

The Rigid Designator – Ice Climbing by Dave Cooper



The Rigid Designator

One word about access. This winter, signs appeared adjacent to the parking area indicating that the approach to the climbs, across the golf course (which becomes a Nordic Center during the winter months), is now a Fee Area. Friends had expressed concern and some confusion over whether the fee applies to climbers as well as skiers. After our climb we headed over to the Nordic Center to clarify the situation. It turns out that climbers do not need to pay the fee. The Nordic Center does ask, however, that we be considerate of the skiers and avoid walking on the prepared track. To avoid access problems in the future it is imperative that we abide by this request

After spending almost half of February ice climbing in the Canadian Rockies, I confess to having thoughts of warm weather pursuits. Hiking and climbing in the desert seemed especially attractive, more so with the snow still halfway up the windows at home (we live a little below 11,000 feet). So it took a little persuasion to convince me to head over to Vail for one more ice climb, the world-famous Rigid Designator.

It had been several years since I climbed the route, but I still remembered the amazing location and climbing that this single pitch climb offers. Usually climbable into mid-April, by this point in the season the route has been climbed so much that you can climb the whole thing without swinging your ice tool - just hooking the existing holds. That doesn't mean that it isn't still a challenge - long, steep and sustained, it would make a fine end to the season.

Jack Roberts, in his guidebook "Colorado Ice" (Polar Star Communications, 1998), says that the Rigid Designator may be the most popular ice climb in Colorado, so mid-week is best to avoid the crowds. Even then you may have to wait in line.

We headed over to Vail at the beginning of March and enjoyed a fine climb, then spent a few minutes watching climbers on some of the other routes in the amphitheater, notably the Fang, a magnificent climb to the right of the Designator.

Getting to the Trailhead:

From the Vail East Exit (Exit 180), take the North Frontage Road west for a mile until it crosses under the Interstate and continue west on the south side of the Interstate. Continue on for a third of a mile to the Pumphouse parking area, on your left. Park here.

Gear and Guidebooks: A standard ice rack should be sufficient, plus extra slings to backup the rappel anchor. Double 50 meter ropes are required.

For more information, see "Colorado Ice" by Jack Roberts or "Colorado Ice Climbers Guide" by Cameron Burns.

and stay on the trails designated for climbers to use. If you have questions, you can call the Vail Nordic Center at 970.476.8366.

The Approach

From the Pumphouse parking area walk east along the Frontage Road to the junction of the Frontage Road and Aspen Lane. Continue east on Aspen Lane for a short distance and take the first right turn onto Aspen Court. At the end of this cul-de-sac is a trailhead, providing access to the cross-country ski trails on the golf course. Cross the creek on a footbridge and immediately turn left (east) on the signed climbers' trail. Follow the trail as it crosses the golf course and then heads east to the right of the prepared track. After a few minutes of walking, the trail leaves the valley floor and executes a rising traverse into the drainage below the Rigid Designator, directly opposite Booth Creek. Continue on the trail as it climbs to the base of the Designator and Fang. You will gain about 550 feet on the approach.

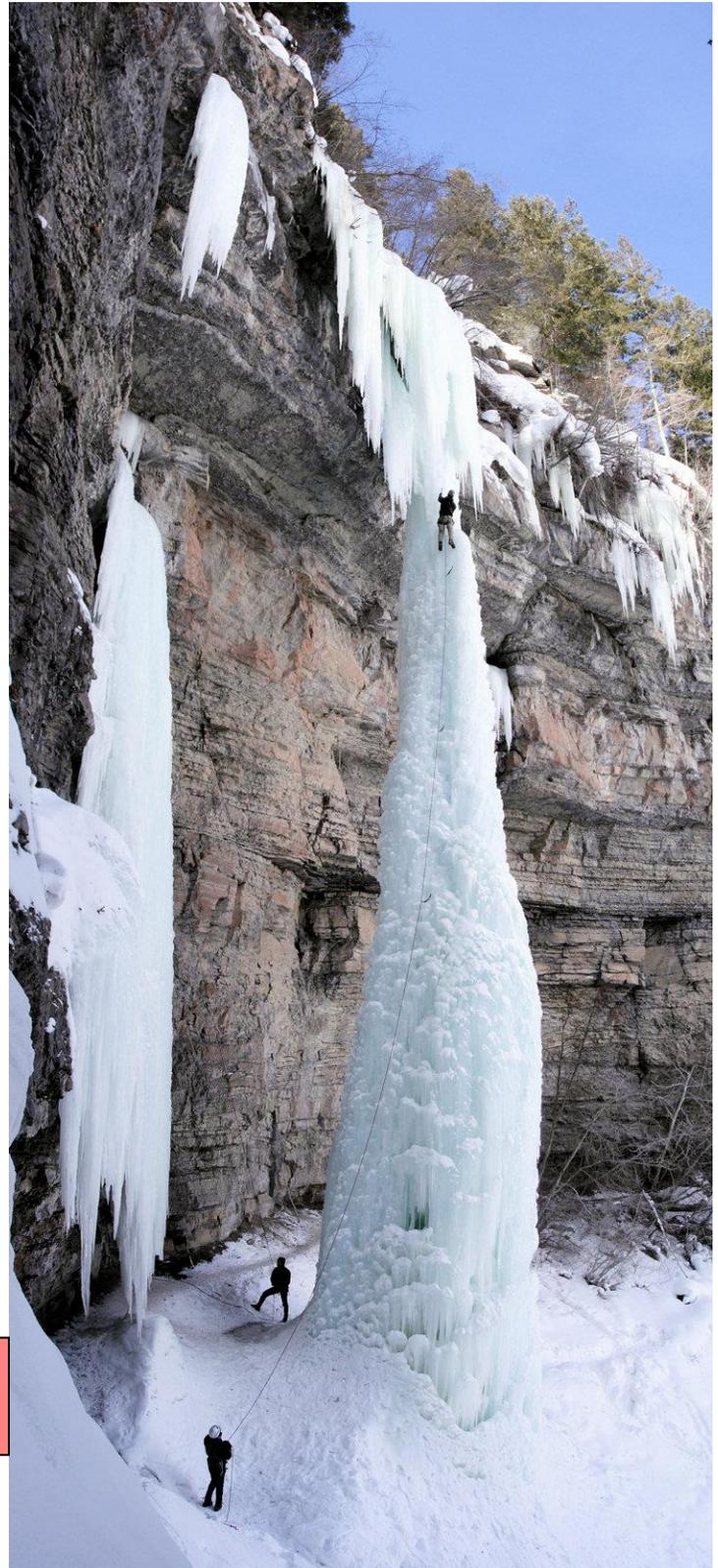
A climber on the Fang

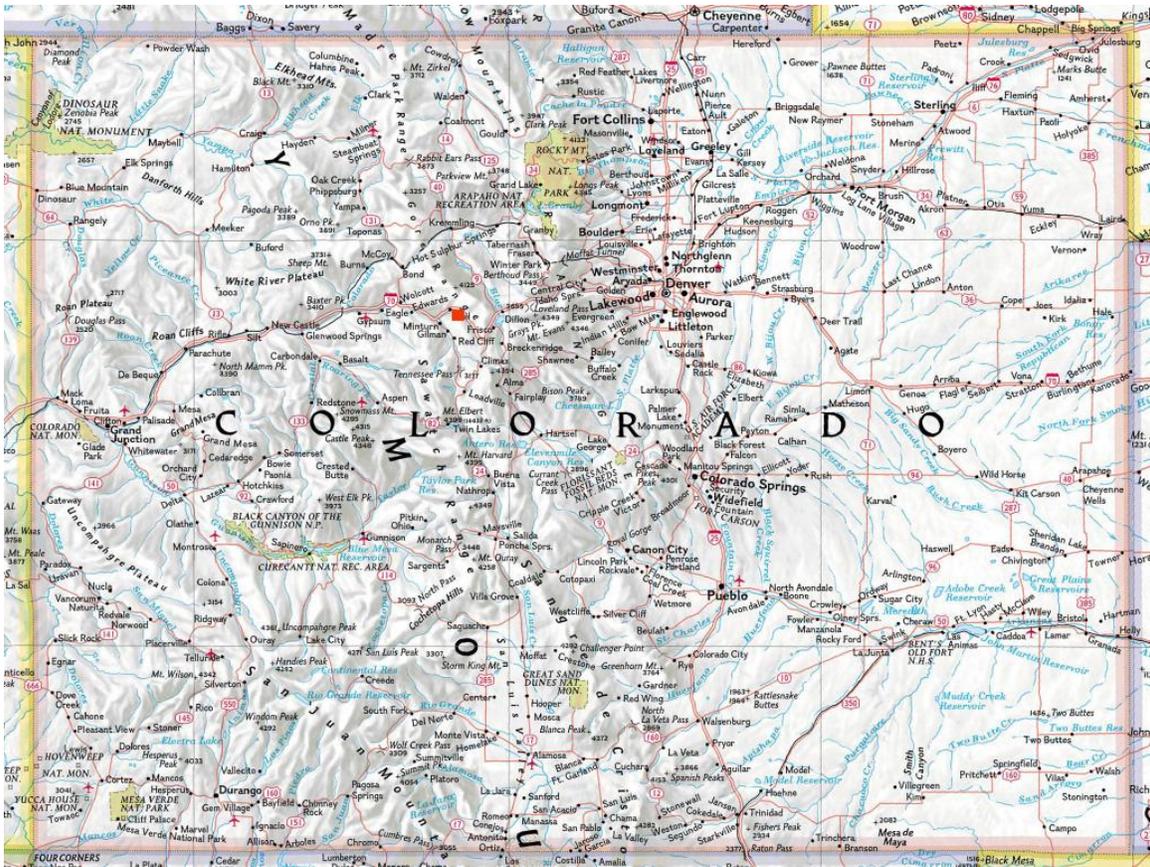
The Climbing

Choose a safe belay stance, well clear of any falling ice. Several lines of varying difficulty are possible. Choose one that looks good and start climbing. My climbing partner, who led the climb on this occasion, commented that there were so many old ice screw holes that the ice looked more like Swiss cheese! You may have to look around to find spots for good protection. The lower part of the route is usually cauliflower ice, a unique formation in which the ice forms in bulges sometimes looking like the petals on a blooming flower. This ice can be hard to protect.

Above this is the crux, with sustained vertical climbing but having good resting spots for placing ice screws. Near the top the angle relents a little but is still deceptively steep. At the top of the climb, look for belay / rappel anchors off trees.

Include the usual climbing disclaimer , perhaps with the observation that ice climbing has additional hazards.





Colorado locator map