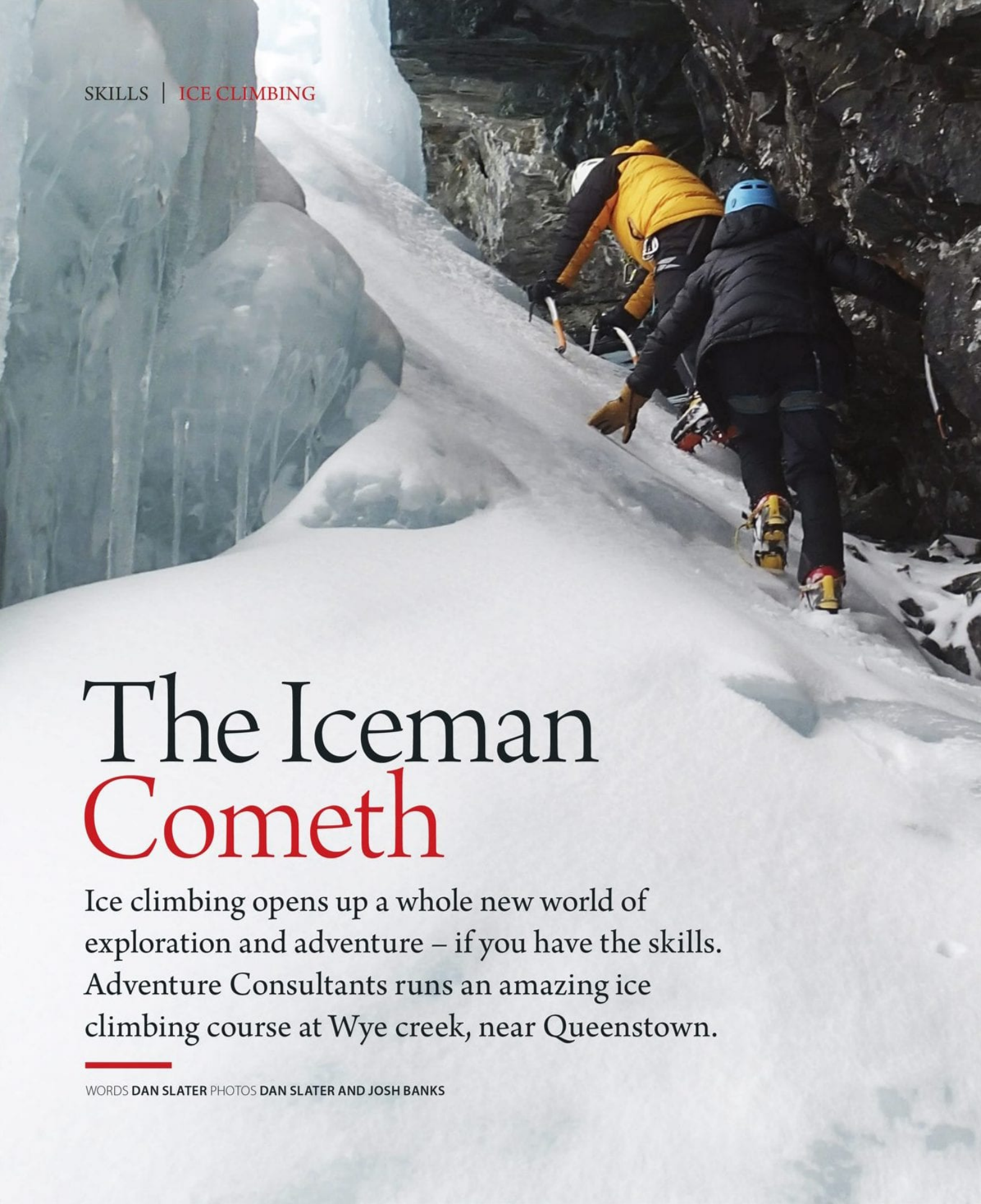


SKILLS | ICE CLIMBING



The Iceman Cometh

Ice climbing opens up a whole new world of exploration and adventure – if you have the skills. Adventure Consultants runs an amazing ice climbing course at Wye creek, near Queenstown.

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A tricky climb, and this is just
the base of the real climb.



I stand alone at the foot of the cliff, hefting an axe in each hand. Staring up at the imposing wall of ice I feel something primal stir within me. This is a battle — me against the ice — and I'm armed with two hooked weapons and spikes on my feet. This isn't like gliding up a rock face leaving only chalk marks — this is violence, something out of *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome!* I raise one axe and swing it in with a solid 'thwack!' Game on.

Of course, it had taken me a while to get to this stage. In fact this was day three of Adventure Consultants' five-day ice climbing course at Wye Creek near Queenstown — a snow-blanketed wonderland of rock buttresses draped with icicles of all shapes and sizes. It was my first foray into water ice and I was hoping to go from bumbling novice to ice champion in one working week.

STARTING OFF

My companions for the week were Kate and Josh, both Australians, and our guide Paul, who is possibly the most experienced ice climbing guide in the country, despite being a Londoner. We met at the helicopter hangar on a Monday when Q'town could have been mistaken for Bangladesh in mid-monsoon. I naively hoped that rain in town would translate to bountiful snow and perfect conditions at Wye Creek — the last thing we wanted was water in our waterfalls — but with our transport into the mountains inevitably delayed Paul sat us down for a review of the forthcoming week's weather; the traditional 'management of expectations' ceremony. It didn't bode well: the prediction was for intermittent wind and snow.

My desire to climb proper ice began more than 10 years ago in Bolivia. Backpacking around South America I signed on to climb Huayna Potosi, a 6088m peak just outside La Paz. It was only a two-day affair but the summit involved ascending a 50° snow slope using crampons and an ice axe. I even got to use the hitherto pointless ice-axe loop on my backpack, making me feel like a proper mountaineer. I was smitten, but life intervened and it took me until last year to attend a Mountain Skills Course on the Tasman Glacier, where I had so much fun climbing out of a crevasse that my craving for ice had been re-ignited.

The rain finally stopped long enough for our lift to take us safely in, all of about a five-minute ride. As the chopper chopped away, Paul pointed out the theatre of operations, known as the Iron Curtain; an uneven wall of rocks, tumbled snow and frozen cascades a few hundred metres away. Our accommodation was a couple of semi-permanent, wooden-floored canvas tents. Oh, and we had a bucket serving as a toilet, which was reached via a 25m wade through thigh-deep snow; this was supposed to be behind a boulder but the southerly was so vicious that we had to pull it out of the wind and anybody answering the call of nature did so in full view of the tents.

The whole shebang is flown in each season in by Adventure Consultants; the company has been running ice-climbing courses here for 10 years. A number of factors combine to make Wye Creek the best such venue in NZ: facing south and southeast with an elevation of around 1400m, the Iron Curtain is just high enough that Central Otago's weather system

Below. Paul shows us how it's done on a WI4 route.



Placing the axes was an art and Paul taught us the key principles straight away

ensures sub-zero temperatures both day and night when the sky is clear. Then, when the ground water stored in the mountains oozes out of fault lines in the rock it snap freezes, building up over time into different ice features.

Ordinarily we would get some climbing in on day one but our late arrival only left time to snowshoe up towards the face and back, putting in a boot track. That way, unless it snowed all night, the walk in the morning would be quicker.

It snowed all night, but we were still up early and keen to be off. We trudged up to the Curtain, about a half-hour walk, peeling off layers as we went. Surprisingly, not all of the routes were in good condition; despite the miserable weather, some earlier warm spells and thawing events had turned much of the easy-angled terrain slushy or exposed it to unstable overhanging snow and icicles. Paul was hopeful though that the predicted cold front would open up more options in the next few days.

METHOD ACTING

It was when we sat down to attach our crampons at the foot of the first exercise that the group's shortcomings became apparent: I got my left and right mixed up and Josh put his on back to front. It was clearly time for some lessons in technique. "Ice climbing is a bit like walking up a flight of stairs," demonstrated Paul, "Your feet are really important when it comes to load bearing but your ice axes are more like a banister – they provide you with balance. You don't drag yourself upstairs by the banister, do you? Well, unless you're really drunk and your legs are giving way." Clearly, he knew his audience.

Placing the axes (or tools) was an art and Paul taught us the key principles straight away – aim for the divots in the ice rather than the bulges, which are far more likely to fracture when struck. Sometimes there would be natural ice features behind which we could hook our tools so we didn't have to swing them aggressively all the time. Our feet were equally crucial – we were to watch carefully as we placed them and keep our soles horizontal to prevent the front points of our crampons slipping out.

These four points formed a moving triangle position: one axe defined the apex while the widely-spaced feet formed the base, then the second axe was placed above the first, slightly offset, and the feet brought up again to reform the triangle. "It's easy to put too much focus into what you're doing with your axe and not enough into your feet," explained Paul. This basic sequence of moves was the secret to good ice climbing.

GETTING VERTICAL

Our first attempt, up some snow-dusted ice slabs overlying moderately steep rock, looked thoroughly scary but Paul only graded it a WI2. [Water Ice grades run from WI1 to WI7, roughly from 'Ho-hum' to 'F**k!'] Josh and I belayed each



Above. The author, dwarfed by a giant pillar of ice.

Right. A bombproof belay anchor utilising two ice screws and a V-thread.



TOP TIP #1
Make sure you aim for the divots in the ice, rather than the bulges, when placing your ice axe.

TOP TIP #2
Keep your heels down when kicking your crampons into the ice to ensure a more secure attachment to the ice.

other off a top rope, displaying technique that may politely be termed 'crude'. In fact I was hacking like a 60-a-day smoker and Josh was gouging like a disgruntled taxi driver, but we both got to the top. "Wow, did I just climb this?" I thought, surveying the route as I was lowered back down. I was genuinely impressed with myself.

In an effort to curb our enthusiasm and teach us better footwork, Paul made us climb the same route again, this time using only one axe. Unsurprisingly this was much more difficult and we often found our feet slipping, crampons scraping down the ice. "Kick in!" roared Paul helpfully from below, "Heel down!" We practised until our legs turned to jelly and our arms ached, although sadly this didn't take long. Kate was let down by basic arm strength but she struggled gamely on, and Josh learned that gaining a toehold is significantly harder when one's crampons have fallen off. This embarrassment signalled the end of a good day.

THE CONFIDENCE GAME

Day 3 started badly: due to high winds and snow flurries we were forced to sit frustratingly in the kitchen tent until about noon, playing Scrabble. When we eventually got out Kate opted to be Base Camp Manager; she hadn't much enjoyed the climbing the previous day and needed time to recover. She was also worried that her nervousness on the ice would hold Josh and I back, and while we had no desire for her to miss out we knew that we would advance quicker without her.

"My goal is for a beginner to come away feeling like they understand how to be a competent second," Paul later explained. "That means following a lead climber, managing their personal safety plus that of the leader, attaching themselves to an anchor and dismantling anchor stations, and managing their ice axes and crampons in a way that enables them to climb from grade WI1 to WI3." However, the driving snow and avalanche hazards had buried more of the normal teaching venues and Paul was forced to lead us to a site where the learning curve (and the ice) would be steeper than usual. We headed beneath an overhang and halted at a gorgeous, freestanding column of water ice, beautifully decorated with mushrooms, jellyfish, rivulets and fangs. This latter icicle formation is also called a pencil but "Check it out, Bru! I just climbed this gnarly pencil!" doesn't have quite the same ring.

We practised a few swings (from the elbow, ending with a flick of the wrist) and crampon placements and, once we'd both hit the metaphorical ceiling, Paul decided we were ready for some serious action – a 30m, grade WI4 route right up the outside of the pillar and up the face above it. Paul went first to install a top rope, clearly enjoying himself. "Oh, yes!" he said, sounding more like he was receiving a massage than a face full of ice splinters, "Oh, what a lovely placement." Josh went next and made good headway until an over-ambitious move left him bouncing at the end of the rope, both his axes still buried in the face in a perfect offset position.

Then it was my turn; the Thunderdome was calling. I hefted my axes and stepped into the breach just as one of the day's many snowstorms blew up the valley. Perfect – I needed an extra element to really push my performance. Ignoring the wind, I concentrated on my tool placements, valiantly ascend-



ing metre by metre in the teeth of the blizzard. "I'm doing it," I was thinking, "I'm bloody doing it!" And I was – I hooked, I swung, I 'kicked in' and before I knew it I was at the top bolt, grinning widely.

We climbed for as long as we could, and it's lucky that we did because it was to be our last chance – the next day was a complete write-off. High winds prevented us from getting out at all and instead we played more Scrabble, while Paul tried to cheer us up by lamenting that this was the worst weather of any course he'd ever run.

At least the walk out on the final day – usually a five-hour snowshoe down the valley to Lake Wakatipu – promised to be fun. And it was, up to the point where Kate fell into the creek and it turned into an epic adventure. I may not have got quite as much climbing in as I'd hoped but this had still been a valuable learning experience. I'd learned that any two letters could be claimed to be a word in Scrabble, how to balance on a toilet bucket in a snowstorm and, most importantly of all, never to trust New Zealand's weather.

Above. A random cascade of tumbling icicles provides a stunning backdrop to the snowshoe trip out of the valley.

More info: Adventure Consultants offer 5-day ice climbing courses from July to mid-August, based out of Wye Creek. See www.adventureconsultants.com