Charlotte Dome

Squaring in the middle of the Sierra Nevada sits Charlotte Dome (10,690'), home to what Todd Vogel feels is the best rock climb of its grade in the range, probably in California, and perhaps the West. The monstrous 1,200-foot-tall dome is one of those compelling formations that begs to be climbed. The setting for this climb is what makes it a classic instead of merely a great climb. Situated near the head of Kings Canyon, the hike in is spectacular, and the views from the climb are outrageous. It is no surprise then that this climb is included in Roper and Steck's Fifty Classic Climbs of North America.

Approach

There are two approaches: from the east side of the Sierra out of Union Valley, or from the west side of the Sierra out of Kings Canyon National Park. The western approach is slightly shorter than the eastern approach but involves more elevation gain (from the west you start at 5,000 feet and from the east you start at 9,200 feet). Also, on the eastern approach, the campsite is much closer to the start of the climb, making for an easier climbing day. From the west, you must climb 2,000 feet on unenjoyable terrain from your campsite to the start of the climb—a rough way to start the morning. The downside of approaching from the east is that you never get a good look at the climbing route. From either side, most parties use a full day for the approach, a full day on the route, and a full day to return to the trailhead.

Western Approach from Kings Canyon National Park

From Fresno, take Highway 180 to Kings Canyon National Park. Drive through Cedar Grove to Road's End.

The approach takes most climbers 4-6 hours from Road's End (the end of Highway 180) to the camping at Charlotte Creek (gaining 2,300 feet in elevation) and another 2 hours from there to the base of the climb (gaining 2,100 feet in elevation). The entire approach involves about 7 miles of travel on trail, 1.5 miles on climbers' trail, and gains a total of about 4,400 feet in elevation. Temperatures on the approach are scorching in the summer so you should start hiking at dawn.

From Road's End, hike east on the Woods Creek Trail for 2 miles and turn right onto the Bubbs Creek Trail. Hike 5 miles to the junction of Bubbs Creek and Charlotte Creek, which is the climbing spot.

The first section consistently and gently climbs uphill except for the initial steep switchbacks getting into the Bubbs Creek drainage. The second part of the approach is anything but gentle.

From the camping spot at the junction of Bubbs Creek and Charlotte Creek, follow a climbers' trail on the east side of Charlotte Creek. This section is steep, grueling, and will probably involve some unpleasant bushwhacking (bring long pants). Stay along Charlotte Creek, occasionally navigating some rock, until it is easy to traverse left on slabs to the base. Do not traverse too early or you may need to climb extra slab pitches to reach the base.

Eastern Approach from Onion Valley

Take U.S. 395 to Independence (45 minutes south of Bishop, 15 minutes north of Lone Pine). Last minute supplies can be found here, but if you need anything more than basic food, go to Bishop. From the center of town, drive west on the Onion Valley Road for 20 minutes (14 miles) to Onion Valley trailhead at the end of the road.

The approach takes most climbers 5-7 hours from the trailhead to the best camping spot and another 45 minutes to the base of the climb. The approach involves about 6 miles of travel on trail and 4 miles of climbers' trail and cross-country travel. You gain about 2,500 feet to get over Kearsarge Pass and lose about that much before reaching the base of the climb. This means the hike out is about as difficult as the hike in.

From Onion Valley, hike the Kearsarge Pass Trail for 4 miles to Kearsarge Pass (11,811 feet). From here, the summit of Charlotte Dome is barely visible down the valley to the west. A steep 0.25 mile descent leads to a fork in the trail. Stay on the right (north) fork (do not go down to Bullfrog Lakes) and continue another 2 miles to the intersection with the Muir Trail and take the left fork. You're only on the Muir Trail for a few minutes before leaving it to head west to Charlotte Lake.

Here the approach gets interesting. Go 200 yards past the lake and cross its outlet on the well-defined trail and continue downstream. This is the start of the old Gardiner Pass Trail. It crosses a talus slope, an open meadow, and heads back into forest where it passes through a packers' drift fence (close the rails if you find them closed).

After crossing to the north side of Charlotte Creek the trail is good for 0.25 mile and then it becomes indistinct amidst small trees and downed dead trunks. Watch for cairns for 0.5 mile until the trail becomes well-defined again. Cross a stream (10,070 feet) amidst forest and continue through the trees until they open out onto a dry, open manzanita and grass slope.

Continue over this and cross a stream in an open gully (9,890 feet). Looking west toward Charlotte Dome, you should be able to see a large forested bench east of the dome, at and slightly above your elevation. This is your camp destination. The trail enters the forest again and passes through an area of aspen and pine. emerge onto a second manzanita slope and drop down the sandy trail 500 yards to 9,740 feet. At this point, the trail to the base continues on down the canyon. If you are not camping, take this trail and it will get you directly to the base of the climb.

If camping, however, look for a large rock cairn and a poor trail that leads upward across the open slope. Follow cairns across to an open gully with some rock slabs. Pass below the slabs and look for cairns. Sometimes you'll have a great series to follow and good trail, other times it will disappear for hundreds of feet. It is never necessary to drop below 9,800 feet. Once back in the forest, the trail is well-cairned. Keep heading toward the ridge that runs off the north side of Charlotte Dome, and cross some moraine ridgettes before running up against this ridge. Look for a great campsite (10,140 feet) on the east side of the creek adjacent to a lush spring right where the old trail heads up to Gardiner Pass. This site is
Backcountry Camping

The best camping spot on the western approach is at the junction of Bubbs Creek and Charlotte Creek. This is a popular spot and has a bear box for your food, which may be full with other campers’ food.

Another strategy would be to camp at the base of the route where there are small open camp spots (bivies, really). However, Charlotte Creek, the water source, is a good walk away so plan on bringing a water bag if this is your strategy. You can also camp at small sloping sites on Charlotte Creek and have a shorter but still unpleasant manzanita bash to the start of the route.

The best camping spot from the east side is the spot at 10,140 feet described in the Eastern Approach from Independence/Onion Valley. Another option is to camp at Charlotte Lake, but this will commit you to a much longer climbing day.

You will need a wilderness permit to camp (see “Backcountry Camping Permits” in the Introduction, page 24).
The South Face of Charlotte Dome has hundreds of different variations. We have provided a topo of the easiest way to climb the face. However, because it is easy to get off-route, you should be confident leading 5.9 before climbing this route. You should also be confident placing gear on discontinuous and devious cracks. The rock and the climbing are reminiscent of Tuolumne Meadows: long, smooth faces that appear to be impossible from a distance are actually covered with knobs and texture, allowing for relatively easy climbing. Many water grooves and solution pockets make the climbing additionally manageable and totally unique—how often do you get to climb “furrows”?

**History**

It is unusual in North American climbing history for the first ascent of a climb of this quality to come as late as 1970, especially since Charlotte Dome was one of the first monoliths nailed in the High Sierra. During the summer of 1864, members of the California Geological Survey camped just below the dome at Charlotte Creek. Charles Hoffmann sketched the peak, and William Brewer, the field leader of the survey, described it in his journal as “a grand smooth granite rock.”

Generations of John Muir Trail backpackers have seen the dome from the Glen Pass region, some 20 miles north of the Mt. Whitney massif. Among these walkers must have been hundreds of rockclimbers who surely commented upon the formation only 2 miles distant. Yet for some reason Peak 10,690 remained for decades just a designation on the map rather than an entry in a climbing guide. Perhaps the idea of carrying a pack full of iron for ten miles—the nearest road is that far—encouraged would-be pioneers. After all, closer chunks of granite beckoned.

When Chris Jones, Fred Beckey, and Galen Rowell approached Charlotte Dome in October 1970, they carried heavy packs. Indeed, for a previous long-distance reconnaissance had indicated a long, steep, and blank wall. With only a weekend at their disposal, it was obvious to the trio that they would have to make a one-day effort or none at all. With the short autumn days, this limitation posed a potential problem. When the climbers arrived under the face, they blanched, for there were absolutely no continuous crack systems, and the wall approached verticity in several places. Bolt ladders might be necessary, they thought, and the climb could take several days. To the side of the south face, however, the cliff looked more feasible, and Beckey insisted that this was the logical way to go. Reluctantly, the other two agreed.

When the three men actually set foot on the rock, they were pleasantly surprised, for the golden granite bristled with flakes and “chickenheads,” the doorknob-like protrusions that occur on certain types of weathered granite. Although Beckey remained committed to his proposed route, Rowell and Jones thought they could piece together a direct line up the south face, hoping that blank-appearing walls would yield knobs. Jones later wrote that they felt it was “better to retreat off a good climb than to succeed on an indifferent one.” With this noble attitude, the threesome roped up.

After a few easy pitches on the apron at the base of the face, the climbers encountered the first problematic section, a steep headwall capped with a short vertical step. The first part of this obstacle was overcome by means of copious hidden holds. And just when these vanished, cracks appeared, and a few 5.7 moves led through the impressive step. By the time the pioneers had gathered atop this pitch, they realized that they had discovered a real gem of a climb. But with three climbers the going was slow, and the sun already was at its zenith. Beckey, still unhappy about the rash decision to push for a direct route, volunteered to jumar up a fixed rope, thus freeing the second man to belay the leader. Self-belayed, Beckey could proceed at his own pace. The climbers thought this clever idea might just get them back to warm sleeping bags that night.

Several pitches higher the incredible climbers, almost sated with chickenheads, came up against a fabulous wall known now as the Furrow Pitch. This steep, 100-foot section dominates the central part of the route and forms ominously over the lower-angled slabs below. Great grooved ruts, some of them three feet deep, scar the otherwise monolithic granite, as if some gigantic feline had sharpened its claws there during primordial times. The Furrow Pitch is not difficult—the only real problem is choosing the easiest slit—but it is the most memorable of many sterling pitches.

An enormous ledge not far above this pitch proved perfect for a brief lunch stop; brief because the sun was sinking disturbingly low in the west. Several more pitches, liberally sprinkled with knobs, went quickly, and soon Rowell’s shouts told the others he was on top. The splendid summit boulders were still aglow when Jones and Beckey arrived, though Charlotte Creek already was cloaked in shadow. Fortunately, the descent proved easy and rapid, and the pessimistic Beckey was amazed as they struttled into camp before pitch dark.

—Steve Roper

**Strategy**

With a summit elevation of “only” 10,690 feet, Charlotte Dome has a longer climbing season than most Sierra climbs. Even after the first few big snowstorms of the fall it is generally possible to have good climbing conditions. The route faces south and dries quickly, and mid-winter ascents using skins to approach and return, though rare, are not unheard of.

This is a big and popular climb so get a dawn start. If starting from the junction of Charlotte Creek and Bubba Creek, get a predawn start.

The route has a reputation for difficult routefinding; but if you can find the start you’ll probably do okay on the route. The
much straight up, with rare detours to place protection (bizarre and questionable nut and cam placements; knob tie-off), to a sloping ledge. If the common midday winds kick up, get ready for some excitement.

The hard stuff is behind you now, but you still have four pitches to go, the first of which is the famous Furrows Pitch. Head up and left to the cool and easier-than-it-looks prow, which is grooved by the giant furrows. These are deep erosional features with sharp edged fins and deep pockets between them.

Retreat
Retreat by rappelling the route with two 50m or 60m ropes (with only one rope you will have to leave a ton of gear). There are usually fixed rap anchors on the first five pitches. Above here, you will have to leave your own gear.

Ascend a short right-facing corner to a 5.9 traverse into a low-angle corner with bushes. Traverse left (one 5.9 move) to easy knobs (5.4). Scramble to the top.

**Charlotte Dome** (3252 m; 10,690 ft)

This beautiful piece of rock was one of the earliest Sierra domes to be discovered outside of Yosemite Valley. In 1864 the California Geologic Survey camped along Charlotte Creek, and Charles Hoffmann sketched this dome. It was first climbed 102 years later, and in 1970 one of the world’s finest rock climbs was discovered on its south face.

Charlotte Dome can be approached from either the west (the end of Highway 180 in Kings Canyon) or the east (from Onion Valley near Kearsarge Pass via Charlotte Lake). The western approach is easier. Those approaching from the west should note that a use trail has appeared 100–200 feet to the northwest of, and parallel to, Charlotte Creek. Bears have been known to raid food caches in this area.

**North Ridge.** Class 3. First ascent August 1966 by Ed Lane (from Gardiner Pass). This is the usual descent route for climbs on the south face. Many parties make the mistake of descending too soon from the summit. It is better to go well north, beyond the small saddle behind the dome, before turning right and descending to the unnamed tributary of Charlotte Creek.

**Neutron Dance.** IV, 5.10d. First ascent 1985 by Jack Wenzel and Elizabeth Ammon. This ten-pitch route starts at a prominent orange dike on the southeast face. The first pitch is the crux. The rest of the climb is moderate, except for the summit pitch, which is 5.10a.

**Beast and Beauty.** IV, 5.10d. First ascent September 2002 by Matthieu Cortial, Pietra Mayet, and Benoit Robert. This eleven-pitch route starts beneath the prominent roof on the southeast face, passing the roof on its left side.

**The Epicureans.** IV, 5.7+. First ascent June 30, 1988, by Todd Swain and Peggy Buckley. This route starts about 200 yards up and right from E. B. White. There are two left-facing corners or grooves here. The first two pitches climb the right-hand corner to the top of a pillar (5.7) below a ledge on a good ledge to the right. Traverse right (5.2) to a belay stance in a mossy alcove. Continue to the right from the alcove, then move up (5.4) to a protected, golden slab that is next to a right-leaning dike; this pitch ends at a sloping belay ledge with a bolt. Continue up the slab to a shallow left-facing corner. Climb the corner to where it meets a white dike with a bolt, then continue up the slab (5.6) to a belay stance at some exfoliated flakes. Go straight up (5.5) over numerous flakes to a stance at a shallow left-facing corner. This is followed by a left-facing flake that leads to an obvious left-facing corner (5.7+) just below a roof. Belay on a small ledge at the left-facing flakes. Continue up the corner (scary 5.7) for one and a half pitches to a ledge. Climb the crack system above the ledge, followed by a huge right-facing flake (5.6) to a hanging belay. The next pitch climbs a crack and a wide, white dike (5.5) to a belay in a tree. The last two pitches follow a crack system (5.2) to the top. Protection to 3 inches.

**E. B. White.** IV, 5.9. First ascent August 1979 by Allan Pietrasanta and Alan Bartlett. This route is on the eastern side of the south face of Charlotte Dome. There are two parallel black watermarks to the right of the Classic South Face. Follow the left-hand watermark, with two bolts and a one-bolt belay at the top of the first pitch. Two more pitches lead to the Classic South Face. Go left and continue up cracks to where the angle lessens. Climb the headwall to the summit.

**Sea of Granite.** III, 5.8. First ascent August 17, 1988, by Chris Keith and Pete Lowery. This twelve-pitch climb is to the right of the Classic South Face. It starts approximately halfway between E. B. White and the Classic South Face, angling right and crossing E. B. White after two pitches. Continue to the right to a belch filled with wavelike ripples. Five pitches of runout face climbing lead up to meet the Classic South Face above one and a half pitches from the summit.

**Classic South Face.** III, 5.7. First ascent October 1970 by Galen Rowell, Chris Jones, and Fred Beckey. First winter ascent April 1992 by Rich Henke, Nancy Jensen, and Alois Smrz. This very popular route climbs the highest part of the south face. Start climbing from the top of a large ridge at the lowest portion of the face. Two-class 4 pitches up and right lead to a steep section, which is climbed by the most prominent crack for two pitches to a big belay ledge. This is followed by easy knobs to the Slot Pitch. Climb to the very top of the slot and belay from a small ledge on its left side. Climb a knobby face above the Slot Pitch to a wide ramp that leads to the right. Follow the ramp around an outside corner to the Furlow Pitch. The Furlow Pitch ends on a steep headwall, with a ledge in a little nook. A long pitch in a left-facing corner is followed by a pitch up a steep, left-leaning crack that ends on a huge ledge with a dead tree. One more easy pitch up and left leads to the top. A common mistake on this route is not taking enough runners; six is not enough, and a dozen (with some doubles and triples) is not too many. There are many variations on this climb; it seems that many parties end up too far to the right. But the quality of the rock and magnificent surroundings usually make up for any routefinding errors. Further reading: Croft, pp. 68–71, Fiddler, pp. 155–158; McNamara, pp. 64–71; SuperTopo, High Sierra Select, pp. 68–71.

**Charlotte’s Web.** IV, 5.8. First ascent August 1976 by Bart O’Brien and Dave Harden. This route is short of the Classic South Face. Start climbing from near a solitary pine tree between a small recess on the south face and the larger recess of the Classic South Face. About 100 feet of class 3 climbing ends on a flat ledge. Four pitches up and right lead to the base of a steep, shallow crack. Two long (15-foot) pitches are needed to climb the crack. The route continues straight up over beautiful knobs and chickenheads for several hundred feet to a large, sandy ledge with a dead tree. Climb the knob covered face directly above the ledge. One more pitch of easy climbing leads to the summit.

**Southwest Arête.** IV, 5.9. First ascent May 1973 by Dave Lomba and Calen Rowell. This climb consists of eleven pitches on excellent rock along the narrow ridge.

**Charlotte Dome, The Artesian Route.** III, 5.10b. First ascent June 1986 by E. C. Joe and Richard Leversee. This is a large slab facing southwest, just south of Charlotte Dome. This route climbs the right-facing corner on the upper half of the slab. There is a spring beneath the corner, bypassed by a long, circular pitch to the left, the crux. There are four runouts 5.8–5.9 pitches beneath the spring.

**Glacier Monument** (11,154 ft; 11,165 ft)

First ascent September 1972 by Andy Smatko, Tom Ross, and Bill Schuler, on a traverse from Gardiner Pass.

**Gardiner Pass** (3429 m; 11,200 ft)

Class 2. At one time there was a trail over Gardiner Pass, but it has been abandoned for a long time. Traces of it may still be seen, and some maps have its approximate location marked.

The route begins at the western end of Charlotte Lake. Cross the outlet stream, skirt a small meadow on its southern side, then cross the stream again to its northern side. Those headed for Gardiner Pass make a gradual descent through this basin, leaving Charlotte Creek far below, while those headed for Charlotte Dome remain close to Charlotte Creek. At approximately 10,000 feet go right and cross the northern tributary stream of Charlotte Creek before making the