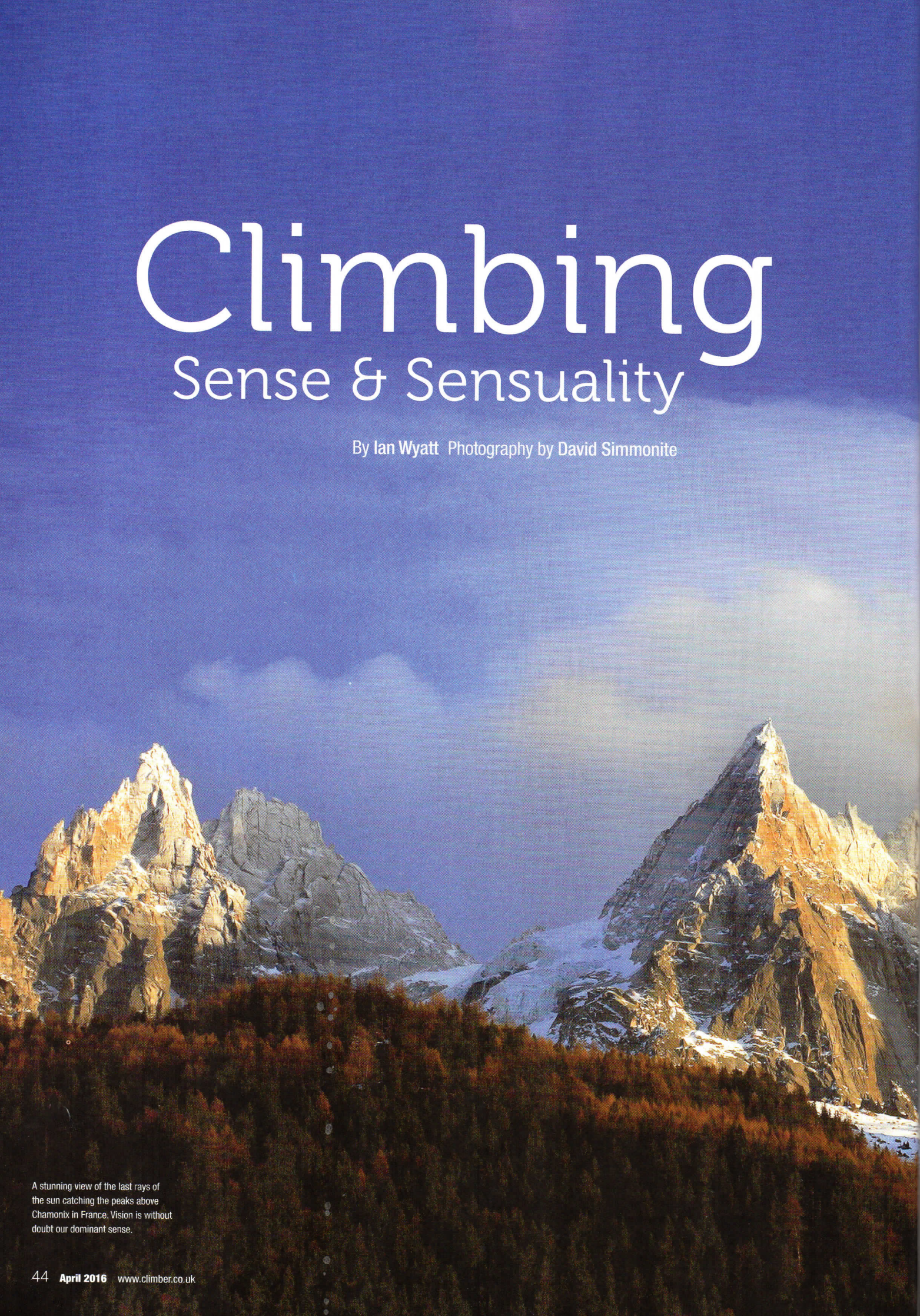
Climbing
Sense & Sensuality

By **Ian Wyatt** Photography by **David Simmonite**



A stunning view of the last rays of the sun catching the peaks above Chamonix in France. Vision is without doubt our dominant sense.

The total engagement of the senses in the climbing experience makes it, in my view, the most sensory and, therefore, sensual of all (clothed) recreational activities. Since Classical Antiquity we have accepted the notion of five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. Modern science has added some 'new' ones to these five but more on those later. Climbing is a whole body, all senses, physical, emotional, thought-provoking and psychological activity in which we engage directly with the landscape. Paradoxically, for the first 17 centuries or so of the Christian Era, mankind's relationship with wild places was one of fear, dark mythology and distrust. It was not until the gentleman scientists of the Enlightenment began exploring the mountains and wilderness areas did we begin to view the wild with anything other than hostility. By the 19th century Romantic artists were filling walls and pages with the joyous, awesome wonder of the mountains and we began to see the development of wild places as spaces for recreation. In less than 150 years the aesthetics of almost two millennia were turned through 180 degrees; in our cocooned urban world it is all too easy to forget that our responses to the great outdoors could be as atavistic as staring into an open fire.

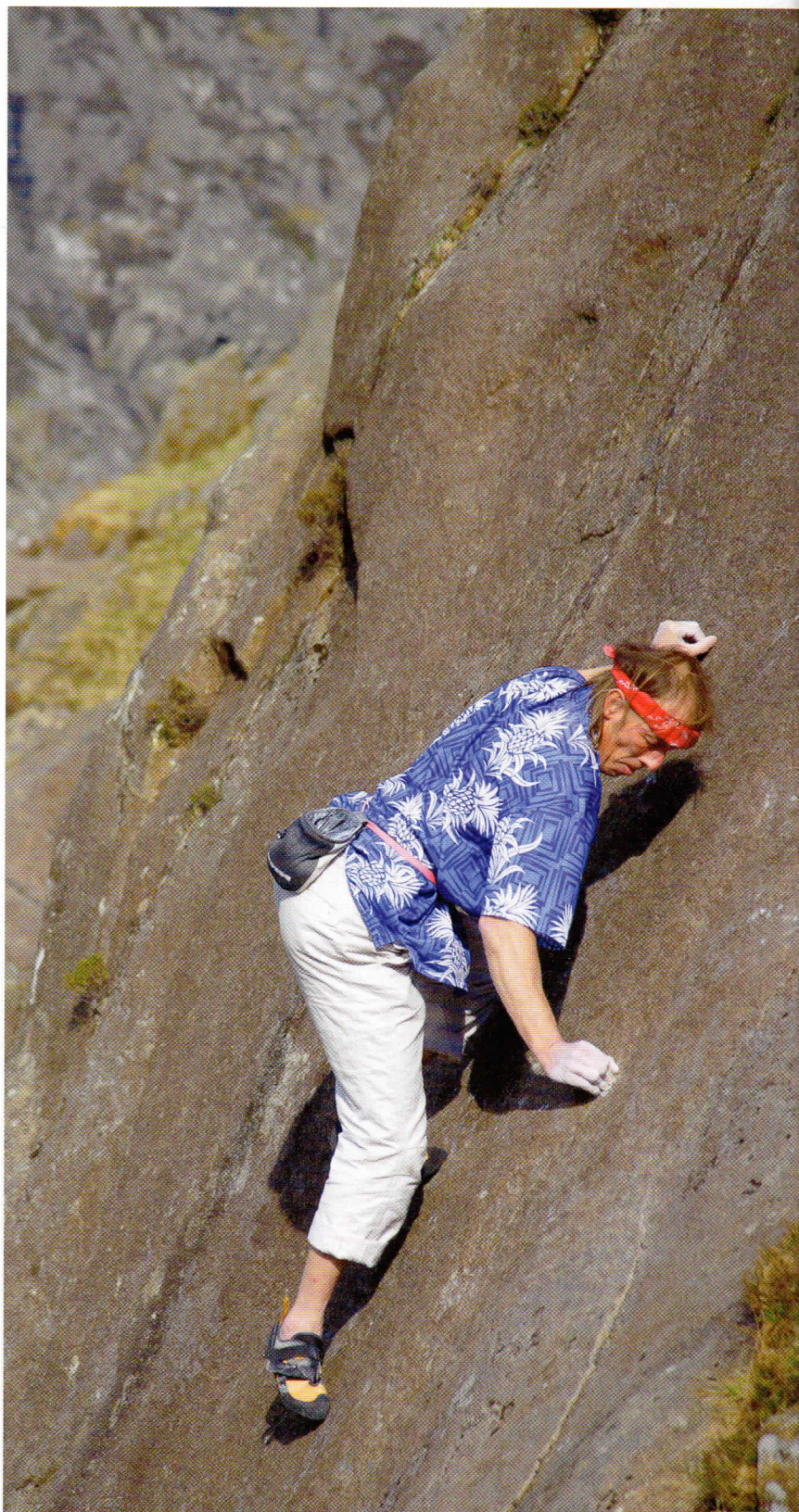
SIGHT

Vision is without doubt our dominant sense. Mountain, crag, sea cliff, moorland outcrop, quarry. These few words will have already triggered images in your mind of favourite places, pictures seen, places to go. Those of us who enjoy the mountains are extending and engaging with that 19th century Romantic aesthetic of the pristine nature of high steep terrain, that which is natural, uncluttered and unsullied. The sublimity of wild, high places is clearly represented in paintings by artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and Thomas Fearnley, and they often show a lone wanderer within the scene. Perhaps we who venture into the hills have taken on the role of that wanderer? So, as you approach Stanage, Ben Nevis, Mont Blanc or Ama Dablam you are walking into a vista, firing your imagination with personal, historical and cultural references. Before any actual ascending has begun you are engaging with the landscape through your eyes and mind.

As you look at a route perhaps you see a beautiful line, unusual rock architecture, colour, texture, an interesting sequence of moves, potential gear placements, a well-known photograph, or possibly a friend's description? None of these are mutually exclusive and there may be many other responses but this is your first response; a sight that leads to a thought and an emotional engagement. It might even begin with the guidebook, reading an evocative description or perusing sunny photo-topos (routes always look easier in sunny pictures). It is your eyes that make the initial assessment of a route, seeking out problematic areas. You may be watching someone already on the route, but that doesn't help unless you know how well they climb. As you eye up the line you sort and rack your gear, wires here, cams there, karabiners all facing this way, and then tighten your shoes just so. An activity that sits on the nexus of safety, efficiency, OCD and fetish; when you are satisfied that you have completed your routine you are ready.

Or perhaps your attention wavers? Perhaps it has been attracted by the sight of a group of students, bright young things with curves and muscles in just the right places. Or the gnarly old guy with museum quality gear, is he carrying a Moac? You feel a little diminished when he cruises the route you fought your way up last time, but console yourself with the thought that he's probably done it a 1,000 times before. Sight, memory and emotion coming together in a moment at the crag.

Sight, memory and emotion coming together in a moment at the crag



▲ The calls of larks, crows, ravens, curlews, peregrines and so on will be your occasional company whilst sitting alone on a belay listening to the breeze and distant river or road. The stunning sight of a Common Buzzard seen from a belay at Tremadog.

Touch – Crimps and pockets can be found from mountain crags to obscure boulders. Graham Desroy tip toeing his way up ***Willy Two Goes*** (V8), The Meadow area in Llanberis Pass. ►

For the winter climber the colour of ice and névé may tell the experienced mountaineer something about how good it is likely to be, the solid plasticity of blue/green ice or the reassuring grip of pearl white névé. But until it has been tested by an axe it is only the look of solid state water that guides the winter climber. Similarly, the mountaineer may look up at the sky for any indication of bad weather when the decision to go on or bail can be a life or death call. The boulderer or the cragrat may watch the rain move across the dales and make sure they stay dry.

Don't imagine though that we are merely passive consumers of the visual world. No, we are part of the scene and, therefore, contributors to it. Whether it is in bright red hardshells, on chalked-up boulders or dog muck on footpaths we make more than a passing contribution to someone else's view.

TOUCH

Granite, grit, limestone, rhyolite, slate, sandstone, the climber's hands knows them all, from the hot bite of Cornwall's crystalline granite to the cold smoothness of Dinorwig slate. There can be few climbers that have spent time at that otherworldly collection of monstrous apparitions otherwise known as Ramshaw Rocks and left without a dose of grit rash but the climber seeks out far more than surface texture. The combination of texture and rock architecture lend to each rock type a singularity of style that we must employ. Granite and grit have great friction and flesh-eating jams, but the impossible sloper with pure friction moves is more the preserve of grit. At the other extreme the sheer nature of slate offers minimal friction and razorblades that you can pull on or, preferably, stand on. Crimps and pockets can be found from mountain crags to obscure boulders, but it is on the lost and found sea beds of limestone that our hands constantly seek out these features.

But it is not enough to see a hold to know how to use it, it has to be felt, pulled, pressed or pushed; assessed by hands, feet and body position. It is by touching the hold and sensing our bodies in relation to it that we learn how to use it. And what joy it gives to unlock a beautiful sequence. Touching holds you're not going to use, fiddling with gear and that nervous tick that is the chalk bag dip are all examples of assessing, thinking, pondering and building up courage through our hands.

In winter the touch of axe or crampon is just as important and informative as hand on rock. An axe drifting through a sugary accumulation in a gully sends more than a shiver down the spine whereas the solid plant of an axe into frozen turf is very reassuring.

There is one aspect of the outdoor experience that is shared by all of us that enjoy (or not) being out in the landscape, the weather. The sun on your back always feels good and cold, wet hands are deeply unpleasant whether you are fighting your way up a V Diff on Tryfan, an IX 9 in the Cairngorms or scrambling up Striding Edge on Helvellyn. The weather forecast on TV, radio or on-line is the regular media fodder of climbers, we constantly monitor it for usefulness. But this is the usefulness of mountain and crag, not that of car cleaning, grass cutting or being with family. And yet we often behave as if the weather is something separate from the landscape; we spend large chunks of our lives trying to manage destinations using the age old formula of forecast and distance. Weather is rarely considered as much a part of our integration with the world as the ground we walk and climb upon. But there it is, whatever the weather is doing you are in it. The wind, rain and sun are as much a part of the world you touch as the rock. Just as touch is fundamentally important in our relationships, especially in communicating emotions, so it is with our connection to the physical world.

try noting and appreciating those little moments of sensory pleasure

SOUND

As the wind and driving rain are ripping at your face and trying to destroy your hardshell you are also being deafened by the noise. This particular admixture of sound and touch can be exhilarating or terrifying depending on your circumstances. Just finished a route at your local crag and you are thrilled, it's okay that you can barely hear each other because you know you're heading back down to a pint. But if caught out in a storm whilst adrift on a big route the difficulties in communicating because of the weather make a huge contribution to how desperate the situation feels or indeed may actually be. Your outdoor life takes place in a sonic landscape.

The calls of larks, crows, ravens, curlews, peregrines and so on will be your occasional company whilst sitting alone on a belay listening to the breeze and distant river or road. All of which, let's face it, are preferable to the sounds of another party chatting away about mortgages, work deals or overachieving children. Or, heaven forfend, their mobile phones going off at regular intervals, but we are more tolerant of the legitimate clink and clang of other people's gear. It is not hard to imagine an idealised soundscape of the wind blowing across mountain or moor and the sea crashing below cliffs. However, the more easily accessed areas, such as moorland

The sound, smell and taste of campfire cooking.

outcrops, potentially offer greater opportunities for disharmony between climbers or climbers and other users of the great outdoors. Everyone has a right to use the outdoors but to what extent is it reasonable to affect the experience of others? Young men (it is usually young men) on quad bikes or scramblers, picnicking families with screaming children, captain sweary failing on his project, portable music systems and barking dogs will all have an impact on your experience. I must confess to leaving a sector in Fontainebleau because someone turned up with loud music. Whether this is right or wrong is, thankfully, a different question but these are all part of our shared experience; we contribute to the soundscape of other people. Our sensory engagement with the world is not simply passive. Even the lonely toiling of the 8,000m climber is accompanied by the sound of their own bronchitic breathing, reminding them that they are still alive, a rasping that competes with the wind and oxygen regulator for attention.[1]

SMELL

In evolutionary terms, scent is our oldest sense and is wired directly into the most ancient part of our brains, the bit we share with crocodiles.[2] It may well be that this is why it is such an evocative sense, most people will have had the experience of a smell that has taken them back to childhood or some significant event in their life. Paradoxically, because scent is connected to your reptile brain you cannot recreate it in your mind in the way you can a picture or a sound, like that annoying song that you can't get out of your head. Furthermore, English is quite a poor language for describing olfactory experiences, for example, how many ways can you describe the delicate scent of a rose or the rotting impression of someone else's climbing shoes? Whereas the Jahai tribe of Malaya can talk about scent as easily as we discuss colour. Nevertheless, scent plays an important role in our sensual journey through climbing and just because we have a poor vocabulary for smell it does not mean we don't experience powerful triggers of recognition and emotion.

I learnt to climb on Staffordshire grit, at The Roaches. To this day, a very long time later, I find the earthy-musty smell of grit and moorland peat very evocative, in fact, almost a sense of being home. I'll wager that you will have a similar reaction to wherever you first climbed, even if that was at a climbing wall with its pungent mixture of plastic, wood, chalk, human effort and stale air. It's fair to say that all areas have their specific odours: the salt spray of sea cliffs, the earth of mountain areas and garlic in limestone valleys or thyme if you have climbed around the Mediterranean.

Even in winter the climber searches the air with their nose, treading through a not-quite frozen Scottish bog by headtorch they hope to catch the scent of snow as they head toward the day's objective. Tents, sleeping bags, cookers, all the paraphernalia of camping have an odour you recognise. And let us not forget the slightly guilty pleasure of brand new gear, especially ropes and guidebooks, when one can draw in deep the chemical perfume of newness.

TASTE

Taste, like scent, is a vocabulary of metaphors and similes. A pint at the end of a day's cragging, a mug of tea at Pete's Eats or a hot drink on a bivvy are nevertheless some of our favourite taste sensations. You may not think of yourself as tasting rock or the environment but limestone is used in toothpaste and some medications and you probably taste the salt of the sea as much as smell it. In fact, it's quite hard to get away from the close relationship between taste and smell, you can almost taste the smell of wild garlic. If you have ever been hit by spindrift you will know the taste of snow and let's not forget the salty taste of sweat and rain as you flog your way up a steep hillside in a torrential downpour. The high altitude climber will appreciate the cool refreshing 'taste' of bottled oxygen, and many connoisseurs of homemade cake can be found at indoor walls enjoying the mix of torte and chalk.

In these subtle ways you are tasting the environment around you and will have your own set of outdoor taste experiences. Of course, water from a mountain stream has a unique flavour that is always good and gets sweeter in direct proportion to your thirst. Food eaten outside always tastes better, it must do or no one would ever buy dehydrated food. Or perhaps you prefer to eat out of cans when you are camping? Whatever you eat when away climbing it will usually taste special somehow, tea in a plastic mug has a quite distinctive flavour compared to the one made at home in your finest china.

Sixth Sense (and more)

As recently as January 2015, scientists and philosophers of science finally agreed about a sixth sense, one that climbers have known about for as long as we have been climbing. We are very aware of where our bodies are and how to move in relation to the force of gravity. We can do this because of a group of perpendicular canals in the inner ear which function as a sort of spirit level and are known as the vestibular system. This counts as a true sense because this 'sensory organ is dedicated to coding gravito-intertial forces and because there is a phenomenal experience associated with vestibular stimulation'.[3] This is perhaps most easily illustrated by imagining you are sitting on a train with your eyes closed and wearing headphones, when the train starts to move you feel the forward movement even though you have no other sensory clues. Similarly you may be enclosed in a lift and can feel the up/down progress of the lift.

To get back to climbing, whenever you move you are negotiating space and gravity. Walking down the street you barely notice your vestibular system at work but when moving up a route, looking for an efficient sequence of

▲ Smell – how many ways can you describe the delicate scent of a rose or the rotting impression of someone else's climbing shoes?

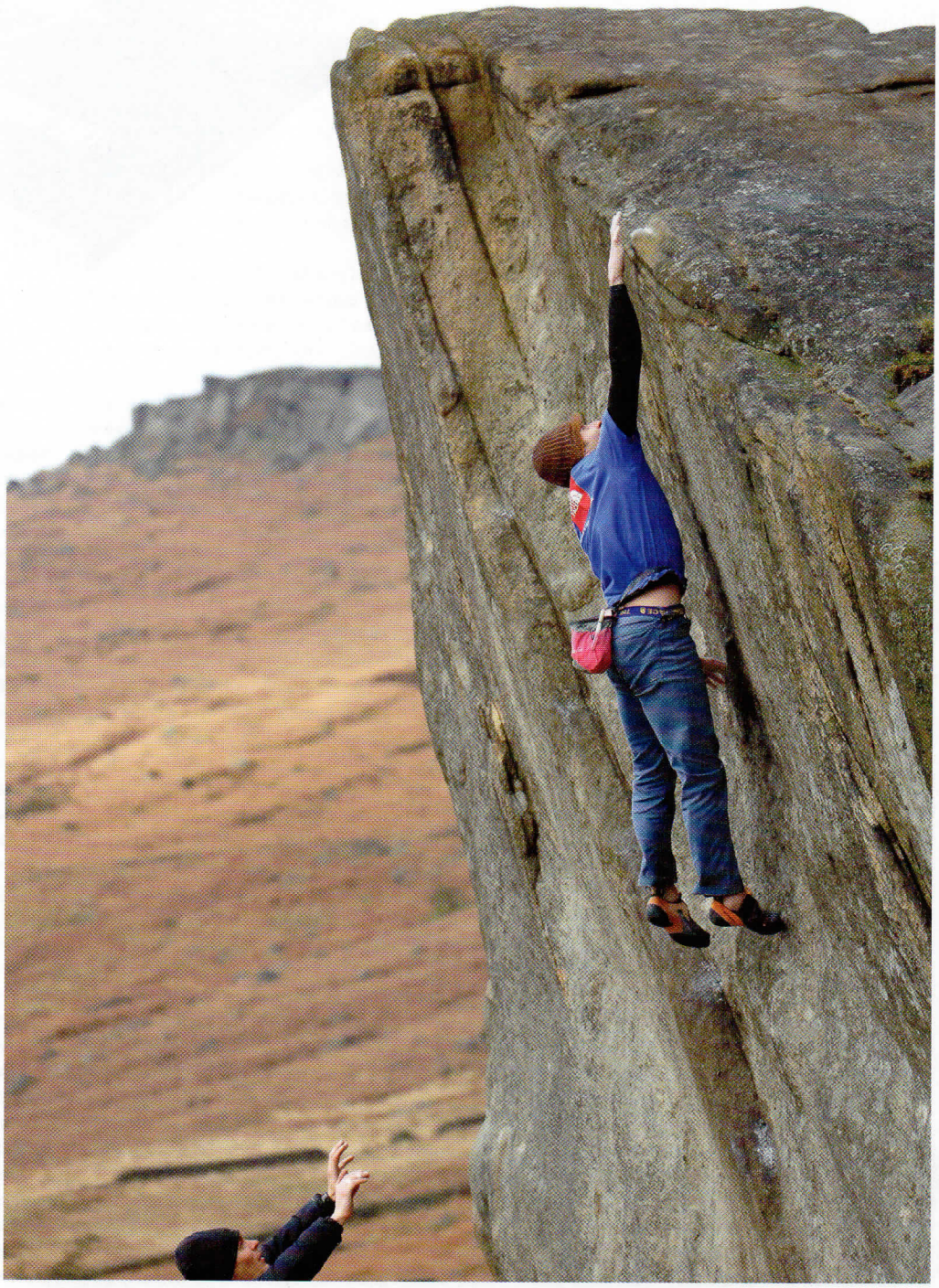
A treat after a days hard sport climbing. Fancy (and very tasty) cakes in one of the bars in San Vito lo Capo in Sicily. Taste, like scent, is a vocabulary of metaphors and similes. ►

moves, you are assessing the holds and sensing the gravito-interial forces required to maintain your position and/or move. This is the case whether you are looking at a simple rock-over onto a step up or a highly complex Egyptian-gaston-crank series of moves. At all times, knowingly or otherwise, you are trying to work around your centre of gravity to make upward progress. For climbers there is nothing new here, it was exactly the same for the Abraham brothers climbing at the turn of the 20th century, but we can now put a name to our secret climbing sixth sense: the vestibular system.

When you scratch your nose, how does your hand know where your nose is? Proprioception is the process by which we unconsciously know where our body parts are in relation to each other and our sense of pressure and force. There is some dispute as to whether this constitutes another fully-fledged sense but as climbers it is one we know only too well. Whether you are reaching into a chalk bag or flagging out to stop a 'barn door' you are making use of proprioception and, of course, in concert with the vestibular system you are deciding where and how to weight a particular hold, or judging how to land that sloper from a dyno. The key difference between proprioception and the other senses is that it is entirely internal and so is not reliant on any external stimuli.

My final climbing sense, which again is a source of some dispute, is pain. You might think that pain was simply the result of the usual sense receptors turned up to 11, but this is not the case. Pain has its own set of sensors and messaging systems such that it could be argued it is a sense. You probably make greater use of pain in climbing than you might think. For example, the last pair of rock shoes you bought, are they comfortable, quite tight, very tight or definitely too tight? Many climbers like their shoes to be tight, but that tightness is a balance between not really comfortable but okay to 'no, I can't actually stand in these shoes'. The difference sits in that liminal area between manageable discomfort and pain. Similarly, hand and finger jams can be quite painful and good technique can mitigate some of the pain but one has to accept there will be a certain level of discomfort/pain. Then there is the pain of flogging up a mountain with a 'sack full of winter gear, you want to get up there to do the route so you live with screaming quads and calves. And talking of calves, there is nothing quite like the burn in arms and calves on long steep ice pitches. All of which, and more, is the pain we are willing to accept to achieve our climbing goals. Indeed the difference between success and failure can sometimes rest on the tension between the levels of physical and psychological pain we are willing to accept. On some occasions we fail because it's too painful, anyone that has spent time in Fontainebleau will know how difficult the last couple of days can be because of the accrued wear and tear on fingers making just touching the rock painful, especially if you reach the point of blood simply seeping through your finger tips and game over.

Next time you are out, try noting and appreciating those little moments of sensory pleasure as you strive with your project for the day. Remember we climb because we like it, it is pleasurable and gratifying and because it engages our entire range of sensory perceptions it is truly sensual. Enjoy. ■



All out dyno for Gus Hudgins on ***To Be or Not To Be*** (Font 7a+) at Stanage Plantation. Sixth sense – judging how to land that sloper from a dyno.

1. I am grateful to Himalayan climber Alan Arnette for his observations on the use of supplemental oxygen.
2. Rivlin, R & Gravelle, K (1984) *Deciphering the Senses*. New York: Simon & Schuster pp 141–156.
3. Lenggenhager, B & Lopez, C (2015). Vestibular Sense and Perspectival Experience – A Reply to Adrain Alsmith. In T Metzinger & J M Windt (Eds) *Open MIND*: 23(R) Frankfurt am Main: MIND Group.