



Cliff Hanger

An Estes Park outfitter is the only guide company in the country to offer commercial camping trips on cliffs.

THE VIEW FROM MY ACCOMMODATIONS this evening is nothing short of spectacular: 180 degrees of the majestic, snow-capped Continental Divide, bathed in golden twilight. However, instead of calmly taking in the mountain landscape, my heart is racing. That's because I'm not in a luxury hotel room; I'm suspended 200 feet above the ground on a canvas platform bolted to the face of a vertical cliff.

My "cliff camping" adventure began about seven hours earlier at Kent Mountain Adventure Center, the first and only U.S. commercial outfit to offer trips to those who seek the thrill of spending the night on a "big wall" but lack the skills to go it alone. Climbers tackling vertical monsters like Yosemite's iconic El Capitan can't typically scale a 3,000-foot face in a single day, so they have no choice but to sleep on a hanging portaledge (a suspended tent system) en route. But would anyone want to camp like this for fun?

Twenty-six year veteran mountaineer Harry Kent hadn't considered that question until he got a call from Charley Boorman, host of the British adventure travel show *Extreme Frontiers*, in June 2013. Boorman had seen a photo of cliff camping, added it to his bucket list, and hired Kent late last summer to guide the adventure. (They filmed the trip for an episode that aired in January.) Inspired, Kent launched the service this summer, for everyone from adrenaline junkies to adventurous romantics looking for a place to propose. "When you're up there, you have this sensation of being really tiny, like 'I can't even believe I am here,'" says Kent, 58. "I wanted to enable clients to feel that extreme environment but feel safe."

As a former climber who once dreamed of completing a big wall—but instead gave the sport up after the

birth of my first child 15 years ago—I was among the first to sign up. We began our day with a 45-minute hike to a remote crag south of Estes Park. At its base, my guide and portaledge partner, Jes Meiris—who holds a speed climbing record on El Cap—spent about

two hours teaching me how to use mechanical ascenders and webbing ladders to climb a fixed rope to our site on the wall and reminding me how to rappel down. She also delicately explained how to use a GoGirl—a funnel-like device that improves the aim of female big-wall climbers who must relieve themselves in a plastic jar.

As I began the ascent, the afternoon sun warming the rock, I envisioned sipping boxed Merlot and enjoying a hot meal (both included in the cliff-camping package) from my idyllic perch above. Then, I'd drift off and wake up to an unforgettable sunrise. But Mother Nature had other plans. Just as I reached our designated "campsite" after a strenuous 200-foot climb, a storm moved in. Unflappable, Meiris set up our portaledge amid intermittent blizzards faster than I could have pitched a tent on the ground.

I watched, in awe, from a hanging seat anchored next to her, then took a deep breath, climbed in, and stretched out. I got my wine, a sunset, and the rare exhilaration of living for a few hours in an alternate plane far above predictable terra firma. Eventually, though, the wind and snow won out, and I asked if we could head down. After an exhilarating 15-minute rappel, my headlamp lighting the way through the dense snow, I safely touched down. I walked back to the car with Meiris around 10:30 p.m., endorphins coursing, senses electrified, in the sort of heightened state of consciousness that often comes from climbing far outside your comfort zone. —LISA MARSHALL

IF YOU GO

PREREQUISITES:

Campers must fill out a questionnaire about their fitness level, comfort with heights, etc., and complete a brief phone interview before signing up. No climbing experience is necessary.

COST PER PERSON:

Overnight:
1 person, \$1,100
2 people, \$800
3 people, \$600
(includes meals, all necessary equipment, and instruction)
Picnic only:
1 person, \$500
2 people, \$400
3 people, \$300

WHEN:

June through September

MORE INFO:

970-586-5990,
kmaconline.com