



Gravity rules

By Matthew Selby
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CRAWFORD NOTCH, N.H. — Jordan Karp is 40 feet in the air, clinging to a granite cliff coated with glistening blue ice, with only six sharp points of steel keeping gravity at bay. It is cold — somewhere in the teens — but he feels only the warmth of adrenaline pulsing through his veins and the throbbing of his overtaxed forearms. He can barely grip the medieval-looking ice-climbing tool as he swings the ax another two feet higher, closer to the top of the cliff. Suddenly, a slab of frozen water is dislodged and hurtles toward earth and his fellow climbers.

"Ice!" he shouts, warning those below to turn away and trust their blue plastic helmets to deflect any impact. The plate of ice hits the ground and shatters into a thousand crystal shards.

It is late January in Crawford Notch, part of the White Mountain National Forest, and Karp, 33, is

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Jordan Karp of Brookline, left, one of a group of beginners at the International Mountain Climbing School, picks his way up Cathedral Ledge in North Conway, N.H., and later makes his first vertical ascent, top right, on Frankenstein Cliff in Crawford Notch. T.K. McClintock of Cambridge, above right, Karp, and the author (behind a passing climber) head up the north end of Cathedral Ledge. The detail is an ice screw, one of a climber's bare necessities.

If you go ...

How to get there

North Conway, N.H., 135 miles north of Boston, is the largest town near the most popular ice routes in the White Mountains. Take Interstate 95 to Route 16 (Spaulding Turnpike), and follow for 80 miles.

What to do

If you're interested in learning to ice climb, or are just curious about the sport, check out the 13th Annual Mount Washington Valley Ice Festival, Feb. 9-12. For more information, visit www.ime-usa.com/ice_festival/. Or contact one of the following organizations:

Appalachian Mountain Club

Highland Center, Route 302
Bretton Woods
603-466-2727

www.outdoors.org

Offers all-inclusive programs. The ice-climbing course included two days' instruction, two nights' lodging and all meals, and cost \$549 (\$499 for members).

Eastern Mountain Sports

Main Street, North Conway
800-310-4504

www.emsclimb.com

Depending on class size, \$155-\$245 per person per day.

International Mountain Climbing School

2733 Main St., North Conway
603-356-7013

www.ime-usa.com

Depending on the day of the week and class size, \$95-\$225 per person per day.

Where to eat

Bangkok Café

2728 White Mountain Highway
603-356-5566

A fantastic Thai restaurant. Meals \$8.95-\$19.95.

Iron-willed climbers supported by a strong crystal

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learning to ice climb at a scar in the mountain called Frankenstein Cliff. Frankenstein is a granite monster offering dozens of frozen waterfalls to conquer, with names as ominous as the cliff face on which they form: Dracula, The Coffin, Widow's Walk. Karp's group, on a beginner course offered by the Appalachian Mountain Club, is climbing in a pine-scented area called Lost in the Forest, where groups of two to four climbers in Skittles-colored clothes take turns clawing up the slick slope.

Lessons began on Friday night, when Karp was introduced to the others in his clinic, his guides, and the equipment necessary for safe climbing: mountaineering boots, crampons, ice axes, helmets, and harnesses. The boots, cumbersome-looking plastic things, have double liners to keep toes warm in the frigid mountain air. The crampons have 12 sharp spikes — 10 on the bottom to offer stability while negotiating slippery surfaces, and two on the toes for climbing up vertical columns of ice. The harness is a complex assemblage of straps and buckles that, once fixed to a safety rope, keeps a climber from crashing to the ground in the case of a fall. The plastic helmet protects from falling ice, a common occurrence in this sport.

"Ice is a very strong crystal and can support a lot of weight," Bayard Russell, 28, a guide with International Mountain Climbing School, in North Conway, tells the group as he demonstrates how to create "V-thread" anchors in the ice that will support upward of 2,500 pounds of force with a single piece of nylon cord. Inconceivably, the ice is strong even in the warm temperatures of the group's first



ESSDRAS M SUAREZ/GLOBE STAFF

The reporter makes his first ascent at Frankenstein Cliff.

day of climbing. In the 40-degree rainy weather, water flowed under and over the ice, and rushed in to fill holes Russell had just bored.

Still, ice does break away as they climb, from small chips to boulder-sized chunks. But it is not only the ice that poses a danger; there are also a lot of sharp objects involved in the sport. Ice screws — hollow tubes with razor-like threads used to anchor into the ice — dangle from a climber's harness. Though the spiked crampons strapped to climbers' boots provide leverage on the ice, they can catch and break an ankle in a fall. And then there are the ice-climbing tools, axes with 18-inch-long handles and an extremely sharp, jagged pick dropping at a 45-degree angle. Yet, those who climb consider the sport reasonably safe.

"With the proper precautions, experience, and understanding of the environment, ice climbing can be a very safe sport," Russell, who has been climbing for nine years, tells the group. "I personally have never been hurt, but there is the potential for injury. After all, in climbing you are dealing with gravity."

In the 30-plus years Rick Wilcox, 58, co-owner of IMCS, has

been climbing in the White Mountains, he can recall only 11 ice-climbing deaths, most from exposure to the harsh environment.

Safe as it may be, ice climbing is most enjoyed by those who are up for a challenge. Karp's group of five, ages 33 to 51, came from across the flatlands of southern New England with diverse backgrounds but a common love of the outdoors and thirst for adventure. Karp, a native Californian who lives in Brookline and is an urban planner, joined the clinic as a gift from his wife.

Karp ties his harness into the safety rope and steps up to the base of the frozen fall. He indicates to his guide that he's ready to climb, and takes his first swing of the ax, getting a solid stick that will support his weight as he kicks his crampons into the crystalline obelisk. The first 20 feet up seem easy. Then, as he tires, Karp's swings get weaker. His grip on the ax softens and it slams sideways against the ice. Ice falls, then

Karp, his descent quickly halted by the rope. He regroupes, and wills his way to the top of the pitch before rappelling down.

"All the instruction makes perfect sense," says Karp as he passes the rope to the next climber, "but when you get up on the ice, you go primal and forget everything you just learned."

Will he climb again? Definitely. "People come from all across the country to climb ice in White Mountains," said Karp. "I'd like to live in New England, but I don't try it at least once."

Contact Matthew Selby, a freelance writer in Upton, at words@verizon.net.

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