

Lake City Ice

by Dave Cooper



Lake City, located at over 8600 feet in the heart of the San Juan Mountains, offers scenic beauty and an ideal location for a wide variety of outdoor activities in all four seasons

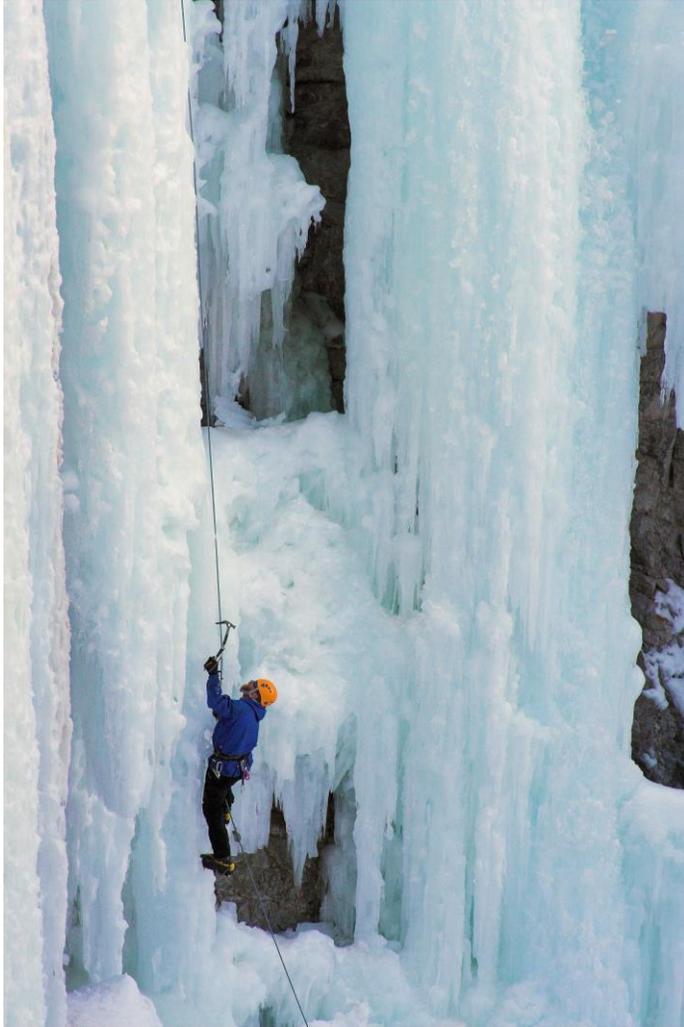
Lake City, nestled in a high mountain valley formed by the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River is, like many of Colorado's mountain communities, a hive of tourist activity during the brief summer season. During the winter months, however, the pace of life slows down considerably. All of this may change if Mike Camp's plans come to fruition.

For the past three seasons Mike, with help from other area residents, has been developing new ice climbing areas in and around Lake City. One of the first areas to be developed is located at the Ute-Ulay Mine, where Mike is the caretaker, among other things (Mike is also the head of the local Search and Rescue

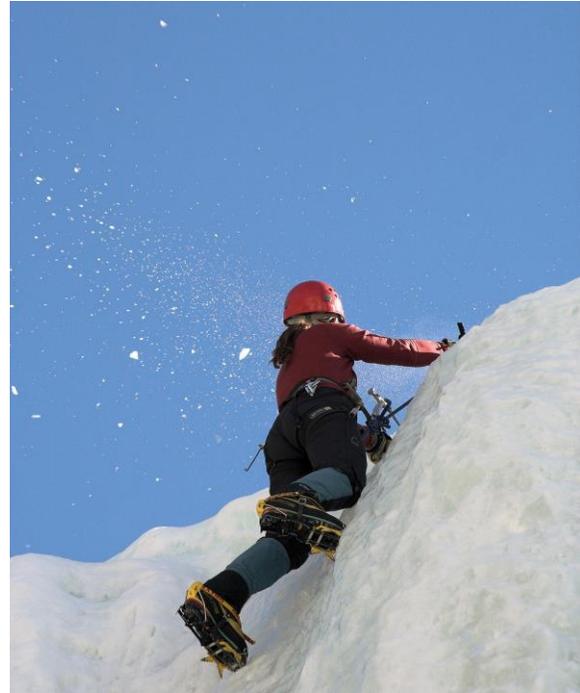
Group and works as a roofing contractor). By piping water from a nearby spring for 1/8th. mile to the cliff above Henson Creek, Mike has created an impressive ice face offering several fine climbs, each 65 to 70 feet in length and covering a wide range of difficulty. Several chain anchors are located at the top of the climbs. Since the spring water originates deep within the earth the water never freezes, even in the coldest conditions.

The Ute-Ulay Ice climbing area





Local climber Jack Nichols has the ice to himself as he gets in a couple of climbs at the end of the workday – Ute-Ulay area



"Let the chips fall where they may!". Ice chips fly as the climber swings her ice tool

A second area that has seen the creation of a number of man-made ice routes is at the Hard Tack Mine. With the owner's permission (George Hurd has reportedly actively encouraged the development of an "Ice Park" at the mine, Mike and other ice climbers have attempted to pipe water one and a quarter miles from Crystal Creek to the cliffs located near the Alpine Gulch trailhead. Problems this year with the water freezing in the pipe have limited their ability to make ice. Mike is optimistic, however, that these problems can be solved. If so, longer climbs up to 110 feet in length will be available.

Another area where ice has been created is right on the edge of town. The ice, made with excess City water, offers the ultimate in climbing convenience.



Ice climbing at the edge of town offers a 30-second approach

While this area has the potential for creating a significant ice park over half a mile long, development has been stymied by the need to obtain a permit from the Bureau of Land Management, managers of the land where the cliff is located. I'll come back to that part of the story a little later.

While the three areas I've described so far all lie along Henson Creek, another new icefall has been created above Lake San Cristobal, a few minutes drive from town, augmenting natural flows found in the area. Here there are several possible lines to be climbed, usually in the WI3-4 range. Trees provide anchors at the top.



"Farmed" ice above Lake San Cristobal

While checking out the Lake San Cristobal ice, I was fortunate to run into local climber Jack Nichols. Jack is one of the small community of ice climbers who call Lake City their home. He knows the area climbs well and was able to offer valuable advice on some of the natural ice climbs in the area.

At a small gathering at Jack's house that evening I was introduced to several of Jack's friends, both climbers and non-climbers, and was impressed by the diversity and energy of the people I met. After an extremely pleasant evening, Jack and I made plans to check out some of the area's climbing the next day.

We decided to head for the Ute-Ulay Mine, so early the next morning found us climbing next to two other climbers, Flo and Greg from Durango. The four of us spent a very pleasant morning swapping ropes and testing ourselves on the challenging ice-face.

With no other climbers in the area we were able to relax between climbs and chat about the development of the new areas.



A relaxed atmosphere at the Ute-Ulay climbing area as Jack adjusts his crampons. Chairs and even hanging plants contribute to a unique setting

Flo and Greg have started climbing in the Lake City area as a change from the somewhat closer and hugely popular Ouray Ice Park.

We discussed the development of the Ouray Ice Park and its impact on the community of Ouray, since as Jack commented “The development of Ouray’s Ice Park gives us a blueprint for developing an ice park here in Lake City”.

Over 15 years or so that I have been climbing ice in Ouray, I have seen the winter face of Ouray change dramatically. In the days before the ice park was created, only a couple of restaurants and the same number of motels stayed open over the winter months. A few local business owners and guides provided the impetus to start Ouray’s Ice Park, initially the result of leaks in a water pipe above the Box Canyon, but over the years things have snowballed – more climbers created the need for more amenities, which has in turn attracted more climbers.

During peak weekends, even leaving out the Ouray Ice Festival, which attracts crowds from all over the world, the town has a thriving, bustling feel to it. I've even heard some climbers complain that there is now too much competition for the available routes, even though the ice park has done a great job of expanding each season to add more climbs in new areas.

While the Lake City area has always provided a large number of high quality ice climbs in the backcountry, these tend to only attract advanced climbers. The steep mountain terrain and large snowfall create avalanche potential on many of the routes, so they require experience in evaluating the safety of a route, which can change very quickly. As in Ouray, the man-made ice-climbing venues in Lake City offer a safer environment that appeals to all levels of climbers (although of course ice climbing is always a potentially dangerous activity and can never be made "safe". If you don't have the experience, get expert instruction or climb with other experienced ice climbers).

The question that I wanted to explore, then, was "Is Lake City receptive to experiencing the same kind of growth as that seen by its neighbor?"

There are many guide services available in Colorado. One of the local guiding services, operating out of Ouray, is San Juan Mountain Guides, founded by Mike O'Donnell – see their website at <http://www.ourayclimbing.com/>. I know of no commercial guiding services currently operating in the Lake City area, but look for that to change.

Over dinner at Mammy's Kitchen, Marcia Connell, Executive Director of Lake City's "Main Street Program", Mike Camp and I discussed the impact of an ice park on the town. Main Street is a program of the National Trust For Historic Preservation, and helps revitalize historic down town districts.

Marcia expressed the feeling that appears to be held by everyone I talked to, that ice tourism would help her group's efforts to develop Lake City's downtown area and overall economy.

For more information on Lake City's Main Street Program, go to: <http://www.lakecitydirt.com/index.html>

The other detail that came across just as strongly was that the town doesn't want to lose its rustic, mountain town character.

Chris Gentry, owner of the Mocha Moose Coffee House (the place where much of the town seems to congregate six mornings a week – closed on Sundays) has been involved with the effort to develop a local ice park. Chris, with a degree in commercial recreation, originally came to Lake City to guide fly fishermen, but four years ago decided to open the coffee shop. He has a keen awareness of the need to offer diverse activities year-round in order to attract tourism, as well as offer amenities such as the coffee house.

Chris talked about the process that he, Mike Camp and others are going through to get permission from the BLM to develop the ice park along Henson Creek. It turns out that they must provide a scaled down version of an Environmental Impact Statement to win approval. The town has sent a letter supporting the development, and even provided the water needed to create the ice.

Currently the water for this ice has been provided from the regular city water supply, but Mike hopes that an expanded ice park will be able to tap into water from the city ditch. Mike anticipates approval in time for the 2006/2007 season. Assuming that happens, Lake City will have an ice park able to accommodate several hundred climbers – many more than the 42 people Mike counted on a recent weekend.



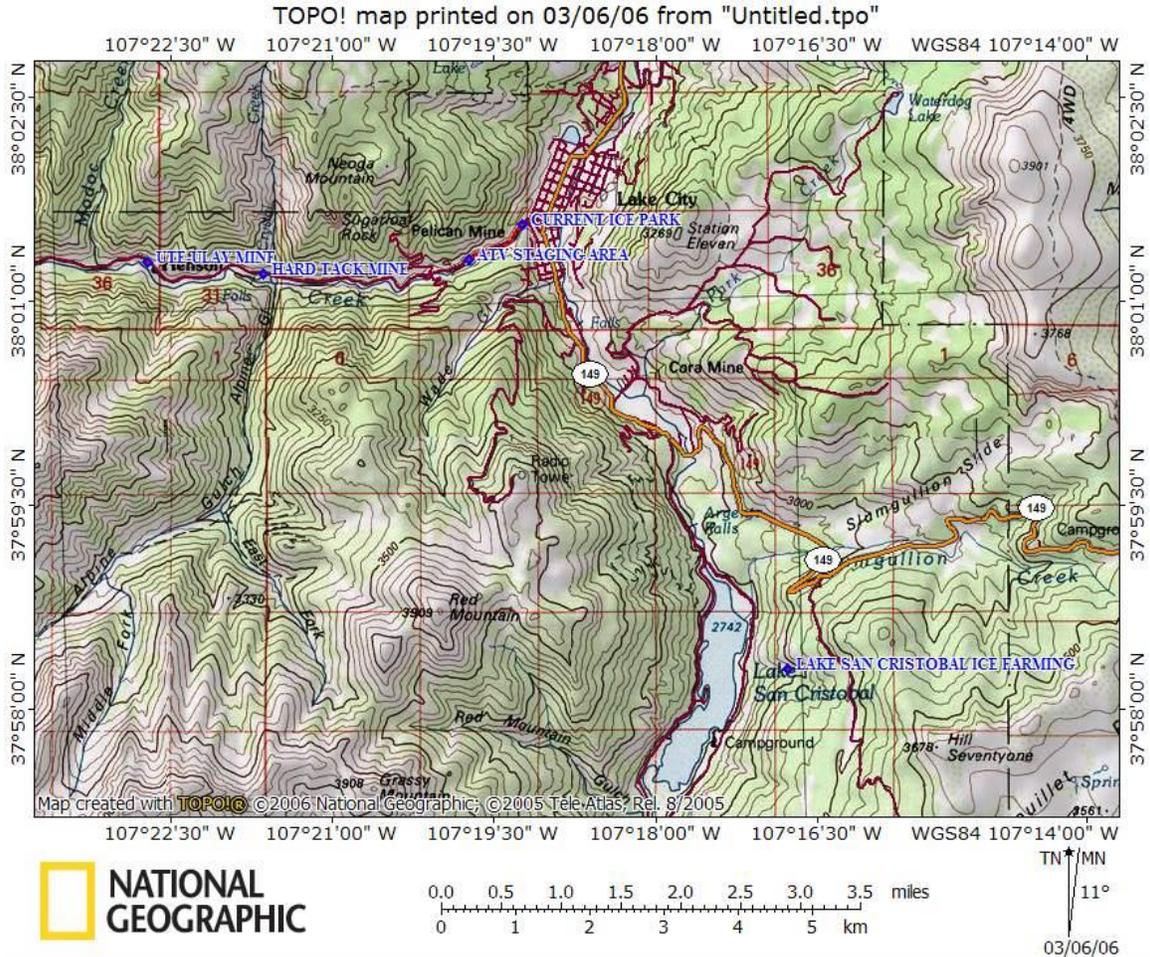
Part of the half mile of cliffs that Mike Camp hopes to turn into an ice park

Resident Tom Reyburn, who works at the Back Country Navigator and initially provided contact information for many of the people I talked to, feels that the “ice farming” that Mike has already accomplished has had an impact on the town. It is hard to say if the new ice climbing areas are directly responsible for the increase in numbers of year-round residents, but Tom feels that it well may have. Tom is a part of that influx, having moved here from the Front Range in 2003. His feeling is that the mix of long-time residents, combined with the influx of newcomers, many of whom are middle-aged and very active, plus the summer residents, all combine to create a very good environment – environmentally sensitive, creative (witness the many and varied art shows and concerts, etc. provided in the summer, plus the addition of some winter cultural events).

Arlen Barksdale and Phyllis Mabbet, who own the Texan Resort (www.texasresort.com), are among the small group of local business owners offering yearround accommodations. They currently only keep a relatively small percentage of their cabins open in the winter, but are eager to increase that number if the demand increases. Arlen stressed that the town must offer a mix of winter activities, and that ice climbing complements the other winter activities of cross-country skiing, snowmobiling, snowshoeing, and ice fishing. Hinsdale County also boasts Colorado’s highest hut system, comprised of four yurts (www.hinsdalehautoroute.org).

For more information on Lake City’s winter recreation opportunities, go to <http://www.lakecitywinter.com/>. You can also request a copy of “fresh tracks” - a free guide to winter recreation in the area. The guide also contains an excellent pull-out map which shows the location of many of the areas ice climbs among other things.

For general information on the area, including lodging and dining information, go to <http://www.lakecity.com/>.



The year-round population of Hinsdale County consists of only about 800 people, half of them living in Lake City. This number swells to five times that many during the summer months, and that doesn't include the tourists. Many local businesses find it uneconomical to stay open during the winter months. The creation of an ice park can play a significant role in developing Lake City's year-round economy. You may want to consider a visit to this exciting winter destination and be a part of the renaissance.

Lake City is located on State Highway 149, approximately 49 miles south of US50 and 55 miles from Gunnison.

To reach the in-town ice climbing area, turn west off State Highway 149 onto 2nd Street, then south (left) onto Bluff Street. The ice is straight ahead of you. You can't miss it!

For the Ute-Ulay ice, continue past the in-town area and drive 3.8 miles along Henson Creek (this is also called the Alpine Loop Road and in the summer goes all the way to Engineer Pass). The top of the ice is visible from the road on your left. Stay clear of the mine buildings, which are posted.

To reach the ice at Lake San Cristobal, from Lake City continue south on State Highway 149 for 2.5 miles beyond the 2nd. Street intersection Turn right on Hinsdale County Road 30 towards Lake San Cristobal and drive 1.3 miles to the intersection with County Road 7. Turn left on County Road 7, crossing the outlet of the lake, and drive 1.3 miles around to the east side of the lake to a parking area with outhouse and a sign for the camping area. Walk back a little more than a hundred yards and find a faint trail that heads east into an obvious drainage. The start of this trail is almost exactly opposite a gate leading to private property. The ice can be seen from across the lake.

For information on the natural ice climbs in the area, see:
 "Colorado Ice, Volume 1" by Jack Roberts and
 "Colorado Ice Climber's Guide by Cameron M. Burns

Mike Camp is willing to provide information on the ice climbing conditions. He can be reached at 970 209 1863.