

How to Choose the Best Rock Climbing Shoe for Women

[Overview](#)[Ratings](#)[Price vs. Value Chart](#)[Buying Advice](#)[How We Test](#)

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Table of Contents

- [What Makes Climbing Shoes Women's Specific?](#)
- [Styles of Shoes for Climbing](#)
 - [Aggressive Shoes for Sport Climbing and Bouldering](#)
 - [Shoes for Traditional Climbing and Cr](#)
 - [All-Around Shoes for Versatile Climbing Use](#)
 - [Shoes for Beginners](#)
- [Fit Considerations](#)
 - [Aggressive Shape](#)
 - [Tightness](#)
 - [Stretch](#)
 - [Brand and Sizing](#)
 - [Laces, Velcro or Slipper](#)
 - [Rubber Stickiness](#)

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Article By:
McKenzie Long
Senior Review Editor
OutdoorGearLab

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Buying climbing shoes that fit just the way you want them to is an arduous process. Unlike running/tennis shoes, you can't just walk into the store, select the size that usually fits, and be done with it. Instead, the fit of a climbing shoe is a very personal and finicky thing. Our intention here is to walk you through the different types of shoes, direct you towards the models that may work best for you, and explain how to find the best fit. If you already know what type of shoe you are looking for, [take a look at our Women's Climbing Shoe Review](#) to see which were our favorites out of 12 tested models.

What Makes Climbing Shoes Women's Specific?

First thing's first, what is the difference between a women's climbing shoe and a men's? What would the advantages of a women's shoe be? Are women limited to just the "women's" models? The answer to that question is absolutely not! Women's specific shoes are relatively new to the market, and before that ladies had to go with men's or unisex models. There are still many shoes in production that only come in a unisex model, and they are just as viable options as anything labeled for women. To really broaden your options, [take a look at our Men's Climbing Shoe Review](#) and make sure there isn't something there you love first.

The main difference in women's shoes (besides color) is that shoes for females are usually built from a different last than the men's counterpart. It will be similar to the last of the male version, but usually a little narrower, especially in the heel. Other differences can include a higher arch, a narrower and longer toe box, and a lower instep. This can really enhance the fit for many women, particularly those who have very narrow or low volume feet and have a hard time fitting into unisex models.



Using the incredible edging power (and girl power!) of the Women's La Sportiva Solution through a crimpy crux in Owen's River Gorge, CA. [\[Edit this Photo\]](#)

Styles of Shoes for Climbing

Before you pick up just any climbing shoe and run with it, consider the main way in which you will use them. Shoes for climbing come in many different styles, some of which are very specialized. Many climbers feel they need a quiver of shoes for different styles of climbing rather than just one shoe for everything, though there are single-quiver shoes available as well. There are four main categories of shoes for climbing based on the primary use:

Aggressive Shoes for Sport Climbing and Bouldering

High-end shoes for sport climbing and bouldering are specialized tools for steep terrain, and usually have a price tag to reflect this. These aggressively down-turned, asymmetrical models are best worn for a single pitch, and then removed immediately after, and they will not be comfortable to wear for much longer than that. When you put them on your feet will be curved and your toes will be pushed to the front of the shoe. Shoes of this style are usually down-sized and worn tight for the most sensitivity, but they shouldn't be excruciating.



Shoes for Traditional Climbing and Cracks

Shoes that will be comfortable all-day and jammed into cracks will have a flatter toe and a more symmetrical design, but a slight downturn can help with precision on technical climbs. Shoes in this style can be sized down for a performance fit or sized up for more comfort on longer, all-day routes. These are the shoes that will be best for multi-pitch routes or single pitch



crack cragging.

All-Around Shoes for Versatile Climbing Use

Though many models of shoes are designed with specific applications in mind, some shoes are designed to tackle anything. These are the models that are best for someone who will only own one pair of shoes but may like to dabble in any style of climbing. Even if you own multiple pairs of climbing shoes, you probably need a good all-around pair in your collection for those days when you don't know what you will jump on. In general, these models will have a slight down-turn and a sensitive, comfortable fit. They can be sized up or down for better performance or more comfort. Loosely fitted all-around models can often make great shoes to wear all-day on long routes.



Shoes for Beginners

When you first start climbing it is highly likely that you will have terrible footwork, and this will wear out the soft rubber on your shoes quickly. We recommend inexpensive shoes as a first pair so that you can wear them out rapidly as you learn proper technique, and then you can invest in a more expensive pair once you learn how to place your feet delicately and you are ready to take things to the next level. Shoes that work best for beginners have a flatter, more comfortable design and an inexpensive price tag. (You can work up to the tight, painful shoes.)



Fit Considerations

Aggressive Shape

Related to the styles of climbing listed above, the degree of downturn makes a shoe more specialized for different styles of climbing. Keep in mind that the more downturned a shoe, the more volume is left for your toes to bunch in the front. If you buy a downturned shoe really big, you are likely to have a lot of extra space above your toes, and often this bunches up uncomfortably while you are climbing. The more aggressive the shoe, the better it is to go for a really snug fit — not painful but snug.



Toeing in on tufa blobs in Kalymnos, Greece is similar to toeing in on steep pockets. Here you can see that the curved toe of the Women's Solution helps the climber keep herself pulled into the wall. [\[Edit this Photo\]](#)

Tightness

There are two schools of thought with climbing shoes: that your shoes should be extremely tight to the point of pain, or that your shoes should be bigger and more comfortable. Really tight shoes are great for sport climbing and bouldering where sensitivity on edges, tiny foot chips, and smears can be the difference between sending and whipping. Also, on sport climbs you tend to only wear your shoes for the length of one pitch so the tightness and curled toes can be bearable. However, don't size your shoes so small that the discomfort is excruciating and makes you not want to use your feet.

On multi-pitch climbs, shoes are worn for longer periods of time and really tight fitting shoes can actually make you climb worse because you are less likely to want to put any pressure on your aching toes. So for long routes we recommend bigger shoes. Also, for crack climbing, when you jam your feet into the crack and tweak them around, shoes a bit bigger are actually an asset.

When shopping for shoes, decide beforehand what you plan on climbing most with these shoes and size them accordingly. In general, we find that just going a little bigger than tight can make a shoe 50 percent more comfortable, and comfortable feet usually means better performance.



The Five Ten Anasazi, with a Stealth C4 rubber sole, smears on small edges. We think these sensitive shoes are comfortable when sized small, and perform even better that way. [\[Edit this Photo\]](#)

Stretch

Now that you have decided how tight your shoes should be, factor in how much the shoes will stretch after you buy them. Most shoes don't keep the same fit that they have in the store.

Leather shoes stretch a decent amount, so prepare yourself when buying them. The exception: leather shoes that are lined. For example, Mythos are unlined leather shoes and stretch quite a bit after a lot of use, becoming sloppy over time. The Miura are lined leather shoes and do not stretch much at all, but they do mold to your feet. Synthetic shoes, like the Five Ten Anasazi and most Evolv shoes, do not stretch much so you can buy those pretty true to size.

Pay attention to what kind of shoes you are buying (and the design and materials) so you know what to expect once the shoes break-in.

Brand and Sizing

Don't expect to wear the same size shoe across the board, but learn how each brand fits your uniquely shaped foot. As a rule of thumb, Five Ten and Evolv shoes fit much smaller than European brands such as La Sportiva. Five Ten's goal is for you to buy your street shoe size without downsizing and achieve the proper fit. La Sportiva has extremely consistent sizing, and our testers are able to buy the same size in any model of shoe and find the right fit, but that does not translate to other brands. The same size in Scarpa fit much smaller.



The Scarpa Techno X (right) runs smaller than shoes of other brands that are the same size. Here it is shown against the La Sportiva Tarantulace (left). Both are euro size 38.5 and both have a mostly flat shape, but as you can see, the Scarpa is much shorter in [length](#). [View this Photo](#)

Laces, Velcro or Slipper

There are three main types of fastening systems: Velcro strap(s), lace-up, and slipper (usually with elastic). Lace-up shoes generally give the most precise, snug, and secure fit but take a while to get on and off. Velcro shoes go on and off quickly and many newer Velcro shoes tighten almost as precisely as lace-ups. Slippers are generally the most comfortable and sensitive shoes. They are usually unlined, which means they stretch and become even more comfortable but less precise over time.

Tip: Store Velcro shoes with the Velcro closed. It keeps the shape of the shoe better, makes it less likely for muck to get in the Velcro, and therefore extends the life of the Velcro and the shoe.

Rubber Stickiness

Rubber, more than any other factor in climbing shoes, is all about personal preference. People have debated forever what is the best. There is one general rule: when looking at the stickiness of a shoe it can be measured in a continuum, where

one end measures stickiness and the other measures durability. The closer you get to sticky, the less durable the rubber and vice-versa. Rubber that is really soft and sticky is likely to wear out fast. A harder rubber is more durable and will hold an edge longer, but also will not stick to the rock as well if you lightly paste your foot on a hold. So there is a trade off. In general, we like our high performance shoes as soft and sticky as possible. For entry level shoes or all-day trad shoes, a harder and more durable rubber is usually preferred.



McKenzie Long

About the Author

After graduating from University of Cincinnati with a degree in graphic design, McKenzie moved to the mountains to spend as much of her time climbing as possible. It started with an internship at Alpinist Magazine and a move to Jackson, Wyoming where she fell in love with the peaks of the West. Now she lives in Mammoth Lakes, California and runs her own freelance design business, where she is constantly balancing work and play.

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