

## Climbing the Icy Tower

It rises into a drab winter sky, this contorted obelisk of ice, frozen in mid-cascade. A startling blue against the low-cloud gray, Bridal Veil falls forms a stairway of sorts, its sculpted benches marking the spot of summertime tumbling over water-shorn rock. To some, its dizzying six-hundred-foot upthrust awes, terrifies, even. But to others it beckons, an open-door invitation into another world, a vertical reality that snatches at your breath and propels the heart upward in a surge of adrenaline.

These are they who ascend its glacial face, their packs and hooded jackets points of color against the undulating ice. One hand, one foot at a time, trailing lines like so much spider's silk, they move inexorably toward a top that seems at once both far away and tantalizingly close.

“It’s exhilarating,” said Valdez Mountaineering Organization President Caleb Metroka. A former rock climber with now five years ice climbing under his belt, he added, “It kind of makes you forget about the rest of the world. You need to focus. It’s you and the ice.”

At forty-two years, the Valdez Ice Climbing Festival is the longest running event of its kind in the U.S. Playing host to both veteran and novice ice climbers from Fairbanks, Anchorage, Canada, and Outside, the festival showcases a wide variety of clinics and classes, and after-hours get-togethers with Valdez locals make for a more social interlude. Attendees can learn everything from beginning climbing, anchor building, belaying and dry tooling, to handling climbing emergencies and injury prevention. The classes are held both outdoors in the magnificent Keystone Canyon and in the comfort of Prince William Sound College.

Originally composed of some board members and volunteers who diverged from Valdez Adventure Alliance, the Valdez Mountaineering Organization has had its share of uncertainties, starting last year with a balance of zero dollars in the bank. In the best ice-climbing tradition they powered through anyway,

with all instructors and safety teams volunteering their time, energy, and skill to the one-hundred-eighty attendees.

So, what makes Valdez one of the best ice climbing areas in the world?

Simple, said Caleb Metroka—easy accessibility, longer climbs on quality ice, and the amount of climbs. “You could spend weeks going on ice climbs here.”

Climbs in the Valdez area range from the relatively straightforward to the technically challenging, and bear such poetically descriptive names as Simple Twist of Fate, The Hanging Tree, and the icily romantic Love’s Way, commemorating the wedding of a first-ascent party member.