

EXPLORER'S JOURNAL

with Jimmy Chin

BY RICHARD PALLARDY

ALL IN A DAY'S WORK

National Geographic photographer Jimmy Chin prepares for a photo shoot at Yosemite National Park—by rappelling down the face of El Capitan.

National Geographic photographer Jimmy Chin has climbed and photographed some of the world's most beautiful and dangerous mountains, including Shark's Fin, a terrifying peak in the Himalaya that had not yet been scaled. But Chin got his start photographing climbers and mountains at Yosemite National Park.

CALIFORNIA DREAMS

"I picked up a camera for the first time in Yosemite," says National Geographic photographer Jimmy Chin. He and his friend Brady Robinson were climbing El Capitan, a 7,569-foot granite dome in California's Yosemite National Park. One day, Robinson, a prominent climber, showed Chin how to use his camera while the two took a break during their climb. So began Chin's adventures.

Originally from Minnesota, Jimmy Chin took to extreme photography like many of the other high-intensity activities he enjoyed growing up. Photographing seemingly unreachable views supported his passion for mountain climbing.

"Yosemite is a special place because it launched me into my career," says Chin. In 1996, he had left school, was living out of his car, and had fallen in love with rock climbing. Earnings from his photography allowed him to explore other climbing hot spots. He explains, "I really wanted to take what I learned in Yosemite to some of the greater ranges of the world."

So he did. Chin has skied down Mount Everest, hiked the Chang Tang Plateau in China, and picked his way up the steep walls of mountains in Pakistan. Each step of the way, Chin has applied the skills he **honed** at Yosemite.

A CLIMBER’S PARADISE

Shaped by glaciers, Yosemite is known for its amazing rock formations and it offers climbers from all over the world the chance to test their skills. “Yosemite is the **epicenter** of climbing,” claims Chin. “A lot of the greatest climbing feats in history have happened here.” Naturalist John Muir was among the early mountaineers who answered the call of the towering rocks. In 1869, he became the first to climb Cathedral Peak.

By the mid-20th century, climbers were flooding the park. This new enthusiasm for climbing was partly encouraged by equipment developed during World War II. **Alpinists** who came to the park gathered at the legendary Camp 4, located in Yosemite Valley between El Capitan—or El Cap—and one of the park’s other granite beasts, the 8,836-foot Half Dome.

Beginning in the 1960s, the camp hosted groups of dedicated climbers. Many lived there for long stretches doing little but climbing and exploring. Chin himself has spent many nights at Camp 4, sharing stories with other climbers. These groups of elite climbers developed new methods, such as free climbing, where only the hands and feet are used to grip the rock.

One thing that all climbers know: Climbing is hard. But for Chin, following another climber and capturing their movements along with the landscape is even harder. He knows how dangerous his job can be, and he takes that seriously. More than 100 climbing accidents happen at Yosemite every year.

It takes a special kind of person to brave a steep climb. Chin makes sure to capture this special character in his work. His admiration for his fellow climbers is obvious. “Part of the story I tell is definitely about the climbing culture,” he says. “I really want to capture the cutting edge of climbing and this lifestyle.”

THE COVER STORY

Imagine his thrill, then, when *National Geographic* magazine approached Chin to shoot a cover story on Yosemite’s climbers. “I think any photographer aspires to shoot a cover story for *National Geographic*,” he explains.

The shoot took a lot of planning. “With this kind of shoot, you spend a lot more time dealing with logistics and moving gear than you do shooting. I probably only shot one-third of the days I was there,” he explains.

For the assignment, Chin captured 25,000 images of climbers on Half Dome, the walls near Yosemite Falls, and El Cap. “To get one shot sometimes take two days of prep on the front end getting all the gear up,” he notes. “So at the end of the day, if I got one photo that captured Yosemite climbing, that would make me happy,” he says. The Yosemite story published in the May 2011 issue. It was Chin’s first *National Geographic* cover—a big deal for any photographer.

Chin loves what he does. He remarks, “Hanging off a free hanging rope in space never gets old.” Photographers like Chin have created a whole new audience for the sport. People can see the triumphs and struggles of climbers up close and join in the excitement of the climb. “I think the most honest photos happen when both the subject and the photographer are just in the moment,” he confides. “Then the rest of the world falls away.”

THINK ABOUT IT!

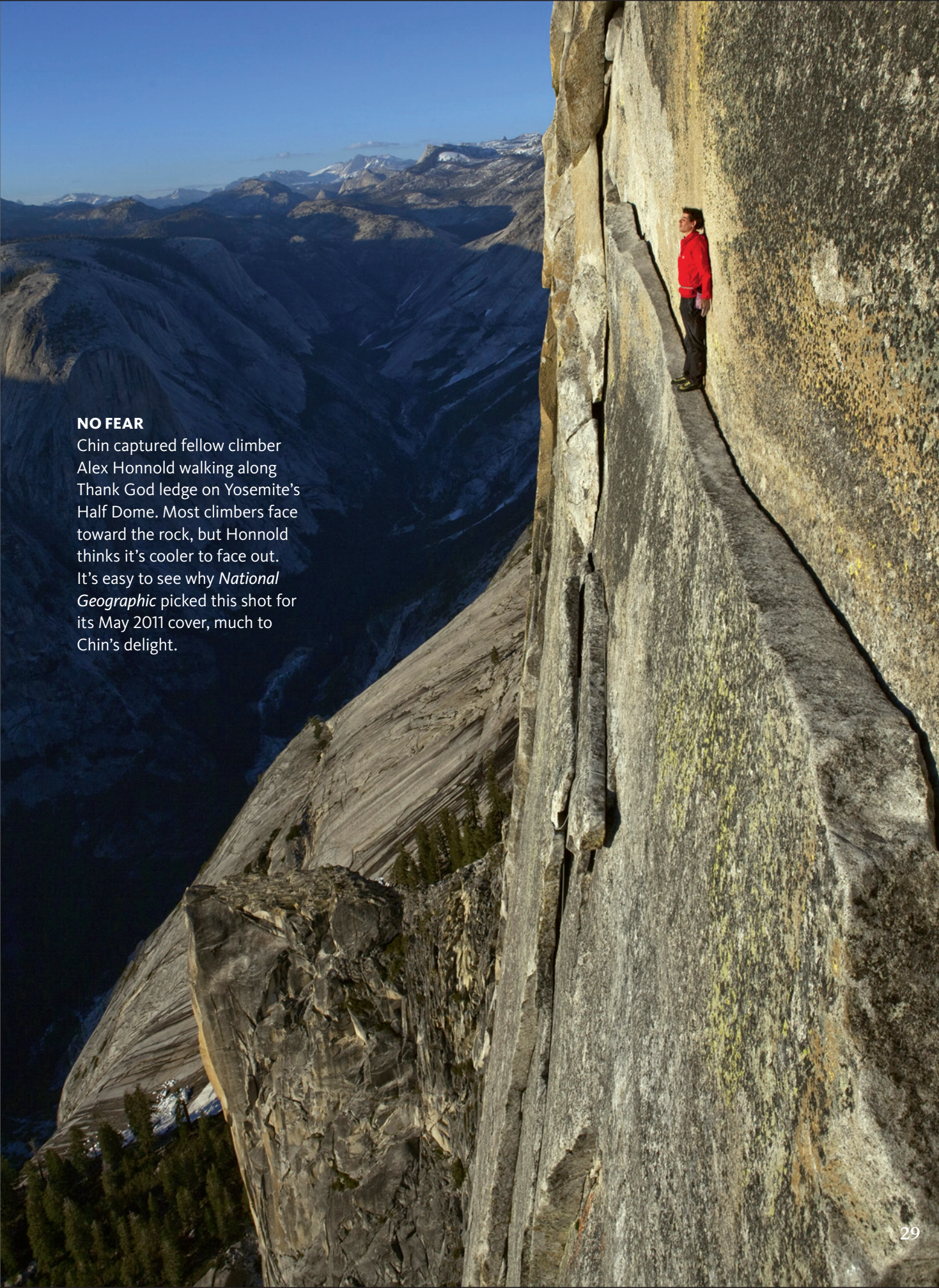
- 1. **Main Idea and Details** Why is Yosemite National Park so important to Jimmy Chin and to other climbers?
- 2. **Pose and Answer Questions** What would you like to ask Chin about his learning process as a climber and photographer?

BACKGROUND & VOCABULARY

alpinist *n.* (AL-puhn-ihst) a name for mountain climbers derived from the Alps in Europe, where climbing became popular

epicenter *n.* (EH-pih-sehn-tuhr) the center of something, a place of significant activity

hone *v.* to sharpen, improve upon or develop a skill



NO FEAR

Chin captured fellow climber Alex Honnold walking along Thank God ledge on Yosemite’s Half Dome. Most climbers face toward the rock, but Honnold thinks it’s cooler to face out. It’s easy to see why *National Geographic* picked this shot for its May 2011 cover, much to Chin’s delight.