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mountain life

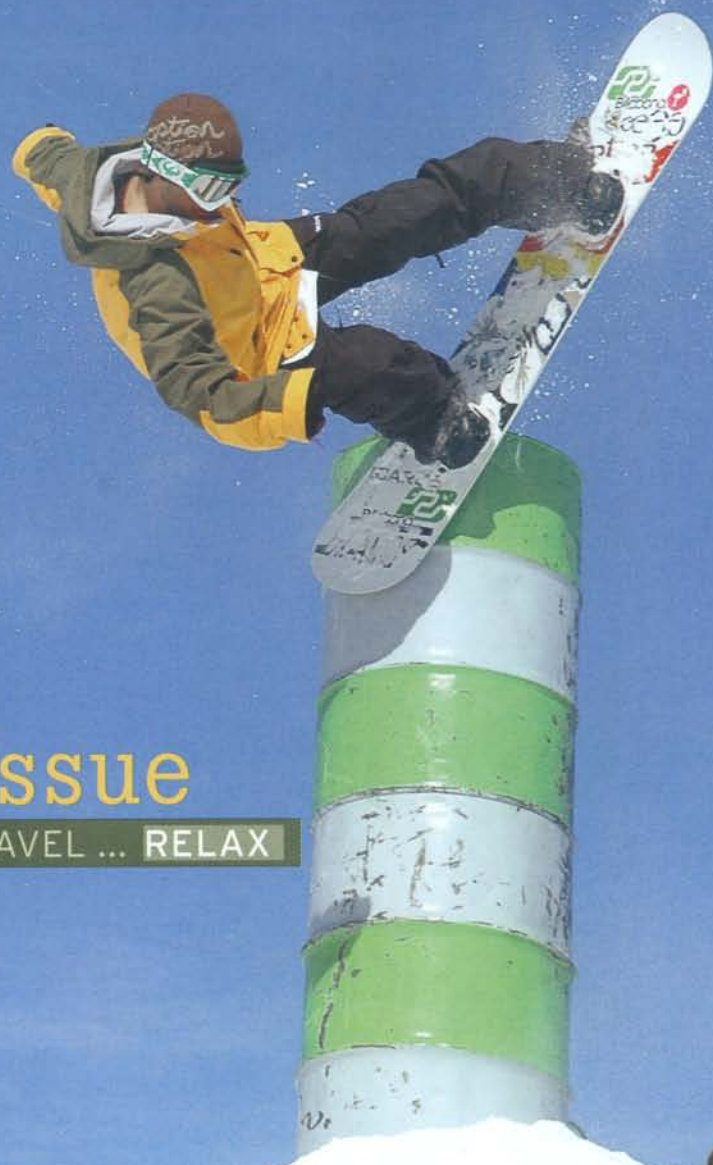
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The **All Mountain** Issue

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The Fellowship of Firm Ice

ICE CLIMBING AT TIFFANY FALLS

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A SHORT DRAGON'S FLIGHT WEST of the man-made architectural marvels of McMaster University, and high above the fires of Mordor, er, Hamilton, where the fires of industry rage toward the heavens and the great ring was forged, holy waters flow through a mostly-frozen waterfall. I had traveled along the Escarpment (along the Spine of the Dragon, as some might call it) from Collingwood to Dundas on a very cold February morning to embrace my fears by climbing the ice at Tiffany Falls Conservation Area.

From the parking area, a kilometre's hike through hardwood forest revealed a semi-circular wonderland of ice. Walls of ice. Pillars of ice. Chutes and funnels of ice. Small ice caves. Enormous silvery icicles interconnected like the teeth of a giant, long trapped inside the earth. It was a festival of ice. The somewhat intimidating aura of bigness within the valley was enhanced at various locations by huge pillars of rock that widened as they rose, many capped by promontories that hung precariously over the valley. I felt the wonder and vulnerability of an ancient traveler; I felt exposed, ambushable.

I was greeted by Jean-Claude Van Damme, who shook my hand with the Kung Fu grip. Actually, it was Frederick, Van Damme's doppelganger, and owner of One Axe Pursuits. Disarmed by Frederick's charm and empowered by his confidence and experience, I was certain we would – as a group – do the happy dance off the edge of any precipice, roped or not, as long as he said it was OK.



In addition to Frederick and yours truly, the five-man climbing crew included Miles, an experienced climber from BC, and Mike and Paul – quiet, stable guys from Ontario, both new to climbing. After listening to their interaction for a few minutes, my first question was directed at Miles: “Has anyone ever told you you have a Jim Carrey thing happening?” He laughed and prepared to climb, exuding all-world personality. Obviously the day included a fair amount of life imitating art. Mike and Paul were both serious, industrious and focused. Mike is a volunteer firefighter. Paul exhibited a quiet intensity that said, “I’m here to change my life and I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer.” Frederick kept everything light all day, his blackish humour reminiscent of that observed in the military, or in medical fields, where danger and the proximity of death thicken skin.

Frederick had arrived early and set “top ropes,” which are tied to something solid, like an abandoned shopping cart, at the top of the waterfall. Actually, I believe Frederick used a large tree or two, which, I thought, took some of the fun out of it. In “top rope” climbing one person stands on the ground and “belay” whoever is climbing. One end of the rope is fed through a device called a grigri, which is connected to the ground-person’s climbing harness. The other end is tied to the climber’s harness. As the climber moves up the ice, his advance assisted by ice axes and crampons – which are toothy metal slippers strapped to one’s boots – the rope slackens.

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WALLS OF ICE. PILLARS OF ICE. CHUTES AND FUNNELS OF ICE. SMALL ICE CAVES. ENORMOUS SILVERY ICICLES INTERCONNECTED LIKE THE TEETH OF A GIANT, LONG TRAPPED INSIDE THE EARTH. IT WAS A FESTIVAL OF ICE.

The belayer must maintain significant tension on the rope. If and when the climber falls, the distance of the fall will be minimized by a tight rope. Chatty belayers are not popular. People – like yours truly – who distract belayers through socialization, are not popular. Mike fell from the ice at the exact moment that Paul's focus had been compromised by my incessant babble. Fortunately, Mike fell only a short distance, but it was great enough to produce a spider-bouncing-on-the-end-of-a-web effect. Mike emitted a Sasquatch-like mating sound – or perhaps it was only a manly grunt – and blasted the ground crew with laser beams of concern from bulging eyes. Fortunately, he was bleeding only moderately from a face cut, which, it turned out, had resulted from an axe blow into exploding ice. I backed slowly away from the belay station, a lesson learned. NEVER LET GO OF THE ROPE!

The ice climbers on TV make it look so easy. You kick in a crampon, swing your axe into the ice, and up you go. The problem is, the people on TV are the best climbers in the world. To the climbing neophyte it becomes immediately apparent that one must choose firm ice carefully, and use a plethora of rarely used – perhaps never used – muscles to sink either tool into the ice. It takes some practice before one can sink the axe or crampon soundly on the first attempt. Fatigue sometimes shuts the climber down before the route is “sent,” a result of all those extra thrusts. There is also the “Gumby Factor.” Gumby was this green, rubbery animated dude seen on Saturday morning television, P.D. (That stands for Pre-Digital.) During ice climbing, when you slip a foot or axe and suffer a bit of a fall, two or three points of contact usually remain sound, but the body's weight and momentum force the climber out of balance. This produces a few moments of screaming panic, forcing the body to twist and stretch into radical (Gumby-ish) positions, as one tries to re-sink a foot or axe and re-gain some level of control. It's heart-pounding action.

As I caught my breath following a tough climb – and a few Gumby moments – I listened to Miles' and Frederick's funky climbing language. They were discussing overcoming the crux. They were stoked about the karma of the route. Their beta enabled

them to send the gnarly pitch. I had no idea what baseball and the Greek alphabet had to do with ice climbing. Although I listened intently, I could only nod goofily, and wipe away my dufus drool before it froze.

Two calm-looking climbers arrived mid-morning and embraced the benefits and risks associated with traditional or “trad” climbing. They placed ice screws every eight to ten feet as they ascended. Their rope protection was fed through the screws that were fastened into the ice, a manner of protection that presents a much higher danger factor compared with top-roping. Their quest for purity and genuineness inspired admiration. Their confidence that screws might hold inspired skepticism. Feelings of envy and pity battled within my half-frozen consciousness as I watched them gently place the axe onto ledges of ice, demonstrating a non-destructive contact with the frozen waterfall. They appeared to flow up the ice, fully engaged, naturally connected.

We spent much of the day taking turns climbing the plethora of available routes on the frozen waterfalls, overcoming fears. My greatest fear involved jamming the ice axe into my eye on the backswing. My second greatest fear involved smashing face-first into the ice – most of which is hard like concrete – during a fall. The scariest moment, however, was provided not by one of our group, or by another climber; but by a misguided dad who thought it would be great to take his (approximately five- and seven-year-old) kids, a boy and a girl, on a family hike around the top of the frozen ring of waterfalls. In spite of cheerful warnings from our group, and from the trad climbers, this guy literally coerced his kids up toward the rim of the valley. I was high on a route when I heard a scream, then some yelling. I looked over to see the boy, on his belly, head first, zippety-doo-dah-ing down a chute of ice at high speed. Mike, always on the ball (volunteer firefighter and all) was there in a flash, and sort of caught/tackled the boy, likely preventing serious injury. The event reminded me of the hard-luck boys in that old movie *A Christmas Story*. I could hear the kid, as an adult, narrating: “And my dad thought he was Adventure Guy, Reinhold Messner's brother. He took us ice climbing with no gear. I did a thousand miles an hour down a frozen trail, no guff!”

Guys like the dad cause the removal of freedoms. If the boy had been seriously hurt, surely it would have been the fault of “those crazy climbers.” “We should ban that sport,” people would write to their local newspapers.

Tiffany Falls is one of a ridiculously limited quantity of ice climbing venues in south and central Ontario. Opportunities are limited by private ownership. I felt very lucky to have climbed there. I feared its development into a semi-circular coffee shop drive-thru. A warmth of fellowship pervaded our jolly group on the way out of the valley. The guys fought for the right to carry more gear and told stories of climbing and adventure. Frederick told a story about his ascent of Mount Logan, the highest peak in Canada, and the largest mountain in the world, by volume. He inspired us all in many ways. It was a day well experienced and well embraced, in the noble pursuit of firm ice. 