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Maxwell Roche takes axe in hand and hacks his way up a daunting 24-metre ice tower in the French Alps

Words Maxwell Roche



As the tip of my axe explodes from the icy wall looming four inches beyond my skyward nose time slows. High definition asymmetrical snowflakes fly by my disbelieving eyes, before being whipped away by funnelling valley winds to settle upon the branches of distant pines. As the debris clears I watch as my arm, now free of the frigid tower, builds momentum. As my weight shifts, the rest of my body slowly turns like a barn door on freshly oiled hinges, disappearing beyond my ears, caught by the howling wind. Seconds later the back of my helmeted head slams into the ice and I'm left dangling by a solitary axe, cramponed feet swinging freely 24 metres above the frozen abyss. "You're climbing with your feet too close together," calls a voice from way below "think triangle!"

When it comes to sport the majority are readily available to us Brits. If you wake up after Wimbledon and decide you'd like a backhand to rival Roger's, you wander down to your local court and start swinging. If après Olympics you fancy burning up the 100-metre straight faster than Mr Bolt, you trot to your nearest track and train. What happens though, when you realise your active outdoor aspirations are altogether less accessible? What if say, instead of tennis or track and field, you hanker for the high mountains, and to test your fitness against frozen facades that loom above moody and merciless mid winter landscapes? Well then, I know just the place.

In the valley of Le Champagny Le Haut, in the French Savoie region next to the huge Paradiski area of La Plagne and Les Arcs, stands a frozen man-made bastion. The bastion is the only one of its kind in Europe, and it has been built to introduce the curious few among us to the otherwise impossibly inaccessible sport of ice climbing. The site in Le Champagny Le Haut was chosen, not for its alpine splendor, but more for its unique climactic location. The 24-metre tower sits at an altitude of 1,500 metres and occupies one of the coldest valleys in the alps, a valley rarely touched by sunlight. Although cold and dark aren't the most alluring climatic characteristics for an operation chiefly

designed to attract tourists, they are perfect if you're in the niche business of icy fortification fabrication - fabrication which is done chiefly via a process of firing water at a steel structure, and relying on it freezing instantly solid.

Approaching the tower by road, I wind down my window and peer through the crack at what can only be described as a scene from science fiction. Like a martian from a 19th century novel, the tri-legged tower looks as though it's landed after a long trip through outer space. Almost sinister in its surroundings, I find myself imagining the icy, insect-like legs breaking free of the ground and tearing off into the forest in search of human prey. I can't indulge too many more extra terrestrial trains of thought though, as we soon pull up at the tower's fenced perimeter. "Eere we are" says my friend and Paradiski PR princessa Séverine with a cheeky grin. Before I'm even halfway out the Honda, I'm greeted by another grin, a grin of equal or perhaps even greater magnitude. Before me stands the one and only axe-master Stéphane Husson, winner of multiple ice climbing world championship medals, and co-creator of the martian tower. "Bon matin monsieur Roche," says Stéphane lifting me out of the car with an iron handshake. As he stands before me, already fully equipped with harness, crampons and



a frost speckled beanie below his helmet, I know this guy is a character, and one that I can trust. His brown oxhide weather-hewn skin alone stands testament to a life of bitter cold and courageous consequence. "Okay, allons-y let's go Maxwell," says Stéphane, as I wave goodbye to Séverine and follow him to a small equipment hut amidst the trees, trying all the while not to look up at the ominously vertical facade stage left.

The warmth of the hut once we're inside, and the subtle and comforting smell of stripped pine momentarily fills me with calm, and I take off my woolly hat to scratch my matted hair. The temporary calm quickly turns to trepidation however as I begin to look around. Hundreds of axes and crampons adorn the walls, sharp, cold, steely and menacing. "Let's get you some kit," says Stéphane with another of his signature, good-humoured, panic-purging grins.

We're now standing at the base of the easiest ascent route on the three-legged tower, and Stéphane is pointing to each of the legs in turn, and explaining the multiple differing degrees of relief and severity which are available. He highlights that there are options up to 45 degrees of overhang, which ensures that even the planet's premier axe-wielders are tested come World Cup day each season. Content to begin my summit



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campaign via the easiest route available, I opt for a very gently sloping route that, with large foot-sized holes cut the entire way up, vaguely resembles a frost-covered staircase. Stéphane ties me into the rope, but before I'm allowed to ascend he runs up a few metres himself and gives me a quick lesson

in technique. First, it's body position. I note the nonchalance with which he trots up the ice and teeters on the front teeth of his crampons trustingly. "You have to make a wide base and a narrower top," he explains "feet need to be a little wider than shoulder-width with boot tips only touching the ice,



heels at 90 degrees." He demonstrates what happens to a foothold when the heel is too far down or up, the gist of which is a quick 24-metre trip to the forest floor. Next he explains "When using your axes you need to keep them shoulder-width apart, with your wrists and elbows all in line". "Once you're in this triangular position, move your hips as close to the wall as possible to shift the majority of the weight over your feet and try to hang from your axes with arms straight to relax your muscles and conserve strength." "Finally," he says "progress up the ice using a leg, leg, axe, axe routine, bringing your knees up to waist-height before standing tall and searching for an axe placement."

I'm two-thirds of the way up the icy ladder and my arms have turned to noodles. Clinging to my axe handles with a vice like grip, I haul myself up on bent arms hacking savagely and repeatedly in search of a reassuring purchase. Using a similar technique with my feet I kick at the ice repeatedly with vehemence, telling myself whilst placing my feet, that with great force, comes great reliability. Eventually I reach the top, exhausted. I let out a relieved exhalation through frozen nostril hairs, and lean back as Stéphane lowers me down below the tree line.

"You made that look easy," says Stéphane with a sarcastic smirk as I drop down beside

him on trembling limbs. I shake out my aching hands and grin back embarrassed, quite conscious of the fact that it's minus five degrees and beads of sweat are running down my steaming face, after climbing what Stéphane earlier described as "ze kids' route". "Any tips on how I can make it look even easier?" I ask. "Sure," says Stéphane "Climb it with your ears." At first I take this to be another sarcastic jest at my expense, but Stéphane then goes on to explain how instead of hacking, kicking and thrashing at the ice, like a petulant child during a temper tantrum, I instead need to slow things down, consider my moves, and "listen to the ice" for reassurance. He climbs a little way up the wall, nonchalant as ever, and demonstrates how a perfect axe placement starts, not with a wild brutish swing, but with the tiniest flick of the wrist. "Let the axe do the work," he says, "pick your spot, take aim, flick your wrist and listen for the satisfying and solid 'thunk'. If the placement is bad you'll hear it. The same applies for the feet, pick your spot, tap them in, listen and trust."

Surprised by the suggestion of a new kinaesthetic approach I agree to attempt a few more challenging routes. Over the course of the afternoon I heed Stéphane's constant advice, take more time to consider my movements, and give trust to technique. To my delight, even though I'm taking more

time, I'm making much faster progress up the ice, and at the cost of far less energy! Stéphane has taught me to spot the nice hard reliable pockets of blue ice, and to trust my ears rather than drowning out all the reassuring noises with a torrent of expletives. I limber up, calm down, and begin to really start enjoying both the edification and the quality of the exercise. To be alone, looking out over the treetops, across one of France's most beautiful valleys, through a cloud of frozen breath, with the satisfaction of having climbed to the top of an enormous icy tower in a graceful and considered manner, sure was one hell of a feeling. I was puffed-out but I'd lucked out. What a sport. I can only imagine the feelings to be had, away from the safety of the artificial wall, in the real wild, looking past the crystal translucency of a frozen waterfall at alpine vistas beyond.

If you too want to bury the hatchet or rather your axe, then I'd recommend the rare and wonderful art of ice climbing. I couldn't praise The Ice Tower, or Stéphane and his team of instructors in La Plagne more highly. The tower is open from December 20th to March 23rd each year and a visit would serve as an exquisite addition to a ski trip in the extensive La Plagne and Les Arcs region. Beach holidays beware though, it's addictive. All info can be found at, la-plagne.com