

SCALING THE ROCKS: CHOCKSTONE CLIMBING

*Owners Speak On Oregon Rock Climbing Tour That Takes Guests On
Exciting Adventures Near Smith Rock*

With such a common name as “Smith,” one might expect Smith Rock to be equally run-of-the-mill. However it is anything but humdrum, beginning with its name. No one can definitively say how the monoliths of tuff and basalt were titled, but conjecture and lore add to this geological enigma.

Six hours from Seattle, Wash., three from Portland, Ore. and just five minutes from the tiny town of Terrebonne, Ore., mystical [Smith Rock State Park](#) has a microclimate all its own. It offers visitors hiking, mountain biking, camping, horseback riding and, of course, epic climbing.

Jim Ablao is a veteran rock climber who guides others’ climbing. His climbing interest began as an early teen when he checked out library books on the subject, since his Michigan hometown didn’t offer much in elevation. He recalls that the books’ pictures of climbers ascending the Alps inspired him to read more in-depth about climbing techniques and tools. He climbed everything he could find until his yearnings for bigger and better brought him westward.

While in Boulder, Colo., Jim met Anne, where they both worked for [Outward Bound](#), a company dedicated to the promotion of outdoor education and lifestyle for people of all ages. They went climbing together and haven’t stopped since, celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary this September.

After marriage, the two brought their family to [Bend, Oregon](#), close to Smith Rock where “sport climbing” was on fire. Anne explains that “Sport climbing differs from traditional climbing in that the climbing anchors and bolts are permanently drilled into the sheer cliff, enabling climbers of all levels to use them repeatedly thus protecting both the climber and the rock. This method enables climbers to reach otherwise unreachable heights.” The commonly used climbing scale of the Yosemite Decimal System (YDS), beginning at 5.1 and increasing in difficulty to 5.15, was maxed out by traditional climbers at about 5.13 before sport climbing at Smith Rock broke the ceiling with new heights.

According to Anne, “Smith Rock has a variety of climbing, enough to never get bored.” Park visitors may choose to hike (YDS 1st Class), simply scramble the rocks (YDS 2nd Class), scramble with occasional use of a rope (YDS Class 3), or climb the rocks with exposure and likely use a rope (YDS 4th Class). YDS 5th Class is where rock climbing begins in earnest. With nearly 2000 climbing routes from 4th Class to 5.14 Class, a new challenge and adventure beckons around every corner of the park.

5.0 – 5.7 Class routes are for beginners to experienced climbers and where novices usually begin. Weekend climbers with more experience in techniques called jamming, liebacks and mantels likely seek routes in the 5.8-5.9 Class range. A dedicated climber will find 5.10 Class routes enticing whereas the 5.11-5.15 Class realm is reserved for true climbing experts dedicated to intense training, often gifted with natural ability and coupled with the tenacity for repeated working of such demanding routes. Smith Rock offers them all and is today considered the sport climbing capital of the world.

Jim began as a guide at Smith Rock for First Accent Climbing Services in 1999. The Ablaos, along with a few committed climbing guides, formed [Chockstone Climbing](#) in 2009 because of their commitment to the standards of the [American Mountain Guide Association \(AMGA\)](#) which includes certification in risk management, route finding, technical and rescue skills, terrain assessment, and client care.

Jim notes that accreditation is relatively new in the U.S. rock climbing industry and believes that “clients deserve to be guided by a professional trained in the current standards of safety.” He points out that “Hiring a local trained and seasoned professional helps maximize your time on the rock, to get the most out of your day. Our approach as instructors is to choose the right climb in context. We don’t use a classroom. Lessons begin with an introduction, demonstration and practice right at the crag (climbing site).”

Jim’s advice for beginners is, “Go for it! The only way to really get what climbing is about is to do it.” He remarks that “It is so satisfying to have shared a fun, safe activity with people who walk away with skills they can develop and share with others in their lives. It feels great to offer a faster, safer path to learn climbing than I had and to be a mentor to others. The learning never stops in climbing. There is something to take away from every climbing experience and from everyone I climb with.”

Jim’s advice to climbers with some experience but wanting to improve is “Utilize indoor climbing gyms during off-seasons to keep strong and develop your abilities. Get proper guidance and instruction before moving onto the next step. There’s an intricate balance between technical and physical ability.”

While Anne's primary responsibilities with the company are administrative, she loves joining her husband and their other guides in the field as an instructor. She relates how she got into climbing: "I started rock climbing the spring I graduated from college and got hooked. It was then something that I pursued on my own. I had a job near [Joshua Tree National Park](#) and started climbing there on weekends. Where I have lived since has always had rock climbing: Yosemite, California, Boulder, Colorado, and then here [Smith Rock]."

When asked what keeps him climbing after all these years, Jim replies, "There are still great opportunities here for adventure in finding new routes as well as maintaining all the great climbing partners I have had over the years. The climbing community is full of psyched, interesting and inspiring people."

Jim gets a little sentimental over a route he forged back in 2006 dubbed "Lost In Space" which has become a modern classic. He says he finds satisfaction in seeing it everyday with climbers using the bolts he placed. His recommendation though is planning on taking half a day to climb this route. Jim describes it as "A long route with five pitches, about a 5.10 grade. It's notable in how it wanders up big, open slabs with lots of exposure wandering between small knobs and pockets—thus the name."

Getting a glimpse into the Ablao's everyday outdoor world shows it to be truly out-of-the-ordinary. Smith Rock looms grand and inviting—uncommonly entrancing—as a travel destination for all outdoor enthusiasts and especially those with aspirations of climbing to new heights.

Nanette Hilton

"An avid cyclist and nature lover, Nanette holds a degree in Writing from Brigham Young University. Her illustrations are licensed worldwide with her writing in publications spanning two decades on diverse subjects. This mother of five calls the splendorous Mojave Desert home."

Make Sure To Stay At:

[Casey's Riverside RV Park](#), where one can rest and relax by rushing waters and tree covered mountains with only the occasional elk, deer, or eagle to distract. Hike on nearby trails that can bring you to alpine lakes and wilderness areas.