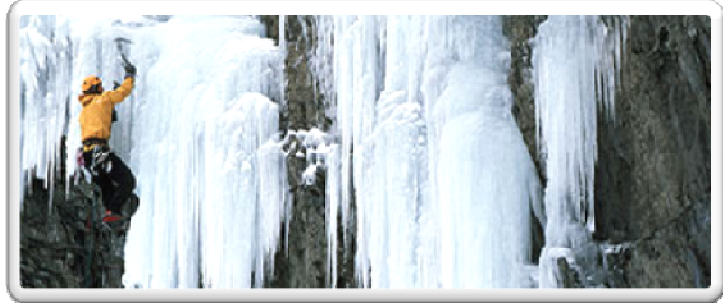


ICE CLIMBING

The roots of ice climbing are buried in the storied history of 19th century European mountaineering. Early on, ice climbing was not considered a sport in its own right. Rather, it was viewed as one of many disciplines involved in the large and noble endeavor of mountaineering.

Ice climbing began to evolve as a singular pursuit in the early 20th century when Laurent Grivel designed a pair of crampons with two protruding front points. These front points virtually eliminated the need to chop steps. This resulted in speedier ascents and the desire to attempt more challenging routes.



Modern ice axes or "ice tools" were not introduced until well into the 1960s. It's generally accepted that Yvon Chouinard, in partnership with Charlet Moser, developed the first short-shaft ice tool with an aggressive, "reverse curve" pick. Armed with lighter, shorter axes and rigid crampons climbers began exploring the frozen vertical world, and the sport of ice climbing was born.

[Where to Ice Climb](#)

The short answer is anywhere there are frozen waterfalls or steep ribbons of ice. Ice climbs include anything from thick pillars to smooth, thinly veiled rock faces. Not all ice is created equally. There is soft ice, rotten ice, serac or glacier ice, rime, hoarfrost, and *firnspiegel*. Ice that is brittle, blue, black, plastic, that's shaped like mushrooms or cauliflower, that breaks off in dinner plates, or shatters like a chandelier. Some climbing gyms in North America now even include routes with artificial indoor ice!

The popularity of ice climbing has spurred an entire ice climbing sub-culture. There are ice climbing festivals in Europe, Canada, and the United States. The finest ice exists in the coldest corners of the world. Canada boast many world class ice climbing areas in the Rockies and in Quebec.

[Route Ratings](#)

Currently in North America, ice routes are graded from WI 1 (WI stands for water ice) to WI 8 (and possibly harder). WI 3 might be a good grade for a fit beginner to top-rope. WI 4 approaches vertical, and WI 5 has extended sections of vertical ice. Harder routes are steeper and more technical, offering fewer rests and increasingly marginal options for protection.

[Gear You Need](#)

The staples of the vertical world of ice climbing include a climbing harness, rope (many ice climbers prefer to use half ropes), ice pro, locking biners, belay device, and slings. Beyond that, ice requires very different gear than rock. The two crucial

instruments are ice tools and crampons. Warm clothing and a helmet are also essential.

- **Ice Tools**

used for climbing are much shorter than traditional ice-axes. Often, they have bent or curved shafts and rubberized handles. Bolted to the head on the tool is a steep and sharp "pick". The back of the head is either a blunt hammer or sharp adze. The heads are usually "modular" meaning they can be removed, changed, or replaced.

See our article about Leashless Tools for the very latest in tool technology.

- **Crampons**

used for ice climbing are also more technical than traditional glacier travel gear. They generally have 12 to 14 points attached to a rigid or semi-rigid platform. The front points can sometimes be moved to configure the crampon for the terrain and to suit a climber's style.

- **Footwear**

can be rigid leather or plastic, double or single construction. Double mountaineering boots are warm but heavy. Leather boots have recently re-emerged as the boot of choice because they provide greater mobility and flexibility. Regardless of the type of boot, the attachment system on your crampons must match the boot design.

- **Ice screws**

are the standard pieces of protection on an ice climber's rack. These are threaded, hollow metal tubes that are wound into the ice. Many ice climbers also use shock-absorbing runners called screamers or zippers. The webbing is loosely sewn together like an accordion. If a climber should fall, the runner rips open and absorbs a considerable portion of the force, reducing the shock on the ice and on the screw.

Ice climbers may also carry a small selection of cams and stoppers that can be used to jam into pockets of bare rock. This is especially true of ice climbers that venture into mixed terrain.