

How to Climb to a Ripe Old Age in Avon Gorge: Ten tips to the Top

By Martin Crocker (written in 2015)

1. Method not madness. Avon is *not* fast climbing. Take your time; it's your sport, your life.
2. Read the guidebook descriptions. Coloured lines on topos alone are fine for sport climbs but not so for traditional climbs, especially Avon-style routes that can sway drunkenly up unobvious lines. While a guidebook won't tell you how to climb a route (e.g. where the holds are), it can contain pearls of wisdom and detail where detail is required (e.g. if you traverse at the wrong level on *The Preter* you'll end up in E5 territory!).
3. Start out with someone who inspires confidence and really wants to be there too. A nervous or 'negative' person holding your ropes can make you unsettled too. If you're new to Avon, try to hook up with a more experienced climber who understands Avon. That way your confidence should grow as you pick up tips on strategy and technique. And joining a climbing club is still a steady and sociable way to start.
4. When seconding a route that you think is above your current leading ability, don't rush just because you have a rope from above or expect instructions from your leader (if he's worth his salt he'll allow you to discover the solution for yourself). Take your time; look around, and climb as if you were leading the route: keep thinking about what it would be like to be on the sharp end.
5. It's slopy, off-vertical and hard to read: Avon is like learning a foreign language. Acquaint yourself first by spending time low-level traversing on Harvey's Wall or along the base of Morning Slab or Fir Tree Slab – get a feel for Avon's range of holds and how to use them.
6. Don't forget your feet! You'll be climbing from *foothold to foothold* (rather than from handhold to handhold as you might on steep sport climbing). Footholds provide a sanctuary – a point of balance and respite where you should be able to stand until you can sort your head out. And take time to look around for small or sloping footholds, edges or smears you'll bring into play as you climb methodically up - they're sure to be harder to spot from above.
7. There's no reason to fall off at Avon! Except on a small number of steep routes, you shouldn't get pumped. Learn to get yourself out of trouble by reversing; e.g. you start a run-out but can't commit to completing it, so you climb back down. Develop a self-awareness of your abilities to down-climb; and – on a committing route – keep on asking yourself the question 'can I climb back down from this point?'
8. Hollow-feeling or rattling holds aren't necessarily loose and about to fall off as you pull on them. (Just look at all the dodgy blocks chalked up by New Quarry boulderers – some of which *are* loose!) Acclimatize safely and develop an understanding of the crag environment including the integrity of the rock.
9. Just because pegs look rusty doesn't mean they are not doing their job as protection fixtures (steel rusts into a protective coating that reduces the rate the fixture corrodes). You will have developed a mindset of 'there is no reason to fall, so why should I fall'; therefore you should rarely have to test the pegs – they're only there to back up your abilities. And wherever possible always supplement any climbing fixtures with hand-placed gear, including and especially at belays.
10. Rid yourself of things that pull you back both mentally and physically. Rope drag can be a mind-killer when gripped high up and way out from gear. On long or wandering pitches take as many slings as you would normally take quick-draws with individual karabiners arranged on your gear loops. Keep your movement free and your confidence level up.

Bonus Tip: Finally, take time to research the background and history of the routes – from books, magazines, the internet, and by asking others. Tales of derring-do, mischief, and Avon weirdness can all add to the identity, mystique, and value of a climb, and therefore help inspire you to climb it. And if you're inspired; well – truly – that's 99% of the job done.

Martin Crocker, Avon Gorge activist: 1970 – 2021 (so far)