parking area on your left.

Camping: Free dispersed camping is available at the Buttermilks. There is a 14-day maximum; no fire rings allowed. To reach the BLM Climbers' Winter Campground, drive north from Bishop on U.S. 395. After 6.5 miles, turn right onto Pleasant Valley Road. After 9 mile, make a left onto a dirt road near the power lines. Continue a half-mile into the campsite. Camping is free, but donations are suggested. Do not camp on the Volcanic Tableland, as this will increase man's impact on the fragile area.

Hotels: Go to www.bishopvisitor.com or call (888) 395-3952.

Information: Go to www.bishopvisitor.com, www.thehighsierra.com, or www.bouldering.com. *The Bishop Bouldering Survival Kit*, by Mick Ryan, is a comprehensive guide to the bouldering areas surrounding Bishop, available at www.rockfax.com. Or visit Desert Rock Sports, 8201 W. Charleston Blvd., Las Vegas, (702) 254-1143. Also recommended is *Hot Springs of the Eastern Sierra*, by George Williams III, a guide to discovering the Bishop area's natural hot springs. To order, call (702) 887-1394.

Worth trying while there: Erick Schat's bakery, 763 N. Main St. is "Home of the Original Shepherd Bread"; Wilson's Eastside Sports, 224 N. Main St., has everything you may have forgotten; Kava Café, 206 N. Main St., is a coffeehouse with personality plus.

