

“Trail Mix” – Ice Climbing by Dave Cooper

Spiral Staircase, Pencil and Eraser (WI3+ – WI5)

Vail offers some of the best ice climbing in Colorado. It is home to two of the testpieces for their grade – The Rigid Designator (WI5) and the Fang (WI6). Here we explore some of the lesser-known ice climbs, in an amphitheatre just left of the Designator amphitheatre.

In recent years most of the new route development at Vail has been in the realm of mixed climbing, in which the route combines sections of rock and ice, both being climbed using ice-climbing tools and crampons. (This emerging sport is developing its own specialized equipment and techniques). Nowadays there may be as many people climbing the mixed routes as the pure ice routes.

Directly behind the Pumphouse there is another fine piece of moderate ice called Pumphouse Falls in some guides and 9th. Hole in others. We have called it the 19th. Green for many years. Whatever the name, it offers reliable ice all season long. Perhaps try this on another visit, or if the other areas are busy.

*Climber on mixed route
behind the Pencil*

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 turn left (east) and follow the ski trail (being careful to stay on the edge of the trail to avoid damaging the groomed track) until a climber's trail takes off to your right after a few minutes. Follow the trail as it 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. Continue on a trail to the left as it contours around a small buttress, at one point on a narrow ledge. In a few minutes you will arrive at the base of the Spiral Stairs.

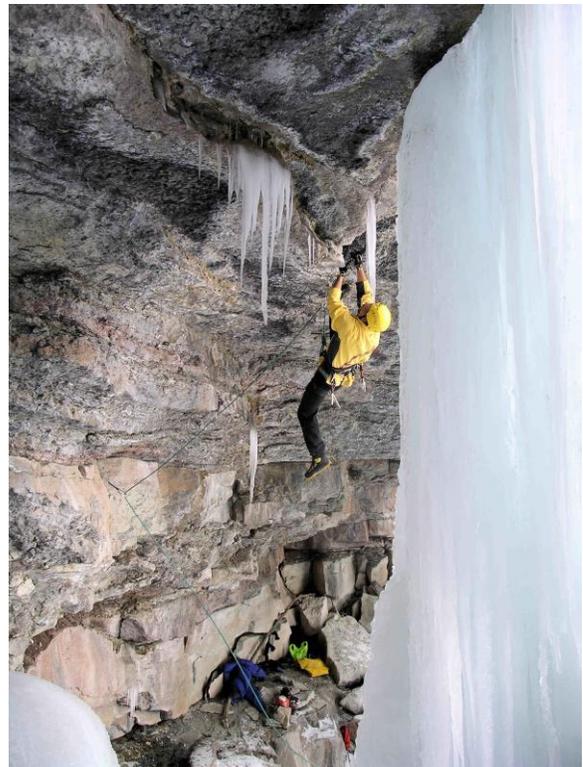
The Climbing

Climb the Spiral Staircase to access the upper climbs. The center line on the Staircase provides the easiest but usually picked-out line. Steeper and harder lines can be climbed on the right side (up to WI5 in

Getting to the Trailhead: Many climbers use an unofficial parking area in the residential area at the eastern end of Booth Creek Drive. This means crossing private property, which I try to avoid. Although some of the homeowners have allowed climbers to cross their property onto the ski path, access is a fragile thing and something not to be taken lightly. These other trailheads are described in the referenced guidebooks. In the past, cars have been ticketed for blocking driveways, access for snow plows etc.

Here, I will describe the parking area and approach that my friends and I use, which, while a few minutes longer, avoids these issues.

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 few hundred yards to the Pumphouse parking area, on your left. Park here. Note: The restrooms are normally open year-round, but on a recent visit they appeared to be locked.



difficulty). In some years the start of the Spiral Staircase may not be completely formed, requiring one or two mixed moves before reaching the ice (tall climbers can usually reach high enough to place an ice screw in the ice before committing to the climb). This year the climb is “fat”, meaning that there is plenty of ice on the whole route.



Belay from the tree on the left at the top of this pitch. This tree is also used to rappel the route.

Kevin leading the Spiral Staircase

From the top of the Spiral Staircase a snowy scramble of 250 feet brings you to the base of the upper climbs – to the left is a free-standing pillar named “The Pencil”. On the right side is a curtain of ice aptly dubbed “The Eraser”. The Pencil offers a short, steep climb - usually WI4. Make sure it is well attached before leading it.

Top-roping the Pencil

The Eraser is rated WI3 in most guidebooks, but every time I’ve climbed it, it felt like a tough WI4 or harder.



Climber on the Eraser

Both of these upper routes can be top-roped. Scramble around the right side of the amphitheatre to reach trees above the climbs which can be used for top-rope anchors. Take

care when walking around above the climbs – it seems that most accidents occur when climbers are setting up top-ropes and are un-roped.

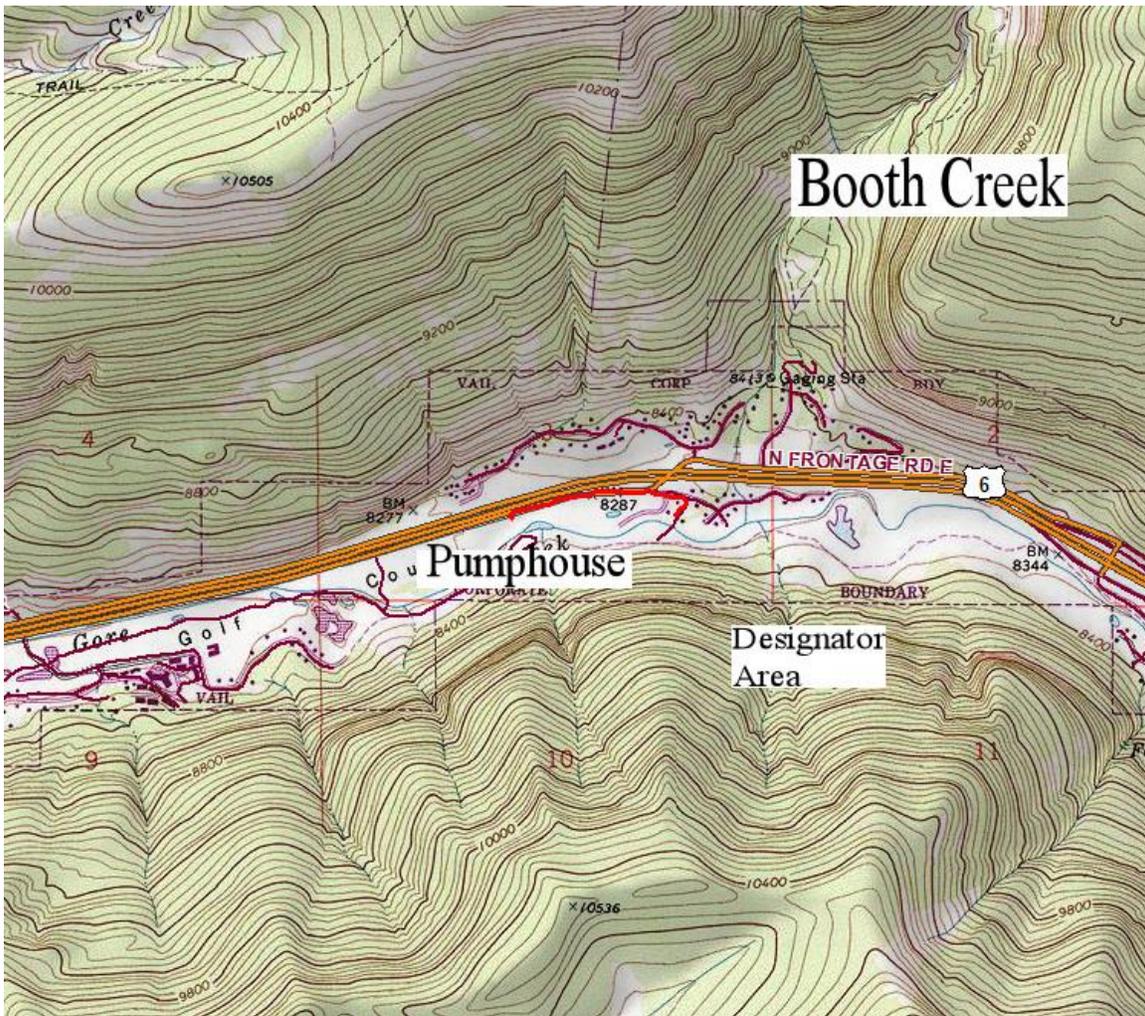
To descend, carefully down climb the gully back to the rappel anchor above the Spiral Staircase. Occasionally short sections of low-angle ice are exposed in this gully and beginners may be more comfortable downclimbing with the help of a fixed line. You may need to coordinate your rappel down the Spiral Staircase pitch with other groups climbing below you – please be considerate and safe.

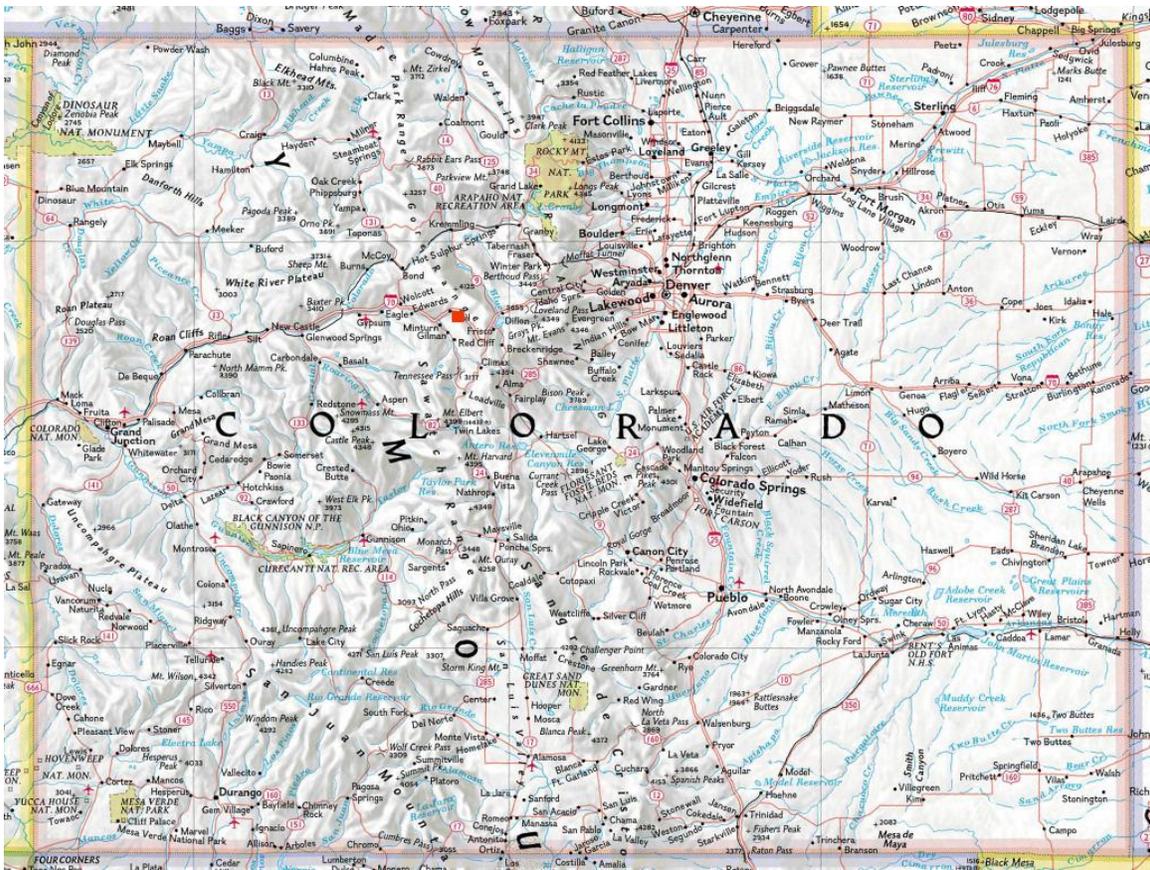
Climbing all of these routes can offer a full day of ice for most of us. If you still have energy left consider top-roping “Secret Probation”, a difficult mixed route twenty feet to the right of the Spiral Staircase.

Gear and Guidebooks: A small to standard ice rack should be sufficient, plus extra slings to backup the rappel / top-rope anchors. Please be considerate of other climbers and don't top-rope the Spiral Staircase directly off the rappel anchors! Remember that this is the descent route for the climbs in the amphitheatre above. A single 50 metre rope is sufficient for this rappel.

For more information, see “Colorado Ice” by Jack Roberts or “Colorado Ice Climbers Guide” by Cameron Burns

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





Colorado locator map