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## A Question of Balance

By Lizzy Scully / Photos by Andy Mann



Martina Cufer works a pose atop the Aiguillette d'Argentiere, high over Chamonix, France. Photo by Lukasz Warzecha / Aurora Photos

### Six essential yoga poses for climbers

**My physical therapist, a triathlete, recently told me that climbing puts more intense stress on my body than any other sport does.** “Your lats are overdeveloped, your shoulders pull forward, your neck is strained, your hamstrings are tight,” she told me. “Just stop climbing.”

Of course, I won't stop climbing. So what to do? Start stretching consistently, say climbers Olivia Hsu, a yoga instructor, and Heidi Wirtz, a long-time yoga practitioner. And the smartest way to stretch? Yoga.

“Yoga balances out climbing,” Hsu explains. She trains hard and climbs 5.13+, but in yoga she favors gentler poses that open her chest and stretch hamstrings, legs, and hips. “I can do the power postures,” she says, “but that doesn't translate to injury prevention for climbing.”

Wirtz also find many benefits. “Yoga promotes balance, increases core strength, calms your mind, and teaches you how to be in your body,” she says. Wirtz initially practiced yoga to manage painful sciatica, but now incorporates it into her daily fitness routine.

Wirtz and Hsu recommend this series of six yoga poses for climbers to stretch all the major muscle groups and improve balance. Do them in the suggested order and “flow” them together into one session, moving from each posture back to Mountain pose, and then on to the next.

Maintain steady breathing throughout your practice. Inhale as you establish the posture, and then breathe deeply and rhythmically as you hold the pose. “As with climbing, before you initiate movement, relax and focus on your breath,” Wirtz says.



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#### Beginning your yoga practice

- Start by expanding your full back with a deep breath and lengthening the sides of your body.
- Always begin with and return to Mountain pose.
- Hold each pose for 30 to 60 seconds.
- Do asymmetrical poses on each side.
- Don't strive for maximum extension, especially if you are new to yoga.
- Focus on standing up tall, without sticking your buttocks or chest out.

#### Mountain

1. Stand with heels slightly apart, big toes touching. Balance your weight evenly by lifting and spreading your toes and rocking your body on your feet.
2. Lift your kneecaps, strengthen the inner arches of your feet, turn the upper thighs slightly inward, and draw your pubic bone and tailbone toward each other.
3. Lift your upper body without sticking your ribs out, stretch your shoulder blades back, and drop your shoulders.
4. Drop and straighten your arms, opening your palms in front of you.
5. Grow tall through the crown of your head, chin parallel to the floor.
6. Allow your tongue to be flat on the floor of your mouth.
7. Soften your eyes.

#### Body benefits:

- This is your basic yoga “ready” pose. It promotes stillness, relaxed strength, and “groundedness.” Think of yourself as a mountain.



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### Eagle

1. With knees slightly bent, lift your left foot and balance on your right.
2. Reach up with your arms and sink into your hips to create a sense of the spine lengthening and straightening.
3. Cross your left thigh over the right, left toes pointed to the floor. Then, try to wrap the top of your left foot around the lower right calf. Hips face forward.
4. Cross your forearms, placing your right above left, and bend the elbows. Press the inside of your left hand against the lower part of the palm of your right hand.
5. Raise the arms and bend at the elbows so that the upper arms are parallel to the ground, fingers stretched upward.

#### Body benefits:

- Stretches latissimus dorsi, trapezius, and deltoid muscles.

#### Climbing applications:

- Limber upper-body muscles have increased blood flow, which promotes faster recovery.
- Strengthens knees and ankles and improves overall balance, helping climbers stand on small holds.

#### Caution:

- People with knee pain should simply stand or cross one ankle over the other, leaving both feet touching the ground.



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### Warrior I

1. Reach your left leg back and bend your right knee directly over your right ankle.
2. Place your left foot flat at a 45-degree angle. Make sure your right ankle and foot are at a 90-degree angle (pointing forward), and that your right heel is aligned with your left heel. (People with ankle problems may lift the heel, and balance on the toes.)
3. Draw your right, outer hip back, and align your right thigh parallel to the ground.
4. Lift your torso and arch your upper back slightly, while raising arms above head.
5. Point fingers up with palms facing together. Lift your ribcage away from the pelvis.
6. Look forward, head in a neutral position.
7. Repeat on the other side, right leg back.

#### Body benefits:

- Strengthens and stretches your quadriceps, hamstrings, and hip flexors.

#### Climbing applications:

- Increases endurance in the legs, which helps prevent “Elvis leg.”
- Stronger hip flexors enhance a climber’s ability to high-step; stronger quads and hamstrings stabilize knees for stepping up.
- Stronger quads, hip flexors, and hamstrings help a climber extend the legs for reachy, sideways foot placements.

#### Caution:

- Those with lower-back disc issues should narrow the stance.



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#### **Downward Dog**

1. Drop to your hands and knees with knees directly below your hips.
2. Spread your hands wide and slightly in front of your shoulders, with index fingers slightly turned out.
3. Lift your buttocks and slowly straighten your legs, without locking your knees.
4. Stretch your heels down. It's OK if your heels don't touch the floor and if your legs remain slightly bent.
5. Press the bases of the index fingers firmly into the floor, and lift your inner arms.
6. Pull your shoulder blades away from your ears, broadening the collarbone.
7. Do not allow your head to hang; keep it between your upper arms.

#### **Body benefits:**

- Strengthens and stretches shoulder muscles, strengthens latissimus dorsi, and stretches hamstrings, calf muscles, and Achilles tendon.
- Helps prevent rotator cuff injuries.

#### **Climbing applications:**

- Stronger shoulders improve stability in gaston moves and manteling.
- Stronger lats help you reach farther.
- Flexible leg muscles help your endurance on slab and face climbs.

#### **Caution:**

- People with shoulder problems shouldn't do this posture without expert supervision.



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#### **Seated Twist**

1. Sit evenly on your sit bones, and straighten your back. If your lower back is sagging, prop yourself up on a folded blanket.

2. Extend your legs in front of you without locking your knees.
3. Bend your right knee, and place your right foot flat on the ground outside of your left knee.
4. Bend your left leg, with ankle close to the right hip.
5. Lift your right arm and stretch the side of your body, while twisting your torso to the right. Place your right hand or fingers on the ground behind you.
6. Lift your left arm up and place the outside of your left elbow on the outside of your right knee to help maintain the twist. However, be sure to move from the base of your spine as you twist. Do not force the twist with the strength of your arms.
7. Look over your right shoulder.
8. Repeat on other side.

**Body benefits:**

- Strengthens and stretches back.
- Strengthens shoulder muscles.
- Opens shoulders by stretching pectoral muscles.

**Climbing applications:**

- Facilitates fluid twisting movements while climbing.
- Relieves lower back pain caused by muscular tension.



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**Bridge**

1. Lie flat on your back, arms by your side.
2. Bend your knees and bring your heels close to your buttocks.
3. Lift your chest and raise your hips, keeping your thighs parallel to each other. Don't clench your buttocks.
4. Press your feet into the ground, and draw your knees forward over your ankles as you lift your pelvis and lengthen your tailbone.
5. Clasp your hands together under your back and stay high on your shoulders.
6. Lift your chest, chin away from the sternum, and push your head into the floor.
7. Tuck your tailbone, while broadening back and shoulder blades. Firm your entire body.
8. Roll the spine slowly down to finish pose.

**Body benefits:**

- Strengthens spine and gluteus maximus.
- Stretches and opens muscles in the chest, neck, and spine that climbers compress and contract through constant pulling.
- Stretches psoas muscles.

**Climbing applications:**

- Back flexibility for reachy moves.
- Strengthens butt muscles, which helps in reachy leg moves, high-stepping, maintaining balance on small holds, or heel-hooking.

**Caution:**

- If you have a neck injury, do not do this pose without expert supervision.