



Spire and ice: Bozeman women reach new heights in the winter backcountry

by Anika Hanisch

It was when she was hiking the Pacific Crest Trail with her husband that Heather Squires grew captivated with the possibility of learning how to ice climb. “Seeing the (snow-capped) volcanoes on the Pacific Crest inspired me to go upward as well as through,” said Squires whose mountaineering journey began with backpacking trips.

“I like to be outside and get around by ways other than car,” she explained. When she saw a flyer for a weekend ice-climbing clinic in the Bozeman area, she signed up. “I was just going for that one day... and then went for all three. And then I just kept going.”

That was only a little over a year ago, but she was rapidly taken with the sport and has since climbed both ice and rock at other locations in North America, South America and in the French Alps. Surprisingly, Squires describes herself as someone who had a horrendous fear of heights. “I’m doing stuff now that I wouldn’t have a year and a half ago,” she said. “It’s so intense and focused, you tend to forget about the fear.”

Mountaineering guide Amy Bullard shared that the chance to overcome a fear of heights is a common motivation to try ice. “They find out they can do something they didn’t know they could do, and that transfers to the rest of life,” said Bullard who has taught many women to ice-climb and has herself ice-climbed for over twenty years.

It’s common for women to participate in a clinic or hire a guide for a day just as a confidence-building activity. Once they experience it though, that one-time lesson often grows into a greater commitment to try it again. “They gain so much self-reliance knowing they can take care of themselves in such conditions,” said Bullard.

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Neva Steward, who began climbing about three years ago when she moved to Bozeman, was from Santa Cruz originally. A surfer in the past, she moved to the mountains and was initially into skiing. A friend invited her to try ice climbing, and it quickly became her ideal winter sport. “I love the aesthetics of it, and it’s always a full day adventure,” she said. “There’s so much more involved than just climbing technique. It’s survival technique too—taking care of your toes, keeping warm.”

Far from scaring her off, the challenge of overcoming the cold during a particularly windy climb, only added to Steward’s love of the sport. “If I can do that, I can handle zero degrees with no wind.”

Ultimately, when comparing rock and ice, Steward is impressed by the unique sights and sounds of climbing in the winter. “Ice climbing is just a million times more beautiful; you can see the water trickling behind the ice. Even if you go to the same waterfall every day, it’s different,” she said.

“One of the neat things about ice-climbing is that the climbs form up differently each year depending on moisture levels and the weather,” explained Meg Hall, owner of Spire Climbing Center in Bozeman. The fact that the routes are on frozen waterfalls results in constantly changing technical challenges, as well as a visually stunning climbing surface.

The mental challenge and amazing views are now open to more women as the opportunities to learn the sport have grown, and so has the list of women-friendly gear. “Generally women have a harder time staying warm,” Hall said. It’s vital for women climbers to have a solid clothing and gear system that helps them prevent frostbite.

“Also, until very recently, most ice climbing equipment has been designed for men,” Hall added. She emphasized that climbing with lighter equipment can make a very big difference for female climbers.

Steward admitted that it has been a little frustrating to find that perfect equipment, often needing to special order certain items. Both Squires and Hardy shared that attending an ice-climbing clinic or hiring a guide for a day can be a good way to not only sample the sport but to rent certain gear before committing to buying it.

While it’s true that most of the available gear is designed with the male physique in mind, the climbing world is quickly discovering that women bring incredible strengths to the sport. “They outsmart the icicle,” Bullard said of women ice climbers. “They use it to their advantage rather than beating on it or using brute force... they’re more efficient.”

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