

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

ICE CLIMBING

Climbing frozen waterfalls is a sport that takes a little warming up to but isn't necessarily the bone-chilling experience you might expect!

BY KIRSTEN SCHMITTEN

Having lived the last six years of my life on the west coast of British Columbia, I hadn't done much ice climbing. Well, to tell you the truth, I'd never even entertained the idea. I failed to see what pleasure people derived from spending a long day with their bodies pressed against a frozen mass of water. Why not just hang out in your freezer and solo a side of beef?

Following a move to Canmore—a town which is within easy distance of some of the world's most impressive collections of ice waterfalls—I became consumed by the question of why people ice climb. I also moved into a household of ice climbing enthusiasts. Many an animated, and to me, incomprehensible conversation took place about the elusive sport. Curiosity grew with every new piece of ice paraphernalia I couldn't identify. What intrigued my friends about this cold, wet and possibly very dangerous sport?

When the opportunity came to learn from my house-mate, Barb Clemes, I convinced myself to give ice climbing a try. With Barb's extensive experience and likeable personality, I at least had full confidence in my teacher. Ice tools and crampons in hand, I followed my petite dynamo of an instructor to Martha's Cafe for coffee. I could get into this sport, I thought.

The rest of the students filtered into the Cafe and soon a group of eight women was assembled. A couple had done a limited amount of ice climbing and the rest were pure novices. When Barb asked each one of us what our objectives were for the course, someone piped in, "We're too much of beginners to even have objectives." I relaxed a bit, knowing that at least I wasn't the only one who didn't have a clue about what I was doing.

Barb assured us she would go

over the basics. And basics they were. Just when I thought I'd mastered the art of walking, enter Foot Fangs. The group strapped on their assortment of crampons and our first lesson began. The pointy teeth, now a part of my feet, could cause serious damage to my body and clothing. To avoid snagging a leg or tripping, Barb showed us how to walk

safely. We may have been walking safely but I found it hard to take seriously. There I was, rope over my shoulder, walking in an exaggerated bow-legged fashion. The crampons clinked on the hard packed snow like spurs on a dusty road. There we were, eight wily strangers, cautiously approaching the climbing range. Ice Outlaws heading out to lasso ourselves a

frozen waterfall. Crampons do your duty.

I knew there were two main things I had to trust. One was my body and the other my equipment. I felt I could trust my body's strength since I'd been skiing frequently. My coordination, well, I'd keep an eye on it in case it decided to skip town. Trusting my equipment was a totally different matter. I didn't know my rental gear as intimately as I knew my body. Besides, it was hard to put faith in things that looked like they were waiting to impale me.

We practiced moving on low angle ice and snow. My vision of being an Ice Outlaw quickly changed to one of being a fragile old lady trying to cross an icy road. Trust, trust, trust, I had to chant. The crampons were doing amazing things for me as long as my body angled the teeth into the ice the right way.

Feeling more comfortable, we ventured further up to the start of the actual ice fall area. I wondered why locals called this labyrinth of ice and rock "The Junk Yards." Before me lay a vision I hadn't expected. I'd hiked up the trail to Grassi Lakes many times in the summer and had only seen a dribbling of water seep from the limestone cliffs. What I was looking at in the winter was a thick sculpture spreading 30 metres across and about 25 metres high. From baby bum smooth to wrinkled and textured, the ice falls were a study. Hues of blue and grey made the ice look inviting.

As soon as we ventured out onto the icy slope at the base of the falls, the inviting quality of the ice gave way to the reality of its potential danger. One false move and I'd be a human toboggan with spikes. I walked my exaggerated, now prostrate, walk and kept my knees bent downhill as I was told.

I felt more comfortable once

DAVE SMITH



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roped up. Barb presented us with the challenge of going up our first gentle pitch—without ice axes. Since I didn't know what the tools could do, their absence didn't bother me. Each step taught me something new about body positioning. Lean too far out and your points don't dig in; lean too far in and you feel insecure.

When I reached my first steep bulge, I took one unsteady step up and lunged for a handhold. Miraculously, I found one. The ice was thin, revealing pockets where rivulets were streaming underneath. My hand broke through one of these pockets, creating a grip on the edge of the ice. I managed to find similar holds for a few more moves. Inevitably, I climbed out of handhold country. I looked at the

smooth surface in front of me. Nothing. I looked to the side and grabbed for a thin ice

crust. It came off in my hand. I took a look up and saw my savior. A bright yellow and orange handhold. The belay rope, to which I was attached, lay dangling in front of me like a carrot. How could I refuse?

Okay, I felt a bit guilty. We were supposed to climb without an axe to learn about body positioning and to get a feel for our crampons. But I didn't want to fall. There were those old equipment blues coming over me again. The rope made a fine handhold but could it support me if I took a tumble? I wasn't about to find out.

Curiously enough, being lowered by my novice belayer, Robin, didn't bother me. Once standing beside her, at the bottom of the climb, I couldn't hold back the smile of satisfaction. I looked over at the next, more advanced, pitch that some of the other women were tackling. Karen, a young, upwardly mobile ice climber, turned my smile into a sheepish grin. Uninhibited by fear, Karen took a few steps, fell, took a few more steps, fell again, and dug

her front points back into the ice—all without breaking her stride.

I stood there contemplating the value of being an aggressive climber. Why not risk taking a fall?

"Come on you guys, I want some action shots," a camera-clad spectator shouted.

Robin's retort was, "Hey, we're beginners, don't expect a lot. You get *no* action, or *low* action."

"And a lot of reaction," I piped in.

Reaction was to come. Our next pitch was a little steeper, a lot smoother and, surprisingly, a little easier. I wasn't sure if it was because I was getting better or because we were allowed to use one ice tool. No more scavenging for handholds. I swung my way up the first section of the climb, marvelling at the added adhesion the ice axe gave me. On the

upper, more vertical, section I found my breath short, my heart pounding, and my hand aching. I

had a death grip on the handle of my Stubai. If ice tools could speak, mine would have said, "Get a grip on yourself lady, holding on harder ain't going to save you." So much for aggressive climbing.

Finally, I got the full initiation. Tools for both hands—double security.

Roped in, I looked up at the final pitch. The steepness was deceiv-

ing. I knew this from watching a few fellow climbers struggling up this climb. The first few moves were confidence-building. I climbed up with ease. Then the long crux began. I found myself moving up vertical ice. My calf muscles were cramping. Both hands were strangling the ice tools. It was here that my mind had to do the old soft shoe: "Come on Kirsten, you're almost at the top. You can do it. So your muscles hurt—no pain, no gain." (I never did like that motto.)

I swung one ice axe in and then the other. I used my arm strength to give my legs a rest. I began using less energy to dig the pick in—my weight being supported by only a few teeth anchored into the ice. A new respect was developing. I was beginning to trust my equipment. Even my body was cooperating. I sucked my hips into the ice, pointed my Foot Fangs forward, and kept my heels down. I was defying my instincts to stick my bum out, angle my feet in, and stand on my tip toes. I was doing what Barb told us to do, and feeling the benefits. But I was still surprised when I saw the end of the line—the anchor embedded in the ice.

Reaching the anchor, I took a deep breath, looked down, and realized how absorbed I'd been in my every move. This is not to say that I was comfortable with my every action. A deep friendship had not developed between my gear and I. Even in my better moments I couldn't let go of the fear that ice was dangerously slippery.

What did happen was the sport of ice climbing lost its abstract quality for me. I hadn't frozen or suffered any injury. I learned what my friends found intriguing about the sport. Its challenge, beauty and ability to be totally absorbing was now a part of my experience. Would I ice climb again? I am sure I could warm up to the idea. 

