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SEARCH

California Ramblings: Ice Climbing the Eastern Sierra

By John Poiriroo
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Democrat columnist

It's been cold lately. That's what January days are supposed to be — cold and wintry. Most of us bear the cold and wait for spring to return, while a few hearty ones among us don't want the icy chill to ever end. On any given morning at Nicely's restaurant in Lee Vining, you'll find clusters of them huddled around steaming cups of coffee and cooling plates of bacon and eggs while discussing their day's plans to climb a wall of ice almost half again bigger than the tallest high rise in Sacramento.

California is often depicted as a temperate place of palm tree-lined boulevards, surfers and sunglasses-clad starlets in convertibles. In the Eastern Sierra at this time of year, it's hard to imagine any place like that. To the west, the towering Sierra Nevada block the sun, shading Lee Vining Canyon and June Lake with a blue curtain. North-facing canyons become frozen chasms from December to March. Waterfalls glaze the cliffs with ice. A 600-foot-tall granite face in Lee Vining Canyon is now covered with a milky-blue watery glass, attracting a special class of adventurers to climb frozen Bard Harrington Wall, Main Wall and Chouinard Falls.

These walls are reached after a half-hour's hike or snowshoe walk from the Tioga Road (SR 120 E). Some of the cliff's named routes reflect their difficulty: Spiral Staircase, Plumb Line, Tight Rope, April Fools and White Lightning, while others make gallows humor of it: Casual Route, Larry, Moe and Curly or Colonel Clink.

Neil Satterfield, head of the local Sierra Mountain Guides, says the canyon attracts two types of ice climbers: rock climbers who move to ice in winter in order to keep practicing their sport and alpinists who seek training on snow and ice before attempting to ascend peaks the likes of Mount Shasta or Denali.

Satterfield, whose guides provide instruction and lead trips throughout the Sierra, says participation in ice climbing has doubled in the past five years and it's not just from avid rock climbers, "A fair number of people who have never climbed before will come out and try ice climbing. Both men and women try it, including a fair number of women teams who partner to support one another as they learn. That's also happening among families."

Ice climbing classes include exercises that progressively demonstrate proper placement of feet and ice axe, transfer of weight, route finding and the use of protection. The technique involves digging the spiked tips of steel crampons, attached to the climber's boots, into the ice and stepping up while balancing using an ice axe. The climber is protected, should he slip, by a climbing rope that is belayed by another climber and bound to the ice by stainless steel ice screws. Ice climbing's advantage is that the climber can place a foot wherever he wants, whereas rock climbers must follow cracks and handholds on the rock. "At some point, every climber imagines himself as being stuck on the inside of a freezer," Satterfield jests.

The trickiest thing about learning to climb ice is learning to read the ice which varies from morning to afternoon. Satterfield explains, "Once you've learned basic skills, the real leap is knowing how to read the ice. Rock doesn't change, but ice is in a constant state of flux. It's a medium that's here today and gone tomorrow." Ice climbing is so demanding of attention that it "wipes away whatever else is happening in your life," says Satterfield, "There's little time for distraction and that's one thing that appeals to climbers. The simple act of placing your ice axe or foot is all involving and separates you from whatever else is happening in your world."

Despite its image as a high risk sport, climbing ranks 30th among sports injuries (as measured by American Sports Data Inc.), 7.5 times safer than cheerleading and nearly 16 times safer than tackle football. Nevertheless, it's a sport whose technical aspects demand training. Sierra Mountain Guides employs only guides who have been certified or trained by the American Mountain Guides Association.

Because ice climbing requires understanding how to read the ice, hiring a guide accelerates the learning curve," says Satterfield. "Lessons allow the novice climber to try modern ice gear before purchasing it and hearing from experts on how to assess the quality and stability of the ice. They also can take you to 'hidden' climbs that most folks miss."

Ice climbing classes occur in Lee Vining Canyon on weekends from late December to mid-March. A basic, two-day "Ice Climbing 101" course is \$305. The next level, "Ice Climbing 201" is \$350 and a more advanced mixed course (rock and ice) is offered to experienced climbers. Custom climbs, guided trips to North Peaks Couloir, Dana Couloir and the Palisades, as well as extended courses and seminars are also offered.

The routes near June Lake are ideal for learning "the ins and outs of ice climbing. It's often sunnier and warmer there," says Satterfield, "and the shorter, easier climbs make it an ideal place to learn the ropes or polish skills. Lee Vining, on the other hand, is known worldwide and has the finest multi-pitch winter waterfall ice climbing in all of California," he exclaims.

World-class ice climbing in California!? Seems hard to imagine, doesn't it? Well, just cross the Sierra to the east side and those images of sunny California beaches will get an icy edge to them.

More information is found at www.sierramnguides.com or by calling 1-760-648-1122.

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