

THE TWO PERSON RAPPEL.

Chris Curtis.

What is a two person rappel/abseil?

- When two people are rappelling/abseiling and are connected together on the same rope.

When would a two person rappel be needed or be an advantage?

- When someone has an injury or something that prevents them from being able to rappel on their own safely.
- For a child or someone that does not have the confidence or skill required to rappel on their own safely.
- Can be used as part of a pick-off rescue mid-pitch.

So, when we have established that a two person rappel is required, but before we abseil, we need to look at what provisions need to be made, rigging changes, safety precautions and to join the two people together for the abseil.

Anchor

First thing to check is if the anchors are strong enough for a two person load. If the anchor is questionable then a backup anchor will be required. In most cases this won't be an issue unless abseiling from a single bolt on a rebelay, but it is still important to review every part of the system.

Descender

What descender to use? Most cavers will use the descender we already have on us, which will usually be a rappel rack or a bobbin. It is still possible to do a two person rappel with most devices, but some are better at it than others. The critical thing to remember with a two person rappel is that we now need a lot more friction to control the increased load, so choice of device is really important. In some cases it may be beneficial to use the most appropriate descender in the group, i.e; borrow someone else's. A device that has a self/assisted braking function is going to be the better choice, like the Petzl Stop.

Adding a friction carabiner for additional friction and control is a must. You can also add a Munter hitch to the friction carabiner for additional friction (Photo 1).

You also want to use a device that has the most mass as there will be a lot more heat generated with that extra friction. A larger device will dissipate the heat better.

No matter what device you use, the descent speed must be slowed right down. This will keep the descender cooler for longer, will be easier to

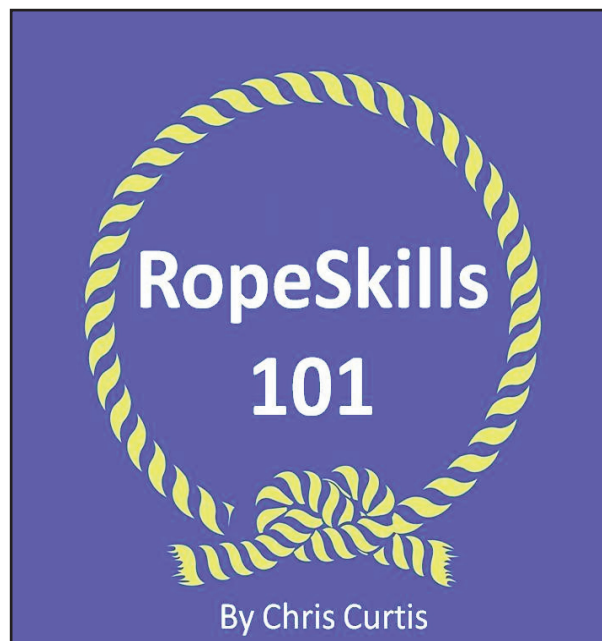


Photo 1: Munter hitch on friction carabiner.

Photo: *Chris Curtis.*

control the descent and also reduce the risk of trips or entanglements.

If you are using a non assisted braking device like a rappel rack and don't have a top or bottom belay, it is highly recommended to use a prussik for self belay.

Method

The next thing to decide is can the driver of the two people descending control both people? If there are only two people in the group then there is no choice to be made, but if there are three or more in the group then that provides more options. The second person should be on the left hand side of the person controlling the descent for all methods.

Depending on the reason for the two person rappel, it may be more beneficial for a third person to lower both abseilers together, so the descending device stays at the anchor. This is better for an injury where the injured person can be better monitored and treated or stabilized during the descent. The uninjured person can focus more on

patient care and the abseil and less time worrying about controlling the descent. This option adds the benefit of being able to change the backup system to a haul if required (Photos 2, 3).

Another option is to have a top belay. This is by far the safest option. Two descending devices will be needed, one at the anchor and one with the two people abseiling. This option provides the advantage that the two people abseiling control their own speed, with the added benefit of full backup with a second rope in case control can't be maintained by the controlling abseiler. This option also adds the benefit of being able to change the backup system to a haul if required (Photos 4, 5).

The next option is to have a bottom belay. This would be beneficial if a top belay can't be done due to not having another rope available.

Obstacles during descent

In a canyon, it is highly unlikely that there will be too much to contend with other than trying to stay out of water and just holding the required line down the rock face.

If in a cave however, there may also be tight restrictions, rebelay and redirects to contend with.

One way of helping to avoid obstacles is to create an angled abseil. This means adding an extra rope into the system as a tight line/tyrolean. These will add some extra forces to the top anchor, but may assist in a smoother and easier descent away from obstacles. This can still be used for canyons. (Photo 6).

If there is a rebelay, you won't be able to cross it like you normally would as you would need to lift a two person load to unhook your cowstail. Instead you have two options.

Option 1

Turn it into a redirect and continue down.

Option 2

The two descender method.

- 1. Stop at the same height as the rebelay and lock off.
- 2. Attach a second descender to the rope below the rebelay. Keep the descender up close to the knot and lock off.
- 3. Attach the second descender to your harness. You should now have two descenders attached to you, but only one will be loaded.
- 4. Unlock the loaded descender and abseil down until your weight transfers onto the other descender.
- 5. Lock off the now loaded descender.
- 6. Remove the unloaded descender.
- 7. Unlock the loaded descender.
- 8. Continue abseiling down.



Photo 2: Lower from anchor.
Photo: Chris Curtis.



Photo 3: Lower from anchor.
Photo: Chris Curtis.



Photo 4: Top belay.
Photo: Chris Curtis.

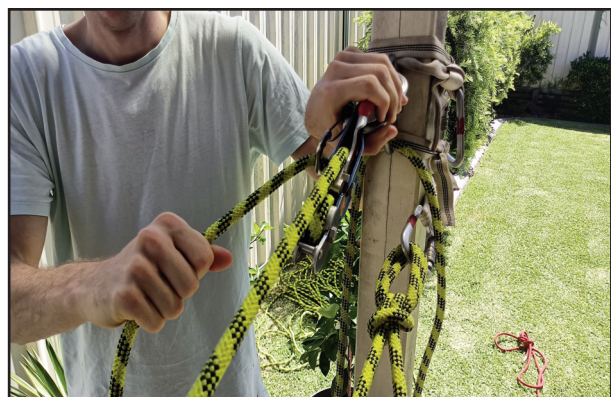


Photo 5: Top belay.
Photo: Chris Curtis.



Photo 6: Angled abseil. **Photo:** Chris Curtis.

If you just remove the rebelay altogether and continue to abseil to the floor, there is a good chance that you could land in a more unsuitable/dangerous area or bring in a dangerous rub point to the rope above, hence why the rebelay was there in the first place.

Connecting the two persons for rappel

It may be beneficial to extend the belay by about thirty centimetres, but it's not critical. It just provides a bit more freedom of movement and less force pulling the two people together. Play around with different lengths though. It will also depend on if the pitch is free hanging or not. Don't extend it too far so as to not be able to reach and control the descender.

The extension can be done by attaching the descender to the short cowstail doubled up. The other person then attaches their short or long cowstail to the descender carabiner. Set the length to whatever is practical or comfortable to suit the situation.

Ok, so you're now ready to abseil.

- Go through the ABC's of abseiling.
- Plan ahead by looking down the abseil, communicate with your passenger and to your top or bottom belay if you have one.
- Descend slowly making sure you control your speed smoothly. Make sure to monitor your descenders temperature and stop, if need be, to allow it to cool down.
- Stop if you need to for a rest, two person abseils can be very tiring on long pitches.

JSSS

SPELEO SCENE SECTION.



Photo 1:
Bob Lewis
descending
the entrance
ladder pitch
of the
Drum Cave,
Bungonia
Caves,
NSW.

Photo:
Ross Ellis,
February,
1963.