



TAKE YOUR PICK ...

Conquering fear on an ice climb in Canada

ALEX CARLTON

I am wobbling on one leg in the offices of Rockaboo Mountain Adventures in the Canadian Rockies town of Jasper, pulling on waterproof pants. They're just one piece of what feels like enough protective clothing and safety equipment to get me to the North Pole on foot. In fact I'm preparing, for the first time, to go ice climbing.

Our guide, Ian, runs through the location options for the day. The names sound ominous. Maligne Canyon is one suggestion. Then there's Tangle Falls, which makes me wonder what my limbs might look like should I plummet to a messy end. The third choice is a frozen waterfall known as Edge of the World, which has an eerie finality to it. "I think we'll go for Edge of the World today," says Ian, cheerfully. I consider making a run for it but I'm too weighed down with hardware.

Ice climbing is similar to rock climbing except you're hauling yourself up a frozen waterfall using crampons and ice picks or axes. It is, Ian assures me, slightly easier than rock climbing because the tools are doing a lot of the grip work instead of your fingers. It is also — at least according to the anxious thoughts swirling around in my head — a lot trickier to compute, and feels infinitely more scary. How is it possible that frozen water, with its ability to crumble and shatter, can hold a person's weight? How can you be sure your pick has a firm grip? At least rocks are pretty much a permanent fixture. Frozen waterfalls are only as solid as that year's winter has made them.

Having committed to a solid 30 minutes of preparation, it would seem churlish to back out now so I follow Ian and the other guest on our tour, a strapping 31-year-old Canadian paramedic called Richard, to the car.

After a short hike through the pine forest, during which I demonstrate my athletic prowess by tripping repeatedly over tree roots buried in the thick snow, we arrive at Edge of the World. Whoever named it wasn't messing around. We're at the top of a towering cliff face, and the waterfall we'll be climbing vanishes below to a spot I can't even see. All around are dramatic oil-painting views of the town of Jasper, a speck in the distance, and the mountains beyond. It's equal parts heart-stoppingly beautiful and terrifying.

Ian secures a rope to a sturdy tree at the top and explains that first Richard, and then I,



Maligne Canyon, top left and far left; a Rockaboo Mountain Adventures tour at Tangle Falls, main; ice climber in Jasper National Park

IN THE KNOW

Rockaboo Mountain Adventures is based in the mountain town of Jasper in the Canadian Rockies. It offers group or private ice-climb adventures suitable for beginners between December and March.

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will abseil to a ledge 20m below before climbing back up. My heart starts racing again.

"What do you do if someone gets down ... and then they can't get back up again?" I ask Ian in a small voice. "Hypothetically."

"Oh, you'll be fine," he says before assuring me he has a technique to pull people to the top if they're really stuck. "But it never happens," he says with unwarranted certainty.

Richard and I lower ourselves over the edge of the waterfall; this part of proceedings doesn't trouble me particularly, probably because I'm disproportionately worried about the climb itself.

Ian follows. He walks us through some practice runs, showing us how the crampons, which resemble fierce bear claws, don't need to be buried nearly as far into the ice as you'd think to take your weight. It's a similar story with the ice tools; only the tiniest tip has to be inserted before you can hang your full body from them.

"Ice is much more stable than people realise," Ian explains. It feels entirely counter-intuitive but after a few practice scrambles no more than 60cm off the ground I feel marginally more comfortable, especially knowing I'll be attached to Ian by harness and he will take

my weight and lower me down if things go south.

Richard goes first and, despite being a novice like me, swings and crunches his way to the top with ease before abseiling back down to the ledge again. "How was it?" I ask nervously. "It's really hard work," he says, slightly out of breath. Like many Canadians, Richard looks like he was born in a beanie and a backpack; if he found it hard I'm likely to need a helicopter rescue.

I swing my pick into what looks like an indentation in the ice, hang some weight on to it and it slips away from the wall, showering my face with cold shards. I breathe deeply and try again. This time it seems to grip. I kick one foot into the ice wall, and then the other, and swing the pick again, crouching low into my heels after each manoeuvre to get more power. I repeat the pattern, until I'm a good 10m above our starting point. I pause to catch my breath and wonder what on earth I'm doing, plastered to the side of a frozen waterfall like a shivering starfish. There's nothing to do except keep going.

Up and up I go. Occasionally my crampons or my axe tear out of the ice and I find myself attached by only three points. In these mo-

ments I cry out, my body instinctively responding to the fact it's defying gravity in a way it's not designed to. But I keep going, working up a bit of speed — more from panic than proficiency.

About a metre from the top, a small lip of ice juts out from the side of the cliff and I realise with thudding dread that I'm going to have to haul myself over this obstacle in a way that will really hurt. My calves are aching, and the ice axes feel heavy in my hands. "I don't think I can do this," I call back down to Ian. "Yes you can," he replies mildly and I realise I don't have a lot of choice. Gritting my teeth, I swing my axe as high as I can above the lip and grunt inelegantly before hauling myself to the top on my hands and knees. "I did it," I cry into the valley below.

I'm breathless, sore and shocked, but triumphant.

As we head back to Jasper I ask Ian, who's been ice climbing for 30 years, what compels him to clamber up the sides of waterfalls, over and over again. "It's addictive," he says. I smile and nod but the guy must have rocks — or ice — in his head. It was exhilarating but it's not something I need to repeat in a hurry.

That night, as I fall into an aching, tired sleep something strange happens. I find myself replaying the ascent in my head — a crunch of a foot here, a swoosh of an axe swing there. I could go higher next time, I tell myself. I could crouch harder into my boots to give my arms more of a rest. I need to focus on technique not speed. "Can you ice climb anywhere in Australia?" I wonder idly as I drift off. Maybe Ian is on to something. Maybe ice really does get into your veins.

Alex Carlton was a guest of Destination Canada, Tourism Jasper and Rockaboo Mountain Adventures.