



SUCH GREAT HEIGHTS



AN INDOOR ENTHUSIAST PUSHES HERSELF BEYOND HER LIMITS—
AND FINDS UNEXPECTED REWARDS—AT HUECO TANKS STATE PARK

By Sarah Hepola

Photographs by Sean Fitzgerald

THE BOULDER LOOKED SO MUCH SMALLER BEFORE I WAS CLINGING TO ITS SIDE.

My fingers grappled against the rock as I tried not to panic. Was I 10 feet off the ground? Fifteen? A few nights ago, I'd gone to a climbing gym, a bustling warehouse where kids in cargo shorts scaled the wall using polyurethane grips that looked like gummy candies, and I'd scrambled to the top on my first try. But out here in the wilds of Hueco Tanks, there were no polyurethane grips. There was no path painted in the elementary colors of white, yellow, or red. There was just this confounding slab of syenite rock, and I was supposed to climb it. Why was that again? My heart hammered as I tippy-toed onto a thin wedge, but I lost my footing, my shoes sliding down the sheer face of the boulder as my hands clutched furiously at holds in the rock known as jugs. I tried to hoist myself up again, but gravity is a hell of a competitor. "I'm falling," I said, lamely stating the obvious, and then I did the thing I've struggled against for much of my life. I let go.

I'd come to the Chihuahuan Desert that spreads across West Texas and down to the Sierra Madres for a self-styled outdoor wellness retreat of sorts. I spend most days holed up with my laptop, nothing moving aside from my fingers. The diminished perimeter of my life astonished me; technology enabled me to work from anywhere, which somehow translated into going nowhere. The only marathon I knew was the Netflix kind. I needed to push out from the snug harbor of my one-click, on-demand lifestyle and get into action.

On my first morning at an El Paso Airbnb, I woke before dawn, made



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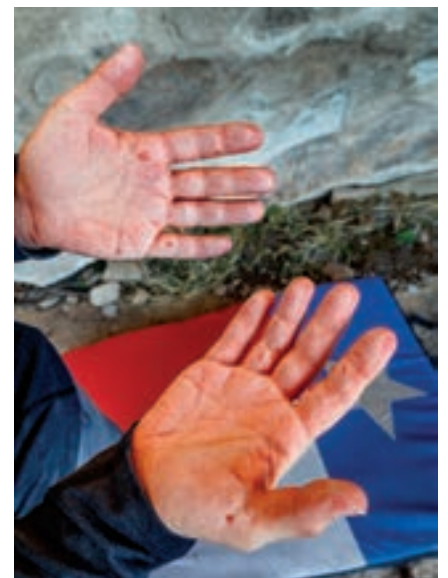
coffee in the tidy kitchen decorated with Frida Kahlo paintings, and slid into the front seat of my car while the stars still pulsed overhead. *Good morning, old friends*, I said to them, as I headed toward my next adventure.

When *Texas Highways* nudged me to take a trip outside my comfort zone, my mind turned to rock climbing. I'd never done it before, but I'd been thinking about the pursuit for a while. I liked the scrappy democracy of a human scaling the earth, woman versus nature. The sport is poised to make its Olympic debut in Tokyo this summer, but it has been on the rise for a while, evolving from the rarefied pursuit of coastal van dwellers into a trendy alternative for anyone seeking a less ordinary adventure. Climbing gyms, like the one I'd visited in North Dallas, popped up across the country like a 21st-century version of video arcades or skate parks. I'm no great shakes as an athlete, too cursed by overthinking and a short stature. But I'm gritty and bendy, and the older I've gotten, the more I've wondered what my body might do if I pushed it. Whenever I saw clips of people

spider-monkeying up the side of a rock, a voice inside me said: *I could do that*.

Hueco Tanks, a state park nearly 40 miles northeast of El Paso, was an ideal place to try. Hueco (pronounced whey-co) is a Spanish word for hollows, another way to describe the holes and divots in the syenite—a granite-like rock, created by wind and water erosion—that make natural hand holds. Tanks is a Texan way of saying the formations hold water. The 860-acre park is internationally known for bouldering, a form of climbing that involves short, powerful moves across a rock low enough to the ground that you don't need much equipment. No ropes or harnesses, just some gym chalk and a crash pad on the ground to catch your fall. I booked a day-long excursion with Sessions Climbing and Guiding. The company offers guided tours for groups of two to 10, but it agreed to give me a private one. I worried I was being a tad ambitious, but then I scrolled through their Instagram and saw pictures of children scaling the rocks with easy smiles. OK, if a kindergartner could do this, I'd be all right. The closer I got to my destination, however, the less certain

Clockwise from left: Sarah Hepola climbs a boulder at Hueco Tanks; the mat below catches climbers when they fall; skin flaps, chalk, and tape are all part of the experience.



The sun sets over Hueco Tanks State Park and Historic Site.





tain I became. Dread began to own me, as the craggy brown Hueco Mountains inched toward me on the horizon. *Maybe the guide won't show*, I thought, but as I pulled into a supply store near the park entrance, I saw a trim young man who looked the part: the beard, the wavy long black hair pulled back into a low bun. This would be my guide, Jacob Garza.

"I want to apologize in advance for how bad I'm going to be today, and how bored you're going to get," I said as I shook his hand. As you can see, I have quite the winning attitude, but accepting the worst possible outcome was how I handled the anxiety of leaving my comfort zone. *This will be horrible. I'm going to humiliate myself. Now, let's go!* Is it any wonder I've spent half my life on a couch?

I picked out snug shoes with rubber tips that were somehow both flexible and durable. Jacob once heard a guide call

climbing "ballet on the rocks," he told me as we warmed up our shoulders and stretched our quads, and I noticed how long and lean his limbs were. Climbing is a discipline of grace and finesse. I wasn't sure I had either, but I'd come this far, and it was time to dance. We hoisted our backpacks and crash pads on our shoulders and headed onto a path lined with prickly scrub and yellow wildflowers.

Humans have been walking these dusty trails for about 10,000 years. A farming tribe called the Jornada Mogollan occupied a village around the mysterious water-holding rocks from about A.D. 450 to 1400, and inside cave walls you can still find their drawings of deer and crops and rain gods with curious bug eyes. Hueco Tanks boasts more than 2,000 pictographs by the Jornada Mogollan as well as other tribes who roamed the land, their prayers and dreams and

communion with the beyond tucked away like secret missives on the underside of the mountains.

It was the surface of those mountains, however, that drew modern seekers. Hueco Tanks State Historical Park opened in 1970 and became a climbing mecca, thanks to the Swiss cheese-like surface of the syenite. So many climbers ascended that environmental impact became a concern, especially after graffiti showed up in the caves. In 1998, the park curbed traffic to 70 entrants a day, although 160 more can book through guides, who have access to backcountry treks like the one Jacob and I were traveling. We didn't see a single other person on that bright October morning. The only noise was the whistle of wind through trees and the flap of bird wings. I forget what quiet sounds like until it envelops me.

We laid down our crash pads at the



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bottom of my first boulder. Each climb in the park is graded on a difficulty scale of v-0 to v-15, and this bad boy was a v-0.

“Each climb is a puzzle,” Jacob said, running his hand along rock that was orange and black in the shade, but glimmered gold and red in the sun. He pointed to cracks and ledges that made a path up to the summit. He was teaching me how to read the rocks, how to plot my moves before I launched into action. There wasn’t one route to the top, necessarily, but it helped to see how others had done it. I could detect the faint white marks of chalk leading up the boulder like footprints left by previous travelers.

Jacob demonstrated one path, which took about five seconds, maybe three. He was like a cat climbing a tree, but I was struggling from my first holds. Each move required more finger strength than I’d anticipated. The ledges were narrower than the ones on the gym walls, but at some point, adrenaline took over. Before I knew it, I was slinging my right leg onto the summit, eye-level with the tree tops. I’d made it. On my first try! Maybe I was good at this after all. Maybe I was a secret genius climber.

But on my second ascent up the same boulder, beginner’s luck crumbled in my hands. I was halfway up when my brain started to spin out. A primal fear of heights announced itself as a tremble in my body. How sturdy were those crash pads anyway? Was it possible to break my back on



the easiest climb in the park? Jacob was gently guiding me toward my next move, but my mind was on scramble. “Try that hold on your right,” he said, as my hand reached left. Why was I so terrible at this? Fear had made its lightning strike, and I stood in place, clinging to the side of the boulder like a child to a mother’s skirt.

Climbing is a mental game. There are stories of people frozen on the rocks, so scared they refuse to move. They will stay in one place, tears streaming down their faces. I’ve hit a few spots like that in my own life. Creative projects, romantic

relationships, health crises—a few chapters of my story could be titled “Crying on the Rocks,” but what you learn is that any move is better than none. I scurried onto the ledge, and the next part seemed to happen in slow motion—my feet slipping, my hands grappling with the holds until I couldn’t bear my own weight. I dropped to the crash pad, landing on my feet and then my bottom. When I opened my eyes, I was pleased to discover nothing hurt.

Falling is not failure in climbing. It’s inevitability. The hope is to fall successfully, which I had, though blood bubbled up at my knuckle creases, dramatic against the white chalk. “Skin flaps,” Jacob announced, pulling out nail clippers and snipping off the loose

Left: Jacob Garza, a guide with Sessions Climbing, hangs from a boulder known as “Moonshine Roof.” Right: water-filled “tanks” at Hueco Tanks.





flesh with the solemn attention of someone threading a needle.

"I wonder if my hands are too small," I said, hoping to excuse my lousy performance. This was my knee-jerk reaction to any game I wasn't winning: Maybe I'm too dinky, too weak, too much or too little of whatever it requires. "I have the hands of a 7-year-old boy," I complained.

"Well, let me tell you about 7-year-old boys," Jacob said, wrapping thin white tape around three of my knuckles. "They crush at climbing." I wondered aloud if being a woman was a limitation, but Jacob shut that down fast. Women's strong cores and flexibility make them natural climbers, he explained. Later I would learn the first person to free-climb the Nose on El Capitan, an infamous cliff at Yosemite National Park, was a woman named Lynn Hill. She was 5 feet, 2 inches tall, exactly my height, and her small fingers could squeeze into slots where the strongest men had to hammer in holds.

The body isn't a limitation in climbing so much as an opportunity for hacks. A gymnast will scale a boulder differently than a fullback, and creative problem solving is part of the process, along with trial and error. I was a beginner who had a lot of technique to learn: how to keep my breath steady, how to hold my body close to the rock, how to keep my arms extended so I didn't wear myself out in a chin-up position. But as far as my ability to climb, I was really only facing one limitation—my mind. And there was only one way out of that tight corner.

"Ready to go again?" Jacob asked, and I responded by swinging my taped fists in the air like Rocky.

I tried one boulder and then another, and I fell more than I summited that day, but the more I repeated these paths, the less frightening they were. My hands and feet started to intuit the surface, and those confounding slabs of syenite transformed into letters of the alphabet I could read like Braille. In the Oscar-winning documentary *Free Solo*, the virtuoso climber Alex Honnold explained how he makes his jaw-dropping ascents. "When people talk about trying to suppress your fear, I look at it a different way. I try to expand my comfort zone by practicing the moves over and over again. I work through the fear until it's just not scary anymore."

Below: Climbers with pads hike to a bouldering site. Right: pictograph at Cave Kiva in Hueco Tanks.



The more time I spent on the boulders, the more at home I felt. As my hands and feet moved along the thin ledges, my mind sharpened to a fine point, and I was able to turn down the noise of the endless internal chatter that so often plagued me. I was only thinking about this move, this moment. “Try that hold on the right,” Jacob said, but I went left instead, not because I was panicking, but because I was starting to trust myself. I was finding my own way.



The next morning I went for a hike in the Franklin Mountains, on the northern edge of El Paso. My arms and upper back were sore from the previous day, and I was ready for a slightly less strenuous trip outside my comfort zone. The day was gorgeous, an unbroken blue sky, and the park was alive with people walking their dogs, jogging, enjoying a picnic in the casual majesty. Franklin Mountains State Park is the largest urban park in the country, more than 26,000 acres of wilderness, but its vibe reminds me of the canyons in Los Angeles, the way you can escape the city hustle and disappear into nature in a matter of a few short blocks.

I wound along the asphalt toward the trailhead for a moderate mile-long hike that led up to some small dark caves. The path was a gradual incline of loose bone-white pebbles that became steeper and more slippery as I neared the top. I guess all walking is a form of rock climbing if you think about it. The question is how big the rock.

I stepped off the path for a moment to rest on an embankment, wiping sweat from my brow with the hem of my shirt and allowing my eyes to soak up the view. The brown mountains seemed to stretch on and on. Tall white sotol stems dotted the horizon like quills dipped in ink. Growing up, I understood hiking as something in the Thoreau tradition, an endeavor that took place under the shady canopy of an East Coast forest with a trickling river nearby. This was something like the opposite. The earth was scorched and unsparring; it didn't pretend to care about you, yet there was such beauty in



the struggle. A large bumblebee nudged around a yellow wildflower. A tiny two-tailed swallowtail butterfly floated past. Thoreau was something of a poser in the end; his mom did his laundry. But his message amid the massive change of industrializing America was as important then as it is now. Life is better when we slow down and pay attention.

I watched families pass, couples with dogs, solitary hikers both young and old, two 20-something dudes in camo vests blasting club music on an iPhone because humanity refuses to cooperate with any plan for peace and quiet. In the silence that followed, I could detect the whoosh of faraway traffic, though it sounded like a rushing stream.

I forget how peaceful this feels. I forget it whenever I've slunk back into my own cave of self-gratification, where the day becomes a long hike from laptop to iPhone to flat-screen. I wonder sometimes what we're doing to our minds by staying still. People talk about what a sedentary lifestyle does to the body—fair enough, but what about our brains? It has taken a long time for me to break old habits of believing that physical challenge is some kind of punishment, a reminder of my deficiencies, when it is so clearly the opposite. A gift. A reminder of what I can do, a way to stay in the moment as I continue to puzzle my way across the rocks of our spinning earth.

When I'm rested and ready, I rise and continue my climb. 🐌