

It's a slippery slope...

BUT FOR AFICIONADOS OF ICE CLIMBING, THAT'S THE APPEAL. WITH INDOOR CENTRES BRINGING MOUNTAINEERING TO THE MASSES, WE GEARED UP TO TACKLE A FEARSOME PEAK IN THE HEART OF LONDON

words timothy edwards photography nick wilson



CHILL SKILLS: Argentinian guide Sherman Tortarolo clips our man to the rope, assuring him that "it's all in the wrists"



My right axe slipped, gouging out a chunk of ice from the cliff face. My stomach turned as I fell maybe an inch, maybe two, but my crampons were holding – for now. As I clung to that frozen crag above a sheer drop, I could feel hope slipping away and for the first time I accepted the possibility that this icy mountain I had set out to conquer might instead vanquish me.

Then, almost drowned out by the constant howl of the wind, I heard a voice from below: my Argentinian climbing partner. "Move your left foot up," he cried. "There's a good hold by your knee." I did as

I was told and then desperately lashed out with my axe to gain purchase on the featureless ice face. Shards of ice sliced tiny nicks in my cheeks, but it was my goal that had my full attention: the nine-metre-high summit of the Vertical Chill ice wall in London's Covent Garden.

The danger may have been in my head, but the wall of ice inside a giant freezer at Ellis Brigham, a mountaineering and outdoors retailer, is definitely real. As is my Argentinian instructor, Sherman Tortarolo. And Vertical Chill is much more than a tourist gimmick. "Experienced climbers come here to try out their new kit," Sherman explains. "In the mountains it's life or death, so a pair of mountaineers will come here to test each other out as well."



Sherman knows what he's talking about. Originally from the wilds of Patagonia, he's been on a few expeditions himself. He and some friends were the first to climb a route 5,700m up in the Peruvian Andes, an achievement that earned them the right to name it. It took them a week and a half to climb the mile-long ascent, which they called 'chapatti', after the Indian bread they were forced to eat for four days when all other food ran out. On another occasion, while walking on a steep, narrow ridge in Argentina, his friend fell off one side. If he hadn't been tied to Sherman, he would have fallen 2,000m to his death. In the event, Sherman threw himself off the other side of the ridge to arrest his friend's fall. "You don't really have a chance to drift off and admire the view," he smiles.

Satisfied that I'm in safe hands, I don the warm waterproof outer clothes, the harness and mountaineering boots. A pair of medieval-looking crampons are next, clamped onto my boots like a pair of bear

traps. Then come the ice axes and an assurance that brute strength is optional and that, actually, "it's all in the wrists". After a short tutorial I'm led through a large freezer door to face my nemesis.

Beginners like me climb by 'top-roping', where you're attached to a fixed line at all times. The rope runs from me, through a loop at the top of the climb and back down to Sherman, who is 'belaying' – keeping the rope taut as I climb in case I fall. More experienced climbers can 'lead', a method that involves drilling your own holds in the ice and attaching your rope to them as you ascend. I won't be doing that today.

I approach the wall and hack into the ice with my right axe. The left one follows and I pull myself up, digging my left and right crampons into the wall, making sure they take most of my bodyweight. It's repetitive work, but not too difficult as there are plenty of ready-made divots in the ice from previous expeditions. As I near the top, the ice is smoother and less damaged; I actually



have to take swings and kicks at the wall with my axes and crampons. As the noisy, cold wind of the freezer unit starts up I can barely hear Sherman's instructions and I have a crisis of confidence. I can't really tell if the axes are secure or not: wasn't it a loose axe-hold that sent Joe Simpson plummeting down a crag in the film *Touching the Void*? Anyway, how can the inch of metal sticking out from the front of my crampons support my entire bodyweight? I finally reach the top, but my relief doesn't last long: now I have to abseil down. Leaning back into the abyss when you have a perfectly solid grip on a ledge isn't the most natural of things to do...

NOT NATURAL, BUT POPULAR. In 1993 there were around 150,000 rock climbers in Britain; by 2003 there were well over a million. Ice climbing is a surprisingly hefty branch of the discipline with over 900,000 participants. Indeed, rock and ice climbing are pretty much inseparable. Most ice climbers are also rock climbers: what really defines ice climbing is the technique and kit you need to climb in an Alpine winter.

A new accessibility is a definite factor in climbing's popularity: Britain's mostly >

urban population no longer has to go to the countryside to take part. “Many climbers are getting their first experience of the sport in indoor climbing centres,” says Tony Ryan, information coordinator at the British Mountaineering Council. “And the quality of climbing centres has increased hugely: 20 years ago, they tended to be small; now many centres have walls 20 or even 30 metres high.”

Climbers are often typecast as adrenaline junkies with a death-wish who get high on the danger. You need to visit one of Britain’s 254 indoor climbing centres to see the real attraction. Here, bouldering (rope-free, low-level climbing) routes are called ‘problems’, and, like an exam, it really does pay to think about it before you start. Whether you’re climbing indoors or clinging with axes and crampons to a frozen waterfall in a Scottish winter, this is a thinking man’s sport. And sociable, too: in every discipline but bouldering and solo climbing (high up, without ropes), you need a partner you can trust with your life.

For an insider’s view, I seek out sports scientist, and one of Scotland’s best young professional climbers, Dave MacLeod. He tells me what I have just done is relatively easy: “You don’t have to be that strong to do an ice climb, but it’s a good way for beginners to get in to rock climbing.” I am crestfallen. But he has a point: hacking into ice with sharp tools doesn’t require elaborate technique. Out in the wilds of Scotland, the pros indulge in a greater challenge, involving both ice and bare rock. Climbers still use their axes and crampons,

but with much greater skill and technique. “There’s no room for error when you’re dry tooling in the mountains,” says Dave. “You’re hooking your axes into cracks in the rock that wouldn’t even fit your finger. Most types of climbing aren’t that serious, but if you fall in Ben Nevis it’s almost guaranteed death.”

FALLING WAS FOREMOST IN MY MIND while climbing, but Dave has made the intimate acquaintance of a far more spectacular danger. After being carried 1,000ft over a cliff by an avalanche on Ben Nevis, he suspects he knows what being in a concrete mixer would feel like. “It was crushing me; squeezing the air out of my lungs,” he recalls. He was lucky to come to rest with an arm sticking out above the snow so that he could dig himself out.

At the end of February, Dave scaled the ‘Hurting’ in Scotland’s Caimgorms, a 200ft-high route that some consider to be the hardest mixed climb in the world. He came within four feet of completing it first time, before falling. Three days later he felt conditions were right for another attempt: it was -9C, snowing, with 80mph winds. “It was hardcore climbing,” he recalls. “I had to concentrate for 90 minutes in a full-on Caimgorm blizzard.” And that combination of chess-player’s intellect and marathon-runner’s endurance is what sets climbing apart from other extreme activities. I may only have conquered the north face of Covent Garden, but I’m beginning to see the appeal. ■

Vertical Chill (www.vertical-chill.com) is at Ellis Brigham, 3-11 Southampton St, London, WC2E 7HA. Call +44 (0)20 7395 1010 to book.

BIGGER CHILLS

IT CAN GET A BIT CLAUSTROPHOBIC IN A FREEZER, AND THE VIEW IS LIMITED, TOO. HERE ARE SOME PLACES TO CATCH THE ICE CLIMBING BUG ON A GRANDER SCALE.

Ouray Ice Park, USA

Located in the tongue-twisting Uncompahgre Gorge in Colorado, this outdoor ice park is run by volunteers who ensure that climbing there is free. A network of pipes allows water to be directed down rock faces to create long flows of clear blue ice (the safest and strongest kind) – and it’s all right on the edge of town. The ‘Schoolroom’ has some good routes for beginners. www.ourayicepark.com

Ice Factor, Scotland

The National Centre for Indoor Ice Climbing in Kinlochleven boasts the biggest ice wall in the world: 18 metres. Add in hand-carved climbable icicles, a bouldering area, and a steam room for afterwards and you have a complete mountaineering experience. And if you insist on climbing outdoors in nearby Ben Nevis, that can be arranged. www.ice-factor.co.uk



Rjukan, Norway

Less than two hours’ drive from Oslo is ice climbing heaven: the huge frozen waterfalls of Rjukan. The north-facing ones are still climbable in April when Alpine routes have regressed to babbling mountain brooks. The Ice Factor runs trips suitable for beginners for £780 per person. (Details as above.) www.rjukan-turistkontor.no



BACK TO EARTH: our intrepid reporter breathes a sigh of relief having scaled the heights (well, 9m) of Vertical Chill

