

COLD COMFORT

One of the world's best winter mountaineering climbing routes is just an overnight journey from anywhere in the UK. MF puts on its crampons ➤

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'As recently as a few decades ago this route would take two days or more'

ICE CLIMBING



I wake at 7am on my sleeper-train bunk, in a different country from the one in which I fell asleep. I got on a train in London 12 hours ago, worrying about the usual things – jobs, clients, bills, family – and now I'm in Fort William, at the base of Ben Nevis, about to take on what many climbers believe to be the best mountaineering route in the UK.

Scotland is ice climbing's secret playground. Mainland Europe may have bigger peaks and better-known routes, but they're far apart and each is an expedition in its own right. In Fort William, I meet a Swiss couple who left the Alps for the variety on offer around the UK's highest peak – there are vertical cracks, waterfalls of ice, tough overhangs, long classic ridge climbs and everything in between, just a short hike from the village. You don't get this kind of accessibility anywhere else in the world.

TOWER HOUR

I'm here for just one route: Tower Ridge on the north face of Ben Nevis, the closest thing the UK has to an Alpine climb, featuring 600m of vertical ascent over 1km of rock and ice. It's basically a huge chunk of granite featuring traverses, ice climbing, powder and some of the most 'exposed' – in other words 'terrifying' – terrain in Britain.

The first winter ascent of Tower Ridge was made in 1894 by climbing pioneer Norman Collie, who compared it to the Matterhorn's infamous Italian Ridge. As recently as a few decades ago, climbers would take two days or more to do the whole thing, using hobnail boots, hemp ropes and whatever way of bolting them into the rock they could jury-rig themselves. Now it's a day's trip, thanks to better gear and technological advances in 'protection' – hand-placed gear and ice screws that can comfortably hold up a Volkswagen ➤



MF's Glen is steered up Ben Nevis by guide Paddy Cave

MIND THE GAPS

Tower Ridge is one of the UK's finest mountaineering routes. Here's how it breaks down



hatchback. And in the winter, when there's plenty of ice, it's basically doable for anyone with a guide and a decent level of physical fitness. I've done some rock climbing before, but the first time I've worn crampons or swung an ice axe is the morning I step off the train. Thankfully, I'm in the capable hands of Paddy Cave, expert guide at mountaineering company Mountain Circles.

Since I know roughly how to use a rope, the first order of business is ice-axe arrest, the most fundamental way of stopping yourself from falling. Normally you'd have a few hours of this, but I get a literal crash course, practising sliding down a gentle slope in every possible configuration, the most frightening being upside-down and head first. You should end up with the axe thrust into the ice and supporting your weight – the idea is that by doing it enough times it will become instinctive.

START UP

The walk to the base of the route takes the best part of an hour – my legs are burning and my chest is heaving by the time we're ready to start the

climb. Later, I'll find out the descent – a hike down the other side of the mountain – is even worse. Running can be useful for building the endurance and cardio fitness needed for mountaineering, although road cycling and cross-training are more effective for the leg strength required.

Ice climbing at its most basic is simple enough: you kick the points on your feet into the ice, swing your axes and repeat. Conditions here are near-perfect – the snow has been thawing and refreezing throughout the winter, forming firm, compact snow that holds an axe well and isn't too tough to walk on. Even though it looks like powder, you could put an axe into it and it would hold.

The terrain looks daunting at first, but I get more confident as time goes on. I learn to rely on the tools and after a couple of hours it feels, if anything, more secure than rock climbing. In some spots we have to do what's known as 'mixed climbing' – getting the ice axes to hook on to holds on the rockface as well as digging them into the snow. Again, the points are secure, although you need to be more careful about where you aim. Top-level climbers can find holds on the most blank rock

'Paddy walks ahead holding the rope in one hand, as if I'm on a lead'

faces, but I've got plenty to choose from. Most of the time, Paddy climbs a section and I follow. It's pretty safe, but still *feels* like I'm putting in the work.

DO LOOK DOWN

The most daunting moment is the Tower Gap, where we have to abseil into a 60m crevice. I can't see where my feet are going – there are times when I'm dangling, trying to find an edge with my feet. When this route was first climbed, this part could take hours. Without modern-day protection and ice screws, it would be terrifying.

Arguably the most dangerous parts of the climb, though, are on foot. When walking across ridges we switch to 'short-roping', cinching in the rope until we're only separated by 6m or so. Paddy walks ahead holding the rope in one hand so he can feel my movements, as if I'm on a lead. The idea is that if I slip off the ridge he'll halt the fall before it begins. A lot of the ridge is sheer enough that if you fell, you wouldn't stop until you went over a potentially fatal drop, so this is essential.

Similarly, on a couple of traverses near the peak there's no way to arrest yourself and you can't see what's underneath the snow. It's very precarious and if you put a foot wrong, you're going off the edge. These are the only moments I see Paddy and the rest of my team looking genuinely cautious – elsewhere

they'll stand on a ledge the size of a table, backs to an enormous drop, rolling a fag. I don't think anyone with a sane and rational mind isn't scared of the potential for death, but repeated exposure can reduce that feeling.

The last pitch is just pure snow, a little gully going up. Getting to the peak and knowing I'm at the highest point in the British Isles is exhilarating. The sun is red in the sky, bathing the ice field in its glow, something I'll never forget. I really do feel like a mountaineer – I've summited the best Alpine route in Britain.

It only hits me afterwards that although I really feel as if I've accomplished something, I don't think there was really any great risk at any point. It's easy to forget there's anyone helping you because a lot of the time I couldn't see the person on the other end of the rope, but I was always safe.

Walking down the other side of Ben Nevis, I think about how many adventures you could go on in this sort of time-frame. Start as a beginner, learn mountain skills on a Saturday, head up one of the world's best-regarded routes on a Sunday and then go to the pub. The best/worst part? I'll be back at work on Monday morning. ☑

Paddy Cave is lead guide at Mountain Circles (mountaincircles.com) and is sponsored by e-climb.com. MF travelled via scotrail.co.uk and used kit from sherpaadventuregear.com



Less than 24 hours earlier, Glen was at Euston station

