Extreme ice: Will Gadd climbing Spray On at the awesome Helmcken Falls, British Columbia.

PHOTO: CHRISTIAN PONDELLA.

TOP 10

EXTREME ICICLES

DEFY NATURE BY CLIMBING UP EPHEMERAL FROZEN CASCADES, AS WE BRING YOU THE WORLD'S TOP TEN ICEFALLS.

From starting out in Scotland to pushing the limits in the upside-down world of Canadian spray ice; from skinny American testpieces to thick Norwegian bastions, here are ten icicles you'll fall for. So sharpen your crampons and take your bravery pills, it's time to head out into the cold. Have an ice day.

1 Grey Mare's Tail, Scotland

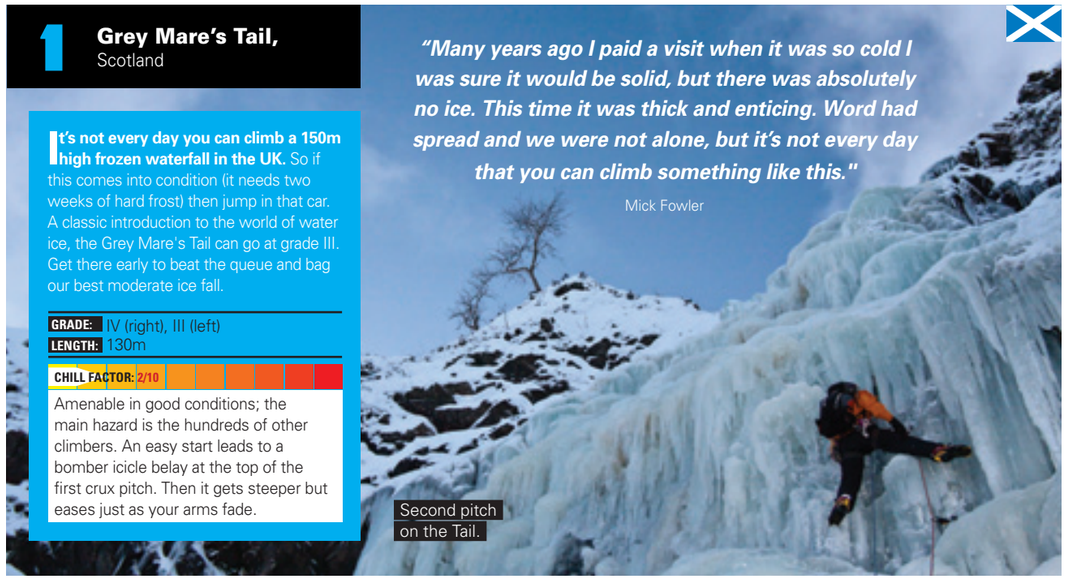


PHOTO: ANDY MAIN.

"Many years ago I paid a visit when it was so cold I was sure it would be solid, but there was absolutely no ice. This time it was thick and enticing. Word had spread and we were not alone, but it's not every day that you can climb something like this."

Mick Fowler

Second pitch on the Tail.

It's not every day you can climb a 150m high frozen waterfall in the UK. So if this comes into condition (it needs two weeks of hard frost) then jump in that car. A classic introduction to the world of water ice, the Grey Mare's Tail can go at grade III. Get there early to beat the queue and bag our best moderate ice fall.

GRADE: IV (right), III (left)
LENGTH: 130m

CHILL FACTOR: 2/10

Amenable in good conditions; the main hazard is the hundreds of other climbers. An easy start leads to a bomber icicle belay at the top of the first crux pitch. Then it gets steeper but eases just as your arms fade.



PHOTO: RAY WOOD.

Stu McAleese, pitch one.

2 Central Icefall Direct, Craig y Rhaeadr, Wales

For years, it looked like global warming had nailed the coffin of Welsh ice climbing shut. But the recent Siberian blasts have seen a resurrection, and there's one route that's coveted above all others: Central Icefall Direct on Craig y Rhaeadr. Why? Partly because of its entry in Cold Climbs, with inspiring shots of Mick Fowler and Stevie Haston, but mainly because it's the closest we've got to a world-class ice fall. Previously hardly climbed since the 1990s, the stories of epics passed into legend: tales of climbers struggling up the middle pitch and attempting the top pillar, only for it to fall down with them on it. Will it be 'in' this winter? Will you be on for it?

GRADE: VI, 6 **LENGTH:** 100m

X FACTOR 5/10

A treasured tick. The route links two impressive ice pillars up the center of a 100m wall. The first pitch is steep (WI5), the next pitch is WI6. The crux is a perilous pillar.



PHOTO: ALASTAIR LEE.

3 Kaldakinn Iceland

CHILL FACTOR: 5/10

Extremely remote. Conditions reliable in January and February, so few hours of daylight. Severe Icelandic weather. Expensive.

GRADE: Various. Neil Gresham's new route, Mr Freeze, is WI 6 **LENGTH:** 50m

Inspired by rumors of ice climbing on Icelandic sea cliffs, Neil Gresham, Ian Parnell, Ramon Marin and Sandy Ogilvie set out to investigate in 2008. They were blown away by what they found: perfect bluey-green icefalls dribbling down dark rocky cliffs, plunging straight into a foaming sea. It turned out that the cliffs of Kaldakinn, in northern Iceland, are an ice climbing paradise. If the area wasn't so far away from Reykjavík then this would surely be the most popular ice on the island. But it's not, leaving it quiet for those after a rather unique experience.

"Surely one of the world's most inspiring and elusive ice climbing destinations? There are few other places where you can experience the thrill of climbing steep ice above the crashing ocean. This place seems to be part of some freakish climatic phenomenon, and a day's climbing at Kaldakinn will remain etched in your mind forever." Neil Gresham



PHOTO: KENNAN HARVEY.

4 The Fang, Vail, Colorado

"Never to be underestimated. We made the mistake of choosing a day when this world-class ice pillar was in an evil chandeliery condition. The cauliflowers and mushrooms just kept coming, and reliable protection never appeared."

Neil Gresham

Sue Nott climbing The Fang.

Think iconic American ice climb; think The Fang. If you've only even seem one image of Colorado ice, it's probably of this: an awe-inspiring ice incisor, forming naturally as the centerpiece to a rock amphitheatre. This mega-classic used to form irregularly but now it's given some sneaky help from a dangling rope to aid the ice accumulation. Depending on conditions it can vary from pencil thin to a fat pillar. The bottom, however, is always the crux: forming an amalgamation of hard-to-protect 'cauliflower petals'.

GRADE: WI5+ **LENGTH:** 30m

CHILL FACTOR 5/10

At WI5 it might be within reach of many but don't underestimate its steepness. Extensive ice cauliflowers and mushrooms can prevent reliable pro.



PHOTO: TOM BRIGGS.

5 Freissinieres, Ecrins France

The civilised pleasures of French ice have been tempting Brits over for years, and the Ecrins National Park leads the way in icy delights. La Grave and L'Argentiere la Bessee are well known, but locals think the best ice is found at nearby Freissinieres – with over 100 pure ice, mixed and dry tooling lines, of all grades. The routes extend up the valley sides and the big daddy line is Geronimo – the longest route in Freissinieres. This is a real Euro-classic, following a series of walls and freestanding drips. The first three pitches are the most demanding, after which the route makes a long, exposed rightward traverse to a Canadian-style ice sheet.

GRADE: WI5 **LENGTH:** 550m

CHILL FACTOR: 6/10

A very long and demanding pitch. But coffee and croissants await below.



6 Promenade, Willoughby, Vermont

An East Coast classic. The Promenade is the centerpiece of the Last Gentleman Amphitheatre at Lake Willoughby. If the Lake is famous for having some of the steepest ice in the northeastern US, the Promenade is famous for some of the steepest ice in Lake Willoughby. Its middle and top pillars just go up and up. And up. The first ascent was made over two days in 1977, and the leader on the middle pitch slumped over his axes, exhausted at the top of the pitch, and then fell 100 foot onto a single screw from its top.

Rumour has it that he just looked up to his belayer and said, with perfect composure: "You want to lead this pitch?"

GRADE: WI5+ **LENGTH:** 121m

CHILL FACTOR 7/10

Very steep and sustained. The crux (WI5+) on pitch 2/3 (depending on where you belay) consists of a hanging curtain of hollow, chandeliered ice.

7 Hydnefossen, Hemesedal, Norway

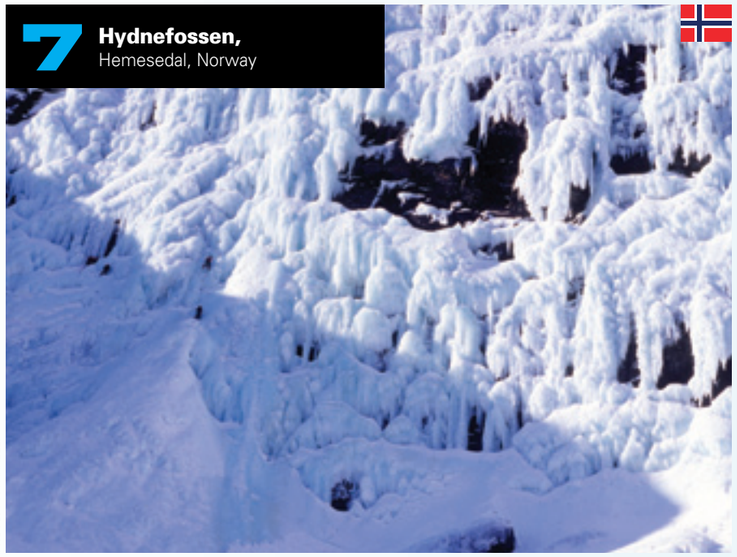


PHOTO: IAN PARNELL.

Leave the masses top-roping in Rjukan and head to the remote region of Hemsefal. Here the routes have a bigger feel to them, and none more so than Hydnefossen, plunging down the side of the 1,300m Veslehorn. First climbed in 1979, this magnificent five-pitch route winds its way up some freakish ice architecture. Most of the climbing is steep on this well-respected Norwegian tick, and it's also known for its challenging conditions.

GRADE: Grade WI5-6 depending on the choice of line. The center line is a benchmark WI5.
LENGTH: 170m

CHILL FACTOR 7/10

A five-pitch hard tick for the grade. Challenging conditions. Victory beers very expensive.

"Hemesedal didn't disappoint. The highlight was Hydnefossen, meandering through a vertical maze of giant mushrooms and cauliflowers. We hooked our axes around giant gargoyles and mantleshelved onto dragons' heads." Neil Gresham



PHOTO: XXXXXXXXXX

8 Breitwangflue, Kandersteg, Switzerland

The Swiss ice at Kandersteg is famous, but it's the waterfalls of nearby Breitwangflue that really excite the cognoscenti. "There is an icefall at Kandersteg, deep within Switzerland, that could even be in Canada..." is how Italian ice climber Anna Torretta described her visit. The falls are almost certainly the most challenging in Switzerland and the most desired route here is Crack Baby. First climbed by Xavier Bongard and Michael Gruber in 1993 (an awesome achievement before the development of modern tools) this is surely a contender for Europe's best ice route. It rarely forms but it's worth waiting for – if you fancy a crack.

"An awesome route that represented a real jump in standards and commitment." Kenton Cool

GRADE: WI6 **LENGTH:** 340m

CHILL FACTOR 8/10

Long, committing and very hard. Spare a thought for the first ascentionists.

9 Trophy Wall, Banff, Canada



PHOTO: IAN PARNELL

Even the world's strongest ice climbers covet a tick from Trophy Wall near Banff. These routes are some of the most watched ice lines in Canada. If any of them form, people fly in from all over the world to savour the dizzying exposure. The Terminator (WI7) was the first line to be climbed in 1985. It's since been downgraded to WI6+, but the few that have climbed it have said it's the hardest piece of ice they've ever touched. Well, until Sea of Vapors took over. Originally graded WI7+ R, this redefined what was possible: extremely thin ice and overhanging ice sections with no protection except the belays. These days, the Sea of Vapors often forms fatter, but it still remains a very proud tick.

GRADE: Terminator: WI6, Sea of Vapors: WI6
LENGTH: 165m

X FACTOR 9/10

When thin, Sea of Vapors is one of the hardest ice routes anywhere (WI7+ R); when fatter, it weighs in at WI5+/6. Wild exposure, but if you climb WI7 you should be OK with that!

10 Helmcken Falls, Canada

"The most insane ice climbing area I've ever seen," said US ice climber Will Gadd. Helmcken Falls – in Wells Gray Provincial Park, British Columbia – is the fourth tallest waterfall in Canada. Water tumbles over a volcanic cliff before roaring into the massive cave at its base. Impressive in summer, it becomes a mental ice experience in winter, when water spray freezes into thousands of jagged icicles on the underside of the cave. This is spray ice, and it's off the end of any scale.

Helmcken Falls was first climbed by Will Gadd and Brit Tim Emmett after they discovered some photos online. Their original route, Spray On, was 30m long and tentatively graded WI10. Gadd said: "It's a whole hell of a lot harder than anything I've ever climbed on ice. WI10 is the lowest grade I can give it with a straight face; many people who can drytool M10 will find the ice climbing a lot harder I think. It's real, honest, cuts-on-your face ice climbing. You have to pull up, lock off and work for every placement, just like on normal ice." Except it's not normal ice: it's 45-degrees overhanging.

GRADE: WI10 **LENGTH:** 141m

X FACTOR 12/10

Off the chart. Spray On is as steep as a limestone sport climbing cave, but is 100% ice climbing. Better do some pull ups.

"It's just the most exciting, dynamic, difficult and all-around engaging ice climbing on the planet. Find spray ice was like being on a diet of salt and then discovering Italian food." Will Gadd.



PHOTO: CHRISTIAN PONDELLA.

Number 10. The third and final photo of Will Gadd on Spray On in this mag. We make no apologies - just look at it!

Words: Katy Dartford.
Thanks to: Will Gadd, Kenton Cool, Neil Gresham, Jerry Gore (www.alpbase.com),

Want more?
Don't miss top ten scrambles in the next issue

