

EXPANDING YOUR HORIZONS GET THE MOST OUT OF GUIDED CLIMBING

Let's say you're brand new to climbing and can't wait to get started. Or, let's say you've got some experience, but want to become a *better* climber. Maybe you know the basic systems, but want to learn how to move over a new medium (rock, ice, or snow), or maybe you just have a desire to learn. Traditionally, you have three options: learn from friends, a club, or a guide. The first two options are typically cheaper, but offer a slower progression than hiring a professional. If you are psyched to learn quickly *and* safely, you're the perfect candidate to hire a mountain guide.



MORE THAN SUMMIT SEEKING

Guiding has long been associated with summits: You hire a guide to get to the top of a coveted peak or spire. While guiding *can* be about dream goals and specific climbs, guides most often teach climbers to be better at day-to-day climbing; whether you are a complete novice or an experienced leader, chances are you could benefit from working with a guide. As a longtime guide, I've found my profession to be most rewarding when working with clients looking to develop a specific skill. Lead climbing is an area where guides can make a marked difference in a climber's career; you can become a safe and proficient climber by trial and error, or you can learn to be one from the start.

Simply put, guides are teachers. They're the people who will give you a four-hour top-rope belay while you place pieces on the pitch you want to lead. They're the people who will then jug up the rope beside you and discuss the quality of each piece of gear you wrestled into the crack. Then they'll give you another patient belay.

ESTABLISHING BONA FIDES

When picking a specific guide service or guide, your best measuring stick is examining the company or individual's training, history, and ethics. The American Mountain Guides Association (AMGA) trains and certifies U.S. guides, and is the U.S. member in the IFMGA, the International Association of Mountain Guides. AMGA guide certification is a rigorous process akin to a graduate degree in the profession, with a primary focus on risk management. The AMGA also accredits guide service business practices. Both of these, from a client's perspective, serve as a quality assurance seal.

If your prospective guide isn't certified (and even if he or she is) you should find out more about his or her credentials by inquiring about training (guiding courses, avalanche certifications, medical qualifications, etc.), how long the guide has been in the business, and in what types of guiding he or she has the most experience in.

Beyond these technical qualifications you also want to make sure your guide is a good teacher. Don't hesitate to ask directly talk to a guide when calling a service and ask him or her about teaching style and philosophy. Many people, once they find a guide they like, will develop a relationship with that guide for many classes and ascents to come.

SURFING THE BUFFET

Good guide services will talk with you about the options best suited to your needs. Classes are always less expensive than private guiding due to the higher client-to-guide ratio. The savvy consumer will integrate classes and private guiding by using classes to learn the basics of a climbing skill (aiding, leading, ice climbing, etc.) and utilize the private guide to refine specific techniques and improve efficiency.

For beginners, there's a host of introductory one- to six-day courses for every climbing genre. Taking a course is a great way to sample the sport and meet other people at your level. If you think – or already know – that climbing is something you'll pursue beyond an introductory course, make sure to start your education with a guide service that offers a learning continuum beyond the intro. While you may not work with the same guide on your mixed-climbing class as on your introductory ice-climbing

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course, you *will* be working with guides who most likely share a similar philosophy.

When calling a potential guide service it's important to find out how you can customize your experience. Classes typically follow a thorough progression of learning, and if the skills are all new to you, they're the best way to get from point A to point Z. But once you take the plunge into climbing, you learn at a unique rate. You may soon be able to follow 5.10, but have never placed a cam; you may be able crampon up 60-degree snow, but have never swung a technical ice tool. The further you go, the more you may want to consider a private guide.

Another issue to consider is the ratio of clients to guides. Classes have higher ratios than private guiding and tend to favor certain learning styles. If you tend to only learn well in one-on-one settings and experientially, private guiding might better fit your needs. Generally, the harder the climbing or the more technical the subject matter, the smaller the ratios for both courses and private guiding.

When working with your guide, in a course or one-on-one, be sure to ask whatever questions occur to you. Don't be shy. Most guides are skilled at addressing client needs, but the more you can inform a guide of what you want to learn, the better your experience will be. A good guide will share your goals. If your want to learn the skills to climb on your own and never use a guide again, that will be your guide's goal as well – there's nothing I like

more than seeing former clients out at the crag or sharing a hot drink with them on a glacier.

Many climbers feel reassured by reviewing safety practices and relearning basics. Others feel frustrated going over information they already know. If you know which type you are, tell your guide or service while booking your climbing day.

Learning to lead is a key area where a guide can accelerate your learning curve. Leading on rock, ice, or snow involves a great degree of responsibility. Rescue systems, complex anchor building, hazard management, all of these elements and more are combined when you take the sharp end. Many guide services offer learn-to-lead courses and have a variety of options for teaching rescue practice.

BEYOND THE EVERYDAY

Guides are also professional climbing managers. Skilled climbers will often hire a guide to ease the logistical strain of a climbing day, week, or expedition. If you've long been dreaming about *Ham and Eggs* on the Moose's Tooth but don't want to organize and execute the expedition, you can find a guide to go with you. There's always a benefit to going on a trip with someone who knows the area, the climb, and the terrain. Removing the stress of major planning can make a climbing expedition seem more like a vacation and much less likely to result in an epic or accident.

Increasingly, more clients are going on trips or hiring guides with their day-to-day climbing partners. If you have a group of friends who want to go to Bolivia or a fellow sport climber who wants to go trad, a guide can make it possible. Working together with your partners and a guide on skills can also help you to better translate the new abilities to your guideless climbing practice. Specific clinics – e.g., thin cracks, mixed climbing, aid – can really hone you in a much-desired skill. Private guiding can also focus on these elusive climbing elements.

Count on your guide to be a constant wellspring of suggestions for improvement. Whatever your level, a guide can be your resource and mentor. Most guides became guides because they love climbing, but also because they *love* to teach people how to climb. A guide is, in many ways, the perfect climbing partner. They're reliable, they can help you safely push your limits, and they can thoughtfully expose you to new terrain and techniques for you to carry into your climbing down the road.

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