

Frozen Dreams

Ice Climbing in Ouray Ice Park

by Felix Wong

Danny Shearer was pacing around with a sharp-pointed, medieval-looking tool in each hand, and Tori Winter's arms hung straight out with her fingers in tight fists. Meanwhile, Michele Gilbert was shaking her wrists like tambourines while muttering something about "screaming barfies." If one did not know better, he might have thought the three were in a rage and gearing up for a fight à la Sylvester Stallone and John Lithgow in the movie *Cliffhanger*. In fact, the three were friends and had come to this idyllic spot in Ouray Ice Park for fun, sport, and to (quite literally) chill.

"Are you cold?" I asked Tori, whose glove-covered hands seemed to rarely become unclenched. Her splayed-out arms in a puffy down jacket made her resemble Randy in *A Christmas Story*. As she grinned and replied "Yeaahh," I thought about how years ago she had proclaimed that she had absolutely no interest in ice climbing because she saw no reason to be frozen on the side of an ice-covered cliff. Yet, here we were readying for our third climb of the day, up a straight up-and-down ice wall the height of Fort Collins' First National Bank in an area of the park called The Alcove.

For Tori and I, this was actually our first ice climbing trip. Being rock climbing enthusiasts, the notion of clinging to the side of a steep wall for dear life was not foreign to us. It did, however, take a little coaxing from Michele and Danny to make the seven-hour drive from Fort Collins to this region of the San Juan Mountains in western Colorado.

Ouray is a former mining town located roughly midway between Grand Junction and Durango. Today, its main industry is tourism and it is also known as the ice climbing capital of the United States. The Ouray Ice Park opened in 1995 as the world's first ice climbing park, which expands upon a series of natural frozen waterfalls along more than a mile of the Uncompahgre Gorge. A system of water pipes and sprinklers developed and maintained by a volunteer organization is turned on during evenings to augment the natural falls with man-made ones.

There are dozens of ice walls ranging from 80 to 200 feet high. We started out on one of the shorter, slablike walls in an area called New Frontier in order for us to warm up and get reacquainted with our gear. One needs to haul in an extensive list of equipment: ice axes, mountaineering boots, crampons, harnesses, helmets, climbing ropes, carabiners, belay devices, webbing, ice screws and, of course, cold weather clothing.

Ice climbing technique is fairly straightforward but fatiguing: kick the two front points of the crampons into the wall, swing the pick of the ice axes into the ice above one's head, and ascend either by pulling oneself up or stepping with the legs. Ideally, to conserve energy one would securely insert the pick into the ice with just one whack, but I found

that as I tired at the top of a climb and my arms started flailing, I needed as many as five to six swings to positively engage an axe with the wall.

The rope is literally a lifeline (controlled by another person called the belayer) whose sole purpose is to catch the climber in the event of a fall. Good thing, because in The Alcove both Danny and I took a fall midway up various climbs and would have otherwise plunged to our deaths in the murky, chilly Uncompahgre River dozens of meters below.

Another danger is falling ice, so helmets are mandatory for climbing in the park. The climbers in particular cause a lot of the falling ice. On a couple climbs with especially brittle ice, I yelled out "Ice, ice, ice!" whenever I inadvertently dislodged a large chunk with my ice axe, lest I'd knock out an unaware bystander below me.

While ice climbing is certainly less safe than, say, bowling, the rewards are quite different than rolling a perfectly executed strike on a parquet floor. The views, for example, are soul-stirring. Ouray is sometimes dubbed "the Switzerland of America" and it is easy to see why -- it is surrounded by towering mountains on three and a half sides and covered with rock, snow, and pine. The narrowness of the Uncompahgre Gorge heightens the drama by drawing attention to the sheer depth and steepness of the ice walls. The walls themselves change hues from white to bluish to gray as the sun rolls around the mountains, sometimes highlighting cauliflower-like textures of ice formations or making frozen regions sparkle like clusters of freshly cleaned crystals. Interspersed between frozen slabs smoother than felt were arrays of icicles dangling like chandeliers, literally a snapshot of water droppings frozen in time, so peaceful and still and seemingly indifferent to the vagaries of life.

Another reward (consequence?) of ice climbing is the adrenaline rush one receives as he is partway up a giant wall. As he looks around and below to admire the views, he also notices clumps of ice falling away and taking an eternity to hit the surface below -- much like Wile E. Coyote falling off a cliff in the Warner Bros. cartoons.

My most memorable climb was after being lowered so far into the gorge in The Alcove area that nearly the entire length of our 50-meter rope was hanging down the wall, meaning that I had over 150 feet to ascend.

Feeling inspired and determined, I started out quickly. Perhaps too quickly, because ten feet higher I took a fall that dropped me half the distance I had just scaled. Carrying on, I kicked the crampons into the ice more deliberately and started swinging the axes with greater force and precision. Midway up the wall, the ice became slightly steeper than vertical and I resorted to doing several pull-ups in succession. Higher up, I quickly decided that pull-ups were a bad idea as my upper arm muscles were now so inflamed that to dig an ice axe in securely, I needed to whack the ice five or six times (with a few heavy and desperate gasps of air in between). Finally, feeling like a superhero but also expiring the last joules of energy in my body, I climbed over the top, where my belayer was sitting.

"My butt is numb," informed Michele who had been belaying with her bottom perched on snow. I guess I took a while to ascend. Immediately thereafter I found out what a "screaming barfie" is firsthand. As blood rushed back into my hands that had been elevated for the last 20 minutes, I experienced an intense burning sensation in my fingers that subsided after a few minutes of dancing around and yelping "ooh, eee, ow."

Our final reward came after the end of the day when we headed back into town and retreated into the Ouray Hot Springs. It is a large pool filled with natural hot spring water, crystal clear and devoid of sulfur smell. Here we each confessed we actually really enjoyed ice climbing, and it was also here that I finally saw Tori's hands become unclenched and Michele's bottom regained all feeling.

I think Tori was wrong -- there were plenty of good reasons to be frozen on the side of a frozen cliff after all.

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Photo captions:

ouray_ice_climbing.JPG: Climbers on the ice walls within the Uncompahgre Gorge.

ouray_ice_climbing.JPG-1: Michele Gilbert in The Alcove with the San Juan Mountains in the background.

ouray_ice_climbing.JPG-2: Tori Winters prepares to rapel off a cliff in Ouray Ice Park as Michele Gilbert looks on.

ouray_ice_climbing.JPG-3: Danny Shearer climbs an ice wall in the New Frontier area of Ouray Ice Park.