



CLIMBERS
ASCEND
NIGHTFALL,
A 200-FOOT
WALL OF ICE
ON DEVIL
TRACK RIVER.

Minnesota ICE

The lure
of
vertical
crystal
takes
climbers
to the
edge.

I can't believe it's 70 degrees outside in early March in Minneapolis. But it's still winter somewhere, and I'm cruising the Web to find it. I'm looking for the cold, hard reality of Minnesota's crystallized rivers,

by JON KRAMER

iced-over lakes, snowed-in forests, and frozen waterfalls. Especially the frozen falls. I'm betting this season has a few more ice climbs left.

The Internet alerts me to hidden pockets where winter is still holding out. Grand Marais clings to nights in the mid-20s, and that puts it in the center of my ice-climbing radar. I recall an ice flow that forms every year along the canyon of the Devil Track River just north of town. It's in the shade all season.

I call my climbing buddies—"Let's go vertical." Hal and Paul are psyched to hit the ice.

We load the gear and hit the road at 4 a.m. I'm thankful it's still below freezing when we arrive in Grand Marais at 10. We park along the lake, where piles of blue ice have been tossed up on the rocky shore like so much broken glass. We heft our packs for the two-mile hike in.

Our plan is simple: Follow the Devil Track River up the canyon to our climbing spot. Most rivers of any size flow year-round. But by midwinter a sheet of ice forms on these rivers, making them virtual highways into the forest and convenient paths to otherwise inaccessible climbs along their vertical flanks.

Dropping down to the river from the road, we encounter an unexpected problem: The river is flowing over the top of the ice cap. The early spring thaw has caused a flood of meltwater that surges in icy waves over the original crust, sometimes 3 feet deep. Our enthusiasm is suddenly dampened, the

climbing plan thrown into turmoil with the prospect of frozen limbs and hypothermia.

I weigh the numbness of freezing feet against the rising temperatures—already in the upper 20s—and the possibility that this could be the last climb of the season. So what are a few Popsicle toes?

We start slogging through the slush. In the first 20 yards, our boots fill to the

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brim with ice water, and our feet sting from the cold. This isn't how we like to start an ice climb, but we have no choice—there's simply no other access to the ice wall. A mile later we reach the climb—an ice curtain 200 feet high and tucked into a notch in the canyon wall. It's good, it's solid, it's a beautiful route that cascades down in icy stalactites from the lip above.

Essential Load. It takes some getting used to—all the gear of ice climbing. You start with an oversized harness loaded with the essentials of up and down: belay device, ascenders, carabiners, safety loops, knife. Then you stretch two equipment slings over your chest like bandoleers. These carry all your ice screws, specters, and quick-draws.

To my plastic mountaineering boots, I've fitted 12-point crampons that bite

HAL'S GEAR: HELMET, HANDHELD ICE AXES, ICE SCREWS, ROPES, CRAMPONS ON BOOTS.





A CASE OF COLD FEET: TO REACH THE ICE WALL, A SLOG THROUGH SLUSH LEADS TO SOCK WRINGING.

into the slick surface like ice picks. Each of my hands is fitted with mean-looking tools of the trade called technical ice axes—which really are sharp steel “picks” that transform my fingers into raptor talons. Finally, I put on my helmet and a pack with food, water, and extra clothing. All told, I’ve gained 40 pounds or more since I woke up in the morning. With each step my gear clangs like a cacophony of metallic wind chimes.



White Ice. Learning to “read” ice is the cornerstone of the sport. Darker ice, whether vertical or horizontal, is usually more solid. Air bubbles create whiteness—and weakness. The more air, the whiter the ice becomes. And the whiter it is, the more you want to stay away if you’re climbing. All the talent in the world cannot make up for lack of judgment when the ice pillar or shelf you’re on splits off the wall.

I approach the ice wall. It is like translucent blue agate with a sprinkling of glitter. I feel privileged to be here in this wild place, alone with my friends in the quiet of winter, surrounded by this crystalline beauty. For a few hours we’ll test our limits, driving ourselves to the edge of our abilities, both physical and mental.

I start up. Alternating swings of the axes allow me to “set” the point of each pick into the ice and pull myself up a few inches. My legs follow in rhythm—I swing my feet, hitting the ice with the crampons and driving their 2-inch “front points” into the slippery face. I forget my freezing-cold legs for a while as I balance 200-plus pounds atop the points of the crampons and hang most of my weight on one ax while threading in an ice screw with my other hand.

Jon Kramer is a geologist in the Twin Cities who’s been climbing rock and ice since the mid-1970s. He’s been mountaineering and climbing around the world but loves Minnesota ice best.

Where to Find Ice

Nearly any cliff that drains an area above is a likely ice-climbing locale. This is especially true along rivers and lakes. Be sure to contact the landowner for permission before you climb.

Though most of the state is too flat for decent climbing, Minnesota does have world-class climbs—many of which remain unexplored. North Shore rivers carve stony canyons deep into igneous rock. Water seepage along the walls forms stalactites, pillars, and curtains of ice perfect for climbing.

The best place to learn ice climbing in the Twin Cities area is undoubtedly the old brickyards at Lilydale, a public park near downtown St. Paul. In winter instructors go there regularly to give students their first good taste of ice. The great variety of ice flows ranges from gently sloping ice pavements to overhanging ice stalactites called teeth.

Ice climbs generally form in the same place each year, and often acquire names, such as Psycho, Dare Devil, and Endurance, to indicate the nature of the climb. Others, such as Comic Book, Fiction, and Game Show, reflect a sense of humor. Still others, Bridal Veil, Crystal Curtain, Ice Palace, comment on their beauty.

If You Want to Climb

Rock and ice climbing are dangerous. Do NOT attempt to climb rock or ice without proper instruction from a qualified instructor.

Start with instruction in rock climbing to learn basic techniques and rope management. Even if you've mastered gym climbing or can fly up a real rock rated 5.14 on the climbing scale, remember that ice is another world!

To find an instructor, contact outdoor sports shops, climbing gyms, or outdoor recreation groups.

I make slow progress as I bury one screw after the other in solid, dark “water ice” and clip my rope to each one as I go. Hal, attached to the other end of the rope, belays me from below. He pays out the rope as I continue upward. If I lose my grip, the ice screws will arrest my fall—if they’re properly placed! I am confident in my abilities and the equipment I use, but the fear is always there, especially with me.

I climb to keep in check my fear of heights. At one time, my intense fear controlled my life—I was too afraid to even ride elevators. Eventually, I confronted this demon, and climbing became my therapy. Now, I climb not only because I must keep the demon at bay, but also because I enjoy it. There’s a fuzzy line between fear and thrill.

Fear of falling terrifies me more when climbing ice than climbing rock. When you fall on rock, at least your equipment isn’t going to harm you. But if you fall on ice, the sharp points of crampons, ice screws, and axes are real hazards.

Numb and Number. I get close to the end of the first pitch, which is one rope length, about 80 feet up. I scout for a place to set up a belay station. Luckily, I find a notch in the wall where I can rest while I set several anchors. This done, I belay the other two climbers as they come up and join me on the ledge.

The afternoon sun melts snow in the forest above. Small streams of water begin to rain down on us. Our hands and feet are soon soaked and turning numb. We huddle on the ledge, stamp feet, and slap hands to keep the circulation going. Despite the cold we press on. We’ve all been in much worse places and know a warm car and hot coffee await us only a few miles downstream.

I lead again from the ledge. The ice is steeper on this section. The water streaming down has an uncanny way of working itself under my collar and trickling down my back. Sometimes the ice is slightly overhanging, and I must hang from the points of my axes as I try to gain purchase with my crampons.

The ice seems stubborn, and I slowly lose my ability to function efficiently. Hampered by my freezing hands, I find each placement of a screw takes an eternity.

Halfway up the next pitch, I’m



THE ASCENT: ICE-ANCHORED AUTHOR (RIGHT) BELAYS BUDDY PAUL UP TO A BELAY STATION. THEN PAUL WILL BELAY HIM AS HE CLIMBS FARTHER UP.

running out of steam. The top is only 40 to 50 feet away. I see sunlight shimmering off the uppermost lip. I clip myself onto an ice screw, release my grip on the ice, and hang in my harness to rest my burned-out limbs.

I think about the joy that we'll all feel at the top. After a few minutes, I regain some vigor and start once more. Before long I reach my limit again. The top is so close, perhaps only 35 feet; but it's so far away.

I know I must conserve energy to get down. History is replete with stories of climbers who

I know I must CONSERVE ENERGY to get down. History is replete with stories of climbers who pushed to the top only to DIE ON THE DESCENT.

pushed to the top only to die on the descent. If there's one law in mountaineering I follow, it's this: No matter what adversities you've overcome, or heroics you've performed, or astonishing heights you've attained, nothing counts unless you come back alive.

I return to the ledge and consult with Hal and Paul. The waning daylight instills urgency in us. Temperatures will soon be dropping. In our condition, we must not be caught on this climb in darkness. The cold is catching up with us. We're all shivering as we agree to retreat. Without regrets, we back off and head down: After all, the journey, not the destination, draws us to this sport.

Brutal Slog. The slog back through the river feels especially brutal. The water level has risen: In some places it's over our knees. But we make light of it: Salvation is a warm car downriver.

By the time we get back—exhausted and chilled to the bone—we've been out nine hours; but it sure doesn't seem like that long. The adventure has infused us with more life than we had when we started.

We thaw out with hot coffee and warm conversation all the way back to the Twin Cities. When we arrive home a little after midnight, I'm too excited to sleep. Climbing takes me to the edge of existence,

where life boils down to the very next move I make, and injury, or even death, awaits if I fail to do it properly.

Eventually, I relax and fall into the deep sleep of satisfaction. 🕒



JON KRAMER

online

Jon Kramer's Favorite Web Sites

www.americanalpineclub.org
Best overall information source for climbing and mountaineering.

www.EverestNews.com
Fun news about all kinds of climbing in the Mount Everest region.

www.climbing.apollo.lv/frm_e2.htm
Good source for climbing terms and equipment.

AT LEFT, A CLIMBER "FRONT POINTS"
INTO THE ICE WITH CRAMPONS. BELOW,
A CLIMBER NEARS THE TOP.

