



Peak Experience

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The iceberg's summit sparkled like a sapphire as I looked up from my perch part way up its slope. The silhouette rose high into the cloudless blue sky, offsetting the blinding white snow of the still-frozen inlet. I scanned the solid horizon of the Arctic Ocean and the snow-covered mountains that fenced in both sides of the passage between Devon and Baffin Island. To the east, I could pick out the floe edge where the ice was slowly receding and narwhals were appearing for the spring break-up. I could have stayed longer admiring the view, but the winds were picking up as my companions and I moved neared the peak of this craggy ice mountain. We needed to pick up the pace if we were going to reach the top.

It was the spring of 2000 and I'd flown to Pond Inlet with my friends Ross Mason and Simon Baker intent on applying skills I'd sharpened ice climbing in the south to the challenge of icebergs off Baffin Island in the High Arctic. Ross, Simon and I believed our expedition to be the first of its kind since creation of the territory of Nunavut in April 1999. Even it wasn't, it was a first of another kind. While I'd been climbing ice for 10 years and had been to the Arctic several times, I'd never combined the experiences.

Ross, Simon and I knew, however, that Pond Inlet was an ideal location for our adventure, an opinion that was confirmed the moment the community appeared through the window of our airplane. As the Hawker Siddley circled Pond Inlet - known traditionally as Mittimatalik - we could see a giant iceberg in the bay that begged for the bite of our ropes and crampons. It was a tempting sight, but we had other plans.

After landing, we lashed our gear to komatiks pulled by snowmobiles and struck out on the sea ice. We travelled out of town, studying innumerable icebergs along the way, before finally settling on a towering specimen about 40 kilometres out. We were close to the floe edge, but not so close we were in danger of the ice breaking and carrying us out to sea. We set up base camp behind a protective rocky outcrop and began assess the myriad alternative routes to the summit. Ross, tinkered with his gear while Simon, who had climbed rock but never ice, studied with growing excitement the challenges that lay before us.

In fact, we were about to experience an ironic twist in the world of ice climbing: although it appears exotic, scaling Arctic icebergs

is safer and easier than traditional waterfall or frozen run-off climbing. The reason is simple. Southern climbers are accustomed to what is considered 'technical ice,' a term that indicates fragile ice requiring special skills to safely scale. Technical ice is always seasonal, never more than a few months old and, therefore, delicate. Climbing a frozen waterfall in Ontario, for example demands just the right amount of force. Use too much and large pieces of ice may break off. Use too little and the tools will not hold the climber's weight. There are sweet spots for southern climbers, areas of ice that are not too soft or too brittle, but developing the ability to find them is a hard-won skill.

An iceberg in the Arctic is completely different from a frozen waterfall. A frozen waterfall is temporary and usually underlain by rock or water. An iceberg, on the other hand, is literally a mountain of solid ice calved from ancient glaciers in Greenland. Besides structural stability built over the thousands of years, the outer surface of an iceberg warms during the short May-June climbing season, softening the exterior to create strong holds that can be easily and reliably placed. The only proviso in this experience is that the iceberg must be grounded. Free-floating icebergs can flip if sections break off under the surface of the water and change its centre of gravity.

Bearing these facts in mind, Ross, Simon and I stepped across onto a ledge of our iceberg and followed it until encountering the first obstacle, a 10-metre rise of vertical ice that had to be scaled before we could reach the tall walls of ice behind. As I started up, I marveled at the excellent conditions. The day had warmed and the sun beat down on us. The outside of the ice on the berg was soft, while a few centimetres below the surface the ice remained hardened from thousands of years of glacial pressure.

Climbing ice must be done in a methodical progression involving three secure contact points of the hands and feet before moving the fourth. An ice axe in each hand and spiked crampons on both feet must be methodically placed into the ice. In a rhythmic pattern -- swing after swing, kick after kick -- the axes and crampons are firmly planted as the climber rises one limb at a time.

On this iceberg, it was a thrill to effortlessly experience the constant rhythm of successful placements of my hands and feet. How different this was from the broken rhythm and multiple





attempts necessary to securely place a crampon or axe when ice climbing in the south. This was a fantastic way to enjoy the Arctic summer and there could not possibly be a better environment to ice climb. The combination of amazing scenery, a lengthy ascent and ideal conditions were a climber's dream.

I free-climbed to the top wall and drove in an ice screw, which served as an anchor through which a safety rope could be threaded for Ross and Simon to follow. We were quickly over the hump and our climb was underway.

After popping up and over the first vertical face, we found ourselves inside a stunning glacial valley completely invisible from the outside. A 45-degree long chute 50 metres across and 300 metres down extended to the bottom of the valley where broken ice revealed open water. As icebergs float through the open ocean, water eats away at the underside to form marvelous hidden shapes. Eventually, the center of mass changes and the iceberg flips, thereby rotating these mythical formations out of the water. We found ourselves standing in the midst of these sculptured carvings that had been formed underwater over months, if not years. Along the top of the valley were large castle-like spires that appeared as fine crystal with the sunlight's rays piercing through.

After an easy traverse across the chute, we had to make another pitch to reach the next ledge of ice. The climb up this vertical face ranged from 30 to 150 metres depending upon how far down the chute we went before starting. Although we had been warm in the sun when starting, we found ourselves now in the cold dark shadows of the chute. The dropping temperature thus became the overriding factor in determining the route we would choose. Once up on the first major ledge of the iceberg, we had an unrivaled view of the frozen ocean, surrounding mountains and deep valley of ice below. The glare from the white ocean contrasting with the cloudless blue sky produced an overwhelming feeling of tranquility, beauty, solitude and awe.

Although we had one more pitch to go to reach the top of the summit we had to return earlier than planned because of a missing screw in one of Simon's crampons. We knew that the climb down can often take longer than the way up and that we should stop for the day because of the damaged equipment.

Nonetheless, we returned the next day to scale the other side of the iceberg, which was a continuous 70-degree slope to the top. After two pitches and about 200 metres of rope, we reached the final summit and joyously surveyed the surrounding vistas, which were to become indelibly imprinted in our memories forever. We were truly on top of the world, both figuratively and literally as we peered out upon the frozen world from this mammoth crystalline ice cube.

