

TRAINING DAYS

Chasing waterfalls

Katy Dartford enrolls on an ice climbing course with Jagged Globe and discovers a whole new world of barn-dooring, chicken wings and 'cascatiti'...

WORDS AND PICTURES KATY DARTFORD

Blackened toenails, hot aches, cold, hungry, and scared... still, "the best way to burn calories is being cold and scared," says our ever-positive instructor, Andy Owen.

I'm in Cogne, Italy for a long weekend of ice climbing and have been suffering with the hot aches as the blood rushes back into my freezing fingers. The ripples of pain came as I finally managed to let go of the axes (as best I could while leashed to them), shake out, and warm my fingers up. I made a note to bring heat pads to put inside my gloves next time, but what could I do to prevent the blackened toenails that would emerge over the weekend after smashing my crampons into the ice, unaware of the pain as my feet were so numb?

This doesn't make ice climbing sound like much fun, admittedly, and even to a keen rock climber and skier it seemed at first like pure hassle, involving a lot of suffering. But weren't both skiing and climbing pretty traumatic too when I first tried them, when I didn't know how to handle all those ropes and protection devices and my ski boots strangled my feet? So maybe ice climbing deserved a chance too. I just needed to be more prepared for what was ahead, so that the fun of smashing into the ice and getting away from all the hordes of skiers wouldn't be ruined by little things like freezing cold extremities.

JOINING UP

With the snow this winter being not the best – either a little thin, or bulletproof with zero visibility – I thought it a good opportunity to sign up for an ice climbing long weekend with Jagged Globe. As the course is based in Chamonix, it means you can choose between routes in the world-famous alpine resort itself or head over to Italy, depending on conditions. The warmer weather this season meant we headed to Italy's ice climbing paradise of Cogne, where we stayed overnight at the Hotel La Barme in nearby Valnontey. This justifiably famous and popular ice climbing area was having the best conditions in Europe. Situated high in the Gran Paradiso Nature Reserve, the cool air from its glaciers flows into the many valleys to form ice. The area is well developed and the cascades are easy to access and have good belays for a quick climb and descent.

As we walked through snowy, tree-lined

paths into the Lillaz Valley, Andy explained that "the Italian for ice climbing is actually 'ice fallers' or 'cascatiti'". Ominous, I thought. He pointed out the different ice formations on the cascades we passed; the chandelier type is known as Jellyfish or Medusa by the Italians. After about a 30-minute gentle uphill walk-in, we reached the third pitch of the Cascade Lillaz, which has several routes on it at Water Ice grade 3 – perfect for beginners to practise on. At the base of the climb were plenty of gnarly-looking Italian, French and English men (where were the ladies I wondered?). As we put on our crampons, harnesses and helmets, Andy told us that this classic icefall was made short work of a few years ago by a 76-year-old Sir Chris Bonington and Mick Fowler. He then charged up the WI3 route in what seemed like a matter of seconds to set up a top rope, before going through some techniques for climbing ice. "Don't make too many arm moves," he said, "and don't chicken-wing as it will just put your arms into a more tiring position. Don't point your toes either as this will make your calves burn – try to keep your heel down, climbing with your body in a banana shape, keeping your hips close to the ice, reach high with your axes but not at full stretch. Your arms use least energy when straight or locked." He said we should be forming an A-shape with our feet apart and arms in, avoiding going into an L or X frame, as this could lead to 'barn-dooring' (being imbalanced so you swing out, like a door).

With a two-to-one instructor ratio (that's two

clients to one instructor), we were climbing straight away, with important knowledge such as safety on ice, avalanche awareness, placing ice protection, organisation belays, rope techniques, abseiling and steep ice techniques woven into the discussion as we climbed.

We weren't leading yet but Andy explained that to stop ice shattering we should avoid putting ice screws in too close together and to use special extenders called 'screamers'. These are slings sewn up with stitches that are designed to rip under load so that if you fall, the impact is gradual rather than sudden, absorbing energy directly because of the stitch ripping effect, but also allowing the rope to absorb more energy from the fall by increasing how long it takes to fall (similar to how a via ferrata set works). Andy said that out of all the types of leading, leading on ice is the most serious and committing, because if you fall you will end up hurting yourself!

I top-roped some lines, which felt pretty hard compared to rock climbing – the burn seemed quite different, with an unrepentant pump on the forearms and thumbs as I was over-gripping the axes. I also found that as a beginner being leashed to the axes made it hard to shake out properly and recover. Andy suggested to try and rest on my leashes, but I found overall the benefits of being able to do this were offset by the fuff when taking out protection and being unable to shake out properly. "To leash or not to leash?" says Andy, "that is the question." Andy says that unlike rock climbing, ice should be easier as you can put your hands and feet anywhere if you chip away enough, although this itself is hard work.

PLAYING HOOKY

We smashed our way up a few more routes, with me pinging off the steeper stuff, just not quite trusting the axes to take my weight, even though the ice was 'hooky' and 'plasticky'-looking. We then headed down to the start of the cascade to climb two 50m WI4 lines. There were two hard, steeper sections where the ice changed from smooth and transparent to funnels and then to flaky pieces which shattered easily. I certainly felt more 'way out there' when it became increasingly vertical, having to rely on my arms to pull me through rather than my feet, and was a bit disconcerted to hear water running behind the section of ice >

COURSE INFO

Details on the training course

Name of course:

Alpine Ice Long Weekend

Cost: £850, including three night's half-board accommodation

Location: Based in Chamonix

Company: Jagged Globe

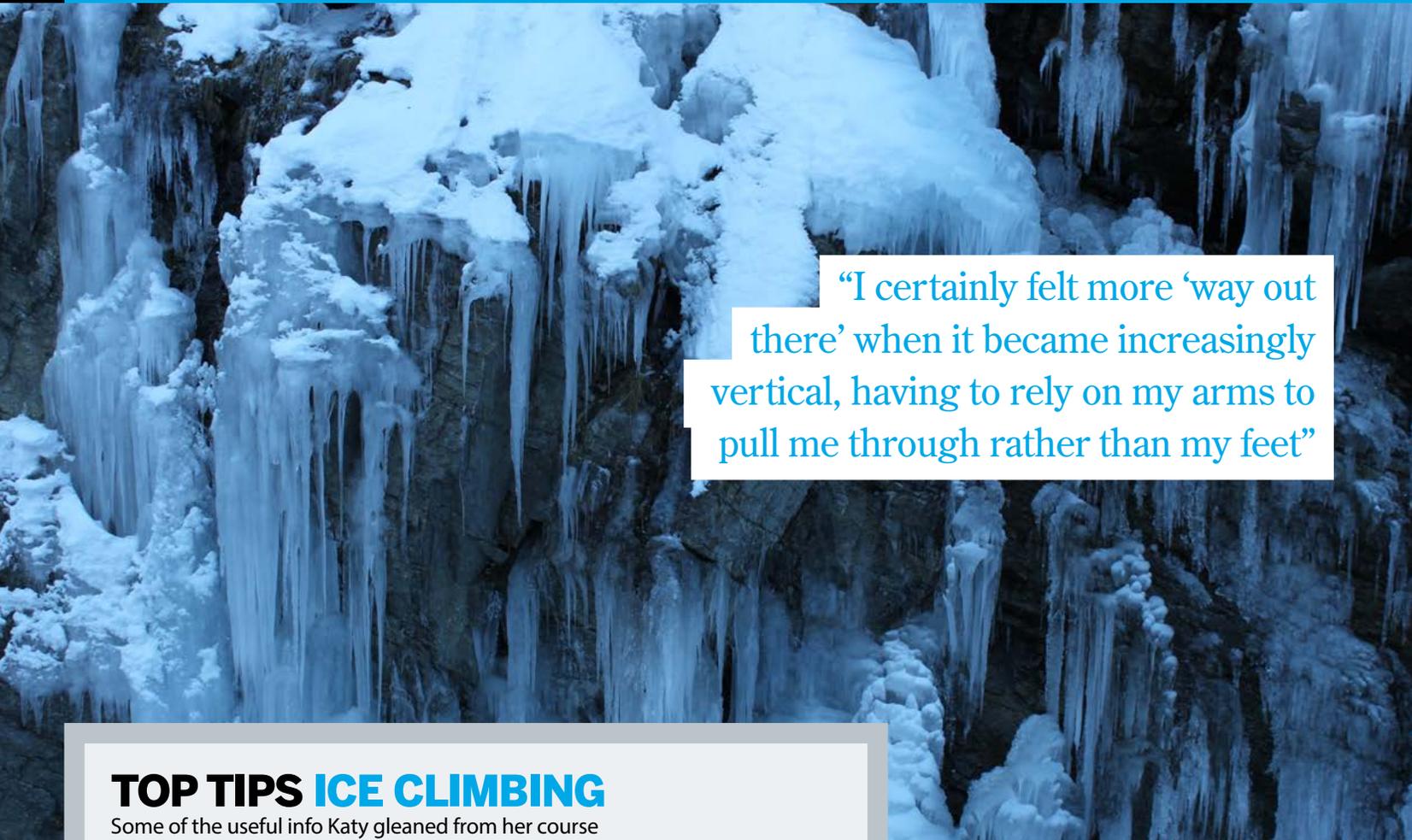
More info: Tel: +44 (0) 114 276

3322 Email: climb@jagged-globe.co.uk

Web: www.jagged-globe.co.uk

Getting to grips with the steeper sections of pitch one of Cascade Lillaz





“I certainly felt more ‘way out there’ when it became increasingly vertical, having to rely on my arms to pull me through rather than my feet”

TOP TIPS ICE CLIMBING

Some of the useful info Katy gleaned from her course

1 The best time to go ice climbing in the Alps is from mid December to late February – at other times there is usually too much sun.

2 A follow on from alpine ice is Scottish ice. It's not so good for coaching as continental ice which is general in better condition for which to practise leading and technique on, but the technical level of Scottish ice is lower and is more of a 'mountaineering' experience.

3 Take heat pads to put inside your gloves to prevent the hot aches.

4 Use goggles or glasses to protect your eyes from shards of ice.

5 The best guidebooks for the area are volumes 1 and 2 of 'Cascades autour du Mont Blanc' by Francois Damilano and Godefroy Perroux, published by JM Editions.

6 Another book worth considering is 'Alpine Ice: The 600 best ice falls in the Alps'. All the popular areas are covered; Chamonix and La Grave in France, the Aosta Valley in Italy and Kandersteg in Switzerland, plus a whole

host of lesser-known venues in Austria and Slovenia.

7 For beginners looking to practise in the Chamonix Valley, head to the Crémérie Ice falls in Argentiere (1350m). The ice falls here are easily angled and are popular with beginners and Guides bringing their clients here. About a 20min walk from the Crémérie above the Grands Montets cable car station, it is a popular sector for ice climbing introduction.

8 Another good area is the Col du Montets. On the top of the col, you can see the icefalls on the right of the road when coming from Chamonix. It is just a 10 min walk from the car and is partly in the sun most of the day. Here there are single-pitch routes which are ideal for learning to lead by putting screws in as you abseil down, then lead up.

9 At WI3, the Cascade de Lillaz is considered the best route of its grade in the valley, but there are many harder variations if you want a challenge and it is well suited to learning to lead or coaching technique.

I was climbing on.

Andy explained that although the given grade may be a WI4, the changing nature of the ice over the course of the day, and the amount of people who've been on it leaving nice hooks and axe placements, may mean the route is actually easier to climb than a WI3. The first pitch of the cascade is like this, with stairs to the top because it's been chopped up by numerous axes.

COFFEE BREAK

After two routes I was knackered and had enough of feeling cold and then incredibly hot from thrashing the ice. It was time to depart for some gloopy Italian hot chocolate, (resembling chocolate custard) in a quirky little café, full of ice climbing kitsch and 'cascatiti' discussing the day's triumphs and tribulations in a crescendo of Italian. Steam was rising up the windows as the very welcome heat from the wood-burning stove caused water to evaporate off their clothing. Over coffee, Andy explained the different types of ice to us; "Generally grades go up to WI6 or 7, but you can get WI11 if you consider Helmcken Falls, Tim Emmet and Will Gadd's 'spray ice' cave in Canada. "Water ice is dense," says Andy, "In Scotland you get rhime where the snow falls into the wind and is feathery. A lot of mixed ice routes are like this; the routes on Ben Nevis are soaked with rain, so whilst the grades are 3 or 4, they are always thin and feel



Katy struggling to keep her heels down on Gomorrah

avalanche. There is nothing to hold the snow and also today is warmer which will weaken the bonds in the snow and, with the wind too, an avalanche is much more likely. Ice climbing is more like mountaineering," says Andy, "you need to consider the conditions more and what's above you.... the routes don't change a lot from year to year, but they are affected by rain in autumn or it being very cold or no freeze and the sun making it hollow."

SODOMA AND GOMORRAH

That night we headed back to Chamonix, to return the next day to Ollomont in Aosta, about 1 hour 15 minute drive from Chamonix. Quite a contrast to the previous day in Cogne, it is set beneath Mont Vela and Grand Combin, and is far removed from the better known areas in the Aosta region. As a result it was very quiet and tranquil, with the climbs reached by a long, snowy climb up through a forest. There are just two routes here; Gomorrah that we were heading for and, to the right, the grade WI5 Sodoma. It was very windy still and the only other people I could see were two climbers battling with Sodoma. Gomorrah consisted of three 50m pitches of WI3 +, but the route felt quite a bit harder than the previous day's climb. It was more 'flow ice' – clear, bulbous, solid and hard to get the axe and crampon points in, and splintered when we did. It had also not been trafficked and snow had been melting on it, covering any footholds that had been carved in. There was also a lot of spindrift falling on me and my toes hurt as I smashed into the ice – that was until they went numb and I couldn't feel anything anymore.

The first pitch felt steep but the second was a simple snow field with an awkward belay, leading to the third pitch which was quite steep again. "Try to keep your heel down", said my well-meaning climbing partner as I complained my calves hurt and my feet popped a few times. "I know what to do," I cry, "it's just doing it!" Then something just kicked in, and I blasted through the top vertical sections, realising it was going to be all on my arms and just getting on with it. I felt more relaxed and trusting the axes more with my weight – I just tugged through it. I felt my body 'bending like a banana' to tackle the steeper section and eventually pulled up to a grinning Andy, calmly belaying off a tree trunk. I hooked a tree root and pulled up to safety – quite relieved, but finally feeling a little surer of myself.

My first taste of ice climbing had been tough, but by the end of the weekend I had finally started to get to grips with it. Will I be going again? Of course! In my quest to be an all-round mountaineer, ice climbing is another essential skill needed in the armoury, and with more practice I'm sure I can become a competent 'glisserateri'. ■ T&M

ESSENTIAL GEAR FOR ICE

Some of the key gear you'll need for ice climbing

- **Boots** - Boots need to be rigid for ice climbing. Traditionally, plastic boots have been the best solution, providing better ankle support, and they are also easier to dry out each day. There are now boots made specifically for ice climbing which are more lightweight, such as the Scarpa Phantom Guide pictured below. **1**
- **Crampons** - For icefalls they need to be sharp! Crampons such as the Grivel G14 or G22 (pictured below **2**) or Petzl Dart are ideal and will also work well in Scotland. More specialised, fully-rigid ice climbing crampons such as the Grivel Rambo, Charlet Moser M10 and Black Diamond Switchblade give without doubt the best performance on pure ice.
- **Ice Tools** - You will need two technical ice tools, such as DMM's Apex axes (pictured below **4**). Make sure the blades are sharp. These days, few people climb steep ice using leashes but if you do prefer leashes, make sure they are ones specifically designed for steep ice. An alternative is to get some axe lanyards (or 'spring leashes') that attach to your harness, and the likes of Grivel and DMM make suitable models.
- **Harness** - Preferably a fully-adjustable alpine harness rather than a sport climbing harness. e.g. DMM Super Couloir, or Black Diamond Alpine Bod harness.
- **Helmet** - It's worth considering getting a helmet that has a visor. Grivel's popular Salamander, for example, has an optional visor for about £15.
- **Gaiters** - Standard alpine gaiters are essential if there is a lot of snow around.
- **Hardware** - Belay device such as the Black Diamond ATC-XP, Wild Country VC Pro II are suitable as they provide more grip on icy ropes than a standard device.
- **Prussik loop**
- **Daisy chain** - Or one long 120cm sling, is useful for belays.
- **Ice threader** - such as the Grivel Candela, for removing ice from ice screws and useful for belays.
- **Ice screw holder** - A means of carrying ice screws on your harness (e.g. Black Diamond Ice Clipper, or two large karabiners).
- **Clothing** is very important as temperatures are normally between 0°C and -15°C in France and Italy. Outer shell: A fully windproof and waterproof breathable jacket and salopettes/trousers. The jacket must allow you freedom of movement and must have a good hood that will go over your climbing helmet. Under the shell a standard layering system, including base layers and fleece. An insulated layer, down or synthetic, which can be carried and worn on belays over the top of your shell layer.
- **Rucksack**, a medium-sized alpine climbing pack of 30 - 42 litres to carry your gear and still be small enough to take on a climb. Gear loops are handy.
- **Headtorch** - In case of an early start.
- **Ski goggles/sun glasses**, an essential defence against spindrift and shards of ice.
- **Hat or balaclava** - that fits under your helmet.
- **Gloves** - Specialist ice climbing gloves such as the Outdoor Research Warrant gloves pictured below **3**.
- **Sunscreen & lip salve**.
- **Hand warmers/heat pads** if you suffer from cold hands e.g. Heat Factory.



Waiting to start the 3rd pitch of E Tutto Relativo

the snow fields in between). Dumping our packs at the base, we raced to the start as there were a few other climbers approaching.

The first 10m pitch looked impressive but wasn't too hard due to the amount of traffic making it 'hooky'. I was feeling nervous as it was the first pitch of the day and consequently was moving rather cautiously. The 70 degree pitch was a little wet, but as a consequence this made it easier for axe and front point placements to bite into the ice. The following snow field relaxed me a little, but it then got steep again and I was getting shards of ice in the eye from the climber above me, making me feel a little stressed. As I moved cautiously up the more vertical



Katy hangs on as the hot aches begin on the third pitch of E Tutto Relativo

scary, but aren't that steep so not many ice screws are needed. Then there is neve-or snow ice which is warmed by the sun, refrozen, or rain is added to it. In Scotland you also have turf ice, which freezes very well....but don't use ice screws on it!"

MULTI-PITCH

We spent the night in Cogne, where I was ready for bed as early as 9pm – a good thing as we were planning to get up early – along with most of the other residents – to catch the best conditions as the day was forecast to be warmer, but much windier. In the morning, we had a quite steep walk up to a multi-pitch route called E Tutto Relativo, a three-pitch, WI4 (five pitches if you include



Trying to avoid shards of ice knocked off by the climber above

section, I felt stabbing pain in my fingers, and frantically tried to hang my axe into the ice so I could let go of them, and shake my hands out to get some heat back. I eventually recovered and pulled over the top and crossed another snow field to reach the end of the climb. We could have continued on another section but it was getting late and warming up, so Andy didn't want to risk it.

Skis would have been handy on the descent back to our packs, as I sunk into the thick powder. As we left the valley we looked back at the route and discussed how you should pick a climb for the day. "Think about conditions and what is above it. The route next to ours has a lot of loose snow above it, on rocky slabs that would create an