



*The here, there, and now of Steph Davis, adventure rock climber*

# Life on the run

*by Candace Horgan*

Most climbers count themselves fortunate to take one big trip a year — say, to Yosemite to climb El Cap, maybe even a dream trip to a remote region like Patagonia.

And then there's Stephanie Davis. In the first six months of 1999, Steph managed trips to Patagonia, Joshua Tree, Yosemite, Telluride, Indian Creek, Tucson, Zion and Majorca, an island off the coast of Spain. Right after sitting down for our first interview, she headed off to Baffin Island and a first ascent there.



Steph in the kitchen of her mobile home in Yosemite (above). Free and easy on the Wiggins Route (5.11a), Indian Creek (left).





Under a good sign on the Zodiac, El Capitan.

**"I**t's all priorities," she explains. "I don't have a house. That does sort of suck, because I have a dog. It's kind of bad ... [but] I get all twitchy if I don't have a big adventure planned." She laughs. During time in the States, she is usually on the road, carrying most of her worldly possessions in her truck. When pressed, she says, "I sort of live in Moab. I have a P.O. box there, and it's also where my dog's vet is."

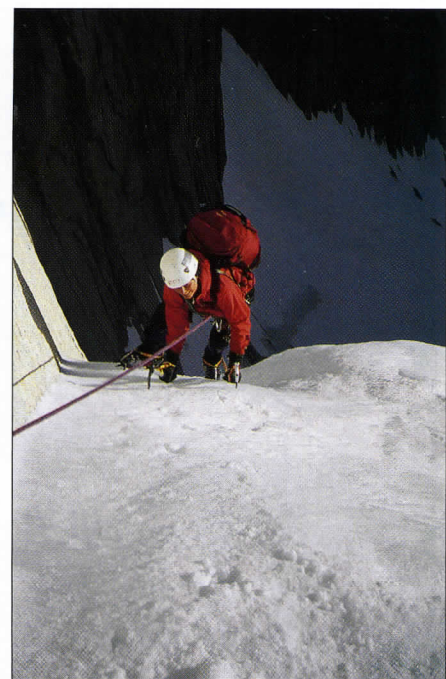
Davis is known as one of the best women all-arounders in the country. In Patagonia with Charlie Fowler, she climbed Guillaumeg,

a satellite peak in the Fitz Roy region, then attempted the *North Pillar* route on Fitz Roy. Stateside again, she climbed the *Ames Ice Hose*

*"She doesn't come across as driven on a climb as much as enjoying challenging herself and learning new things. And even when the shit hit the fan, she stayed loose."*

*— Warren Hollinger*

(WI 5-6) near Telluride, Colorado, with Laurence Monnoyeur of France, went overseas for sport climbing in Majorca, gave a slide



Davis "kicking and hitting" untouched ice on the west side of Fitz Roy, Patagonia, 1996.

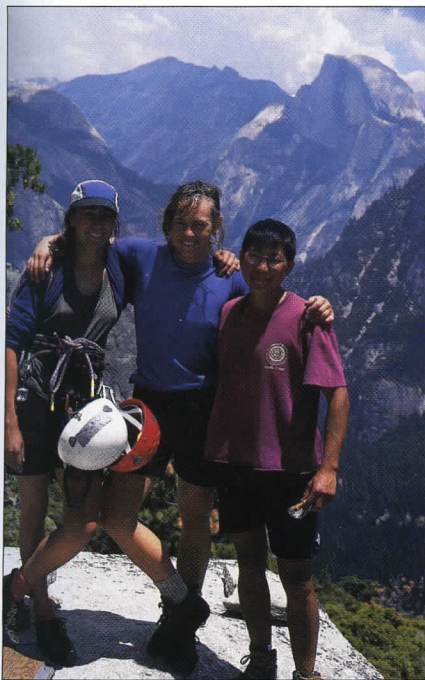
show in Wales, then returned home and free soloed *Coyne Crack* (5.11+) in Indian Creek.

Davis, 27, looks much like the girl next door, 5-foot-6 and small-boned, with wavy brown hair past her shoulders. Look closer, though, and you will see she is also very lean, the beginnings of crow's-feet surround her luminous brown eyes, and scabs and scrapes dot her knees, shins, and small hands.

I first met her at the American Alpine Club's 1998 Annual Meeting, where she showed slides on *Inshallah* (VII 5.12 A1), her new route on Shipton Spire in Pakistan. Done with Seth Shaw and Kennan Harvey, it used only several moves of aid on over 30 pitches. This is the closest to an all-free route on Shipton so far; the other routes have required large amounts of aid. She also described her rope-solo of *1000 Years in Christianity* (V 5.10) in Kyrgyzstan, which follows two buttresses of rock separated by a large ledge. Most of the climbing was moder-

ate, with the 5.10 pitches near the top. Davis self-belayed each pitch with a GriGri, rappelling to jug back up with her pack.



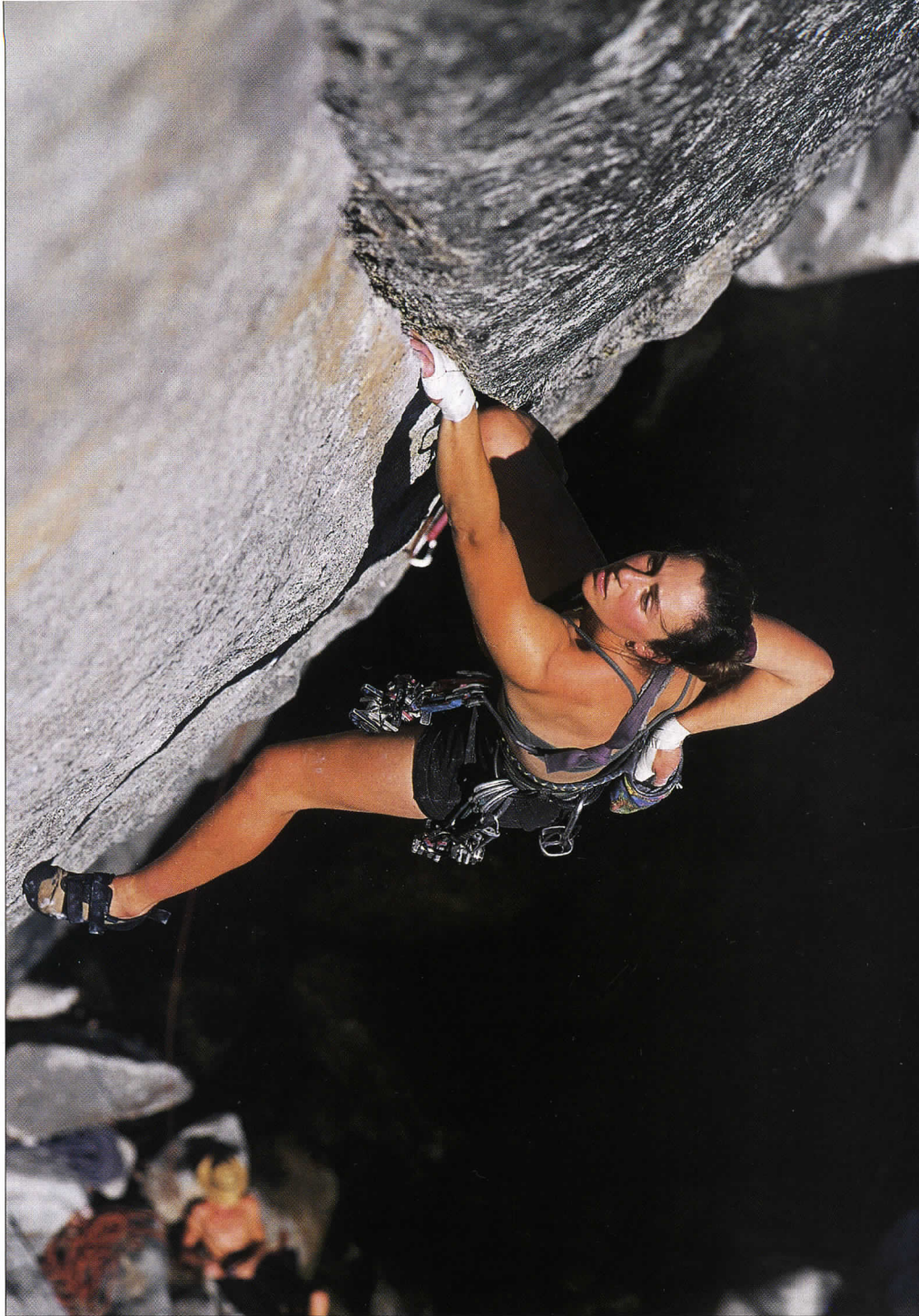


Steph Davis, Kim Csizmazia, and Elaine Lee atop *Zodiac*.

Before her AAC presentation, Davis confessed to being “freaked” by the large audience, ironic in light of the climbs she was describing (and the presentation went well, too). One-on-one, she was open and confident, smiling and laughing spontaneously, buzzing around the conference seeing and meeting friends.

Underneath the happy-go-lucky persona, Davis is driven — intense and focused on pushing her limits on expeditions and climbs around the world. At 6000-plus meters on Shipton Spire, for example, she, Harvey, and Shaw dried pitches of rock with toilet paper to allow free climbing. She sets herself goals, has big agendas, and worries about being in shape. Returning from Baffin, she was eager to get to Rifle to train on the hard sport routes there, then continued to Estes Park and climbed *Pervertical Sanctuary*, *D7*, and *Ariana* on the Diamond although the famed alpine wall was soaking wet; soloed “a lot” of routes at nearby Lumpy Ridge; and did two- to three-hour mountain runs.

Says Warren Hollinger, who teamed with her for a winter ascent of the *South Seas* (VI 5.10 A4), a harder variation to the first 10 pitches of the *Pacific Ocean Wall* on El Capitan, “She doesn’t come across as driven on a climb as much as enjoying challenging herself and learning new things. And even when the shit hit the fan, she stayed loose. ... She’s also a bit competitive, especially with herself.



Focused on the *Crimson Cringe* (5.12a), Yosemite.

But she also can be competitive about a route that she wants to do. For instance, if she and another person were trying to get a first ascent, she’d train hard and try to get it first.”

Davis has strong opinions and often says what she thinks. On debt, for example, “It represents a lack of freedom.” On Himalayan climbing, “I have no desire to do high-altitude mountaineering. I don’t like snow slogs and avalanches.” On organized competition, “I hate competitions. Don’t get me wrong, I’m good friends with Kim Csizmazia and I think her accomplishments are wonderful,

but competition sullies what is important to me about climbing.”

It took me over a month to manage an interview with Steph. We originally planned a climbing weekend in Moab, but she called from Camp 4 in Yosemite and said she was invited to go to Baffin, so we settled for a three-hour chat in a coffee shop in Golden the day before she flew out of Denver.

There she sipped a latte, and displayed determination and a feminist sensibility. “Traditionally, women have given up their goals to be with their husbands or whatever,





Another on-sight, *Right Trinity* (5.12a), Little Cottonwood Canyon, Utah.

so in a way, I feel more driven not to give in to that. Like with Alison Hargreaves, that was such bullshit, the way she was pilloried for being a mom and dying on an expedition."

Upon her return from Baffin, she phoned for five minutes while driving to Durango to see Kennan Harvey. A week later she was on the road to Salt Lake and then Rifle, finally calling to suggest we do a climb on her way to Estes Park.

**D**avis was born in Illinois, and at seven moved to New Jersey, then to Maryland during the eighth grade. She pursued literature and music, and at one time thought she would become a concert pianist.

"I started piano lessons at age 3. I also played flute, so I was very involved with all the music programs at school. I was pretty much a loner, even then. I just read and played music.

"Then the first time I went climbing" — at age 19 — "I felt a passion for climbing that I had never felt even after 15 years of piano. I dropped out of piano that day." She thinks

that someday she could go back to piano "and have the passion from climbing carry over."

In school at the University of Maryland, she first climbed at Carderock outside of Washington, D.C. She spent a year on a student exchange at Colorado State University in Fort Collins, where her climbing really took off. She bouldered at Horsetooth Reservoir during the week, took trips to Fremont Canyon on the weekends, learned how to lead, and fell in love with alpine rock climbing in Rocky Mountain National Park, doing several routes on the Diamond on

and American Literature at CSU. Studying, she says, "was fun actually. In my family, my mom has a master's, my dad is an aeronautical engineer, and my brother is a doctor, so I don't think there was any question [of my getting a master's]." She wrote her thesis on "Reality of Experience in Climbing Literature."

Today she travels with a small library stacked against one side of her truck that includes *Collected Poems of Rumi* — a 13th-Century Sufi mystic — a Webster's dictionary, novels by Isabelle Allende ("I love anything by

*"Traditionally, women have given up their goals to be with their husbands or whatever, so in a way, I feel more driven not to give in to that."*

Longs Peak that remain personal favorites.

Davis also learned that she preferred to get away from people, going to Fremont largely because she was turned off by the crowds in more popular areas like Eldorado Canyon. "I don't want to be around people all the time. I spend a lot of time by myself."

Davis also earned her master's in British

South American authors") and E. Annie Proulx, and several titles from paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould. "On an expedition, I bring French novels and a French dictionary; that keeps me entertained longer."

Davis' current status as a full-time climber has not exactly been well received by her fam-

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# Life on the run

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ily. "My climbing has definitely caused friction with my parents. They hated it that I left off after a master's, and wanted me to get a doctorate. But now that I'm sponsored" — by Five.Ten and Patagonia — "they have something to tell people."

"They don't like the whole danger aspect and my not having a home. I understand their point of view. And they've certainly supported me a lot in other ways."

**D**avis might be best known for her solos of *Incredible Hand Crack* (5.10b) and *Coyne Crack* in Indian Creek, yet she modestly deflects the suggestion that they were hard-core. "Soloing *Coyne Crack* was not on the edge for me," she says. "I felt very much in my element, whereas I wouldn't consider soloing some 5.10 friction route where it would be way out there. I have to be solid, a hundred percent."

Her ability to focus translates well into various realms on rock. Davis has on-sighted *Crimson Cringe* (5.12a) in Yosemite; *Cloud Tower* (5.12a) in Red Rocks; and *Sacred Cow* (5.12c) and the offwidth *Big Baby* (5.11c) in Indian Creek. In September, after climbing *Zodiac* (VI 5.11 A3+) on El Cap, she called me to say she had on-sighted the *Alien* (5.12b) on the Rostrum. "*Alien* was stiff. It's really exposed and you are doing hard moves out this giant roof." Her best redpoints include *Tricks are for Kids* (5.13a/b) in Indian Creek and *Scavenger* (5.12d) in Mill Creek. Also in the Valley, Davis teamed with Dean Potter for a speed ascent of the *Regular Route* (V 5.9 A2 or 5.12b) on Half Dome, finishing the route in three hours 59 minutes.

She feels that to be a good rock climber she needs to be confident on any type of terrain at about her top grade, 5.12: sport, cracks, face. Davis is no big fan of aid or ice climbing, but considers them necessary skills for the mountains. On her Baffin Island trip, she ended up placing heads and rivets when she, Mitrovich, and Brandon Kannier did an unclimbed tower in the Gibbs Fjord. They named it Jushua Tower after the Inuit man who took them in. Their route, *Zen and the Art of Leadership* (VI 5.11 A4), is named for a book Mitrovich brought along. Says Kannier of the trip, "We didn't have one argument. It was my first expedition, and having Steph along was great. We all bonded pretty well, and laughed a lot. That's good,

because we only saw the sun five days on the whole trip. We spent 21 days on the wall, then one day rappelling." Early on the route, Davis on-sighted two runout 5.11 pitches on bad rock.

Mitrovich recalls her "pulling on loose blocks, throwing them over our heads. She did a mantel onto a sloping, slimy slab with snow and water on it, and there was bad rope drag."

Davis' presence has led to some personal reevaluations among her male partners. Says Hollinger of their winter ascent of El Cap, "She exposed my preconceived sexist notions that I didn't even realize I had. I was expecting her to break down. I had reservations about doing a winter ascent of a hard wall route with someone who had so little experience, and I've done walls with women before and they've ended up relying on me a bit." Davis was the "gung-ho" exception, though she had never before placed a copperhead and learned on lead.

The climb was plagued by bad weather, and the summit of El Cap covered in snow that Hollinger describes as "armpit deep." Snowmelt ran down the route the whole climb. Warned by a friend shouting from the meadow of an approaching storm, Hollinger and Davis were forced to finish the second half of the route (15 pitches) in two days, climbing at night in the waterfalls. They also dropped their funkiness device (a wire loop attached to a piton hammer for gear removal).

Says Hollinger, "I finished one pitch at night, and she had trouble getting the pins out, and she ended up spending two hours cleaning the pitch in a waterfall. I was relaxing in the portaledge with a beer, and she finally arrives at the bivy, pops her head in and goes, 'Where's my beer?'"

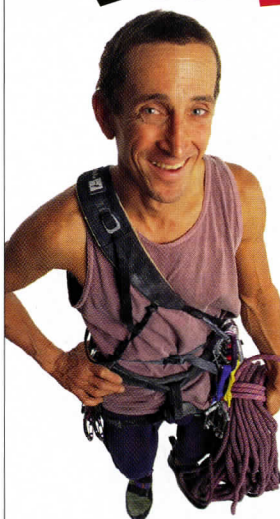
Charlie Fowler, who has gone to Patagonia twice with Davis and also climbed with her in Canyonlands and the Black Canyon, says, "She's pretty strong and motivated. On our most recent trip to Patagonia, she spent some time with Jim Donini. He said, 'Steph is not an alpinist, she's an adventure rock climber.' He hit the nail on the head right there."

The pair spent three months on their first Patagonia trip, nearing the top of the *American Route* on Fitz Roy before bailing due to more bad weather. On their Fitz Roy trip last winter, Davis planned a guerrilla strike of three weeks. Fowler originally wanted to do *Royal Flush* (VI 5.12), but Davis talked him into the *North Pillar*. The bergschrund at the

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base of the route overhung sharply, so they aided a short rock pitch around it, which proved to be their high point. The weather got bad again, and Davis took off.

"She doesn't have the experience to do the mixed routes that were in condition, so it was a little frustrating, but I already knew that before we went down there," says Fowler. "This time, she seemed to not want to spend the necessary time down there. I know she was in a relationship with Kennan, so maybe that was part of it."

Says Davis of the trip, laughing, "My new theory is that half the people who go there get good weather. So I went down for a month. The weather sucked again, and we didn't get Fitz Roy. Naturally, after I left, Patagonia had a week of good weather, so I'm telling people to find out when I'm going and go either a week before or after me."

In discussing her expeditions, I notice that almost every trip she has made has been with guys. Davis says she would like to do a trip with other women sometime, but is frustrated at the difficulty of finding female partners. She's met some women on her trips — notably Louise Thomas of the UK, and Monnoyeur. "I have plans to go to Patagonia with Laurence this December. I just like to go on trips with friends; it's not like I only want to go with women, or only men. It's hard to find compatible partners of similar ability who have the time and money to commit to long trips."

The dynamics of such trips bring complications, but Davis takes a dim view of those who air dirty laundry. "Any trip you do anywhere, there will be tense moments. That's why the best trips are with small groups of friends. If you are with somebody 24-seven, there will be disagreements. That's part of climbing, and you have to work that out."

**O**ur last meeting is in Eldorado during an intense late-afternoon thunderstorm. Davis' dog, Fletcher, hides under the dashboard, terrified of the thunder. "She's such a wuss about thunder," Davis says. The dog had just bolted in a grocery store upon hearing some peals, leaving Davis running up and down the aisles after her, apologizing all the way.

Thwarted by the rain, we decide to go out for dinner. At Ras Kassa's, an Ethiopian restaurant in Boulder, Davis jokes with the waitress, and briefly agonizes over ordering a beer. "I've had a lot of beer since I've gotten

back," she says mischievously, referring to the Baffin trip. She finally orders one, and then when choosing food graciously considers my vegetarian diet. During dinner, Enga Lokey, Davis' partner from Rifle the previous week, comes in, and the two chat about upcoming trips to the Bugaboos and Yosemite.

Over dinner, Davis discusses some of the issues women climbers face, whether it be relationships, the pressure to have kids, or resistance to women pursuing dangerous hobbies. "I actually was helped by Warren's mom. I met her in Yosemite when I was 21 and wondering what to do with myself, and thinking I should have a plan. And she said that she had never had a plan. She had always done what she wanted to, and could look back through her life and see how each decision led her to where she was now. The trick was to be happy in the moment."

Davis and Kennan Harvey had broken up three weeks earlier, and she quiets significantly when I ask about it, saying only, "We'll see what happens." It is the first time I've seen her in a somber mood.

Certainly Davis, like others, finds pursuing climbing to be a complicated business. I ask if she would like kids some day. She hesitates. "I don't really plan for the future much. I don't even know what I'll be doing next week. I suppose at some point I might want to."

Eventually she launches into a soliloquy of Shakespearean length and animation, of which I will repeat some.

"I never had any intention of being a [full-time] climber. For a long time, I had strong feelings against being sponsored. And I haven't completely resolved those feelings. ...

"There's this poem by (William Butler) Yeats called 'Slouching Towards Bethlehem.' And he says 'The best lack all conviction and the worst are filled with passionate intensity,' which is of course the opposite of how things should be. And for me, climbing is about passion and intensity."

"Climbing strips everything away. There's this truthful ideal to climbing. ...

"I also love adventure. I'm so driven now, and I've been agonizing over it, because I have been away a lot, and it takes me away from my dog, Fletcher, and it makes it harder to have a relationship, but I just need to follow my passion. Without that, I shrivel up."

*Candace Horgan is a book and music reviewer for the Denver Post and a freelance writer.*