

Stairway to Heaven (WI4, IV)

by Dave Cooper

An ice climb that has long been on my list to do is “Stairway to Heaven”, near the ghost town of Eureka in the San Juan Mountains.

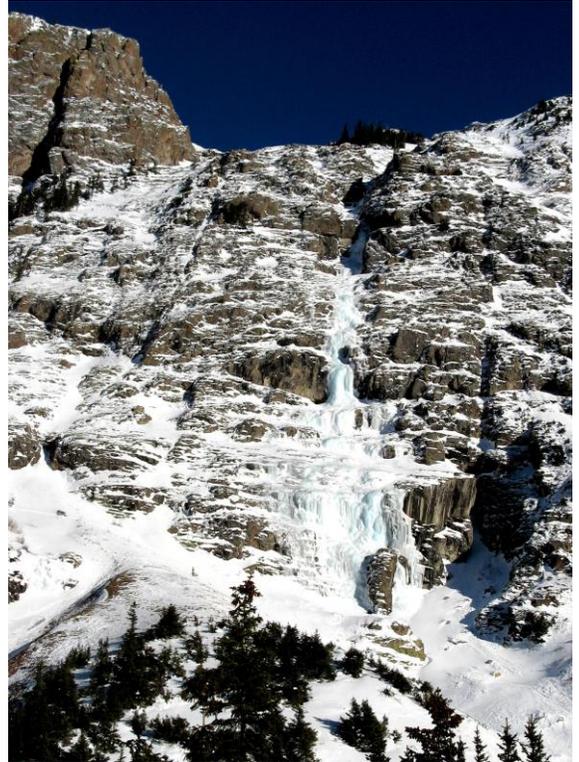
Unfortunately, since the climb is in an area well known for its avalanche hazard, the combination of stable snow conditions, free time and an available climbing partner hadn't occurred until recently.

Over the New Year's holiday weekend, as a respite from the throngs in the Ouray Ice Park, a friend and I decided to head south over Red Mountain Pass and give the climb a try. We checked the Colorado Avalanche Information Center's newly re-vamped website for current conditions (<http://avalanche.state.co.us/>) and also talked to locals to get current conditions.

Leaving Ouray at 5 am, we were walking up the road with headlights by 6:30am. Kevin, my climbing partner, had climbed the route previously and so led the way as we left the road and cut back across snow slopes to the base of the climb. Wind slab over depth hoar on our approach helped make our decision to rappel the route rather than downclimb the normal descent gully, known to be avalanche prone.



Approaching the climb



Stairway to Heaven. The top of the descent gully can be seen at left of photo.

By 3pm we were off the route and back on the road after a most enjoyable climb in a beautiful setting. The route certainly deserves its reputation as a North American classic.

Getting to the Trailhead: Drive to the town of Silverton on US550. Turn onto Silverton's main street (County Road 2) and drive northeast through the town for 0.9 miles to a junction. Stay right on County Road 2.

Pass through Howardsville 5.1 miles from US550 and reach the old mining town of Eureka at 8.8 miles. Park on the left in a plowed area just past the bridge.

Hiking and Climbing Statistics:

The approach gains 580 feet of elevation in 1.1 miles to the starting elevation of 10,400 feet. The route can be climbed in five, very full pitches .

Difficulty: An easy road approach to a moderate snow slope gets you to the base of the route. The route is normally climbed in five 60 meter pitches up to WI4 in difficulty. This is a committing climb in a high alpine environment, with significant avalanche potential. The best time to climb the route is in early winter, before snow conditions become too dangerous.

Technical Gear: A standard ice rack, plus V-thread material and two 60 meter ropes if you choose to rappel the route.

USGS Quad: Handies Peak, CO

Approach



There are several ways to approach the climb. This one works well.

From the parking area walk up the road approximately 0.9 miles to a point a little past the climb, very visible on the west-facing mountainside across the Animas River.

Find a convenient spot to drop down and cross the river, more a creek at this point. Diagonal back southeast towards the climb and reach the base of the climb in 0.2 miles, being careful to avoid avalanche slopes.

Kevin leading the first pitch

Climb Description

The first pitch is a full 60 meters, consisting of steep sections of WI3 followed by flatter terrain. The second pitch is a long easy pitch with a couple of steps and should get you to the base of the crux third pitch, a broad, steep pillar. It may be necessary either to add a short pitch to get all the way to the base of the pillar unless you stretched out the first pitch.

Climb the steep pillar, usually wet (WI4) and continue to the end of the rope before finding a protected spot to belay.

Pitch 4 is a long low-angle pitch of WI2 to WI3 which takes you to the base of the next steep section.



The long rolling second pitch takes you to the base of the crux pillar - photo at right



Cooper leading Pitch 3 (courtesy Kevin Craig)- photo at left



We found pitch 5, often a ropelength of moderate WI3 ice, to be an intricate and interesting series of steep bulges which created a fun “sting in the tail” to the climb.

5th. pitch

Descent

From the top of the fifth pitch it is possible to traverse left to a gully which offers a steep descent route. Due to concerns about snow stability however, we elected to rappel the route.

The descent goes in five full 60 meter rappels. A chain and bolt anchor at the top of the fifth pitch gets you started. Reportedly there is a line of bolt anchors the whole way down on climber’s right but these were apparently covered by ice. We used a combination of existing V-threads and fixed anchors off trees on climber’s right. (Jack Roberts has a good description of how to create V-thread anchors in his guidebook “Colorado Ice, Volume 1”, though you need expert instruction to learn how to safely build and use them.) Don’t count on always being able to find existing anchors on any ice route.

Caution:

The snow above the climb has been known to slide, so check on avalanche conditions before getting on this climb. Be aware of the potential for ice fall and always wear your helmet.

Remember, climbing is an inherently dangerous activity and you should always climb within your ability after carefully judging the safety of the route. We write about it, you take all the risks.



*Heading
down from
the climb*

