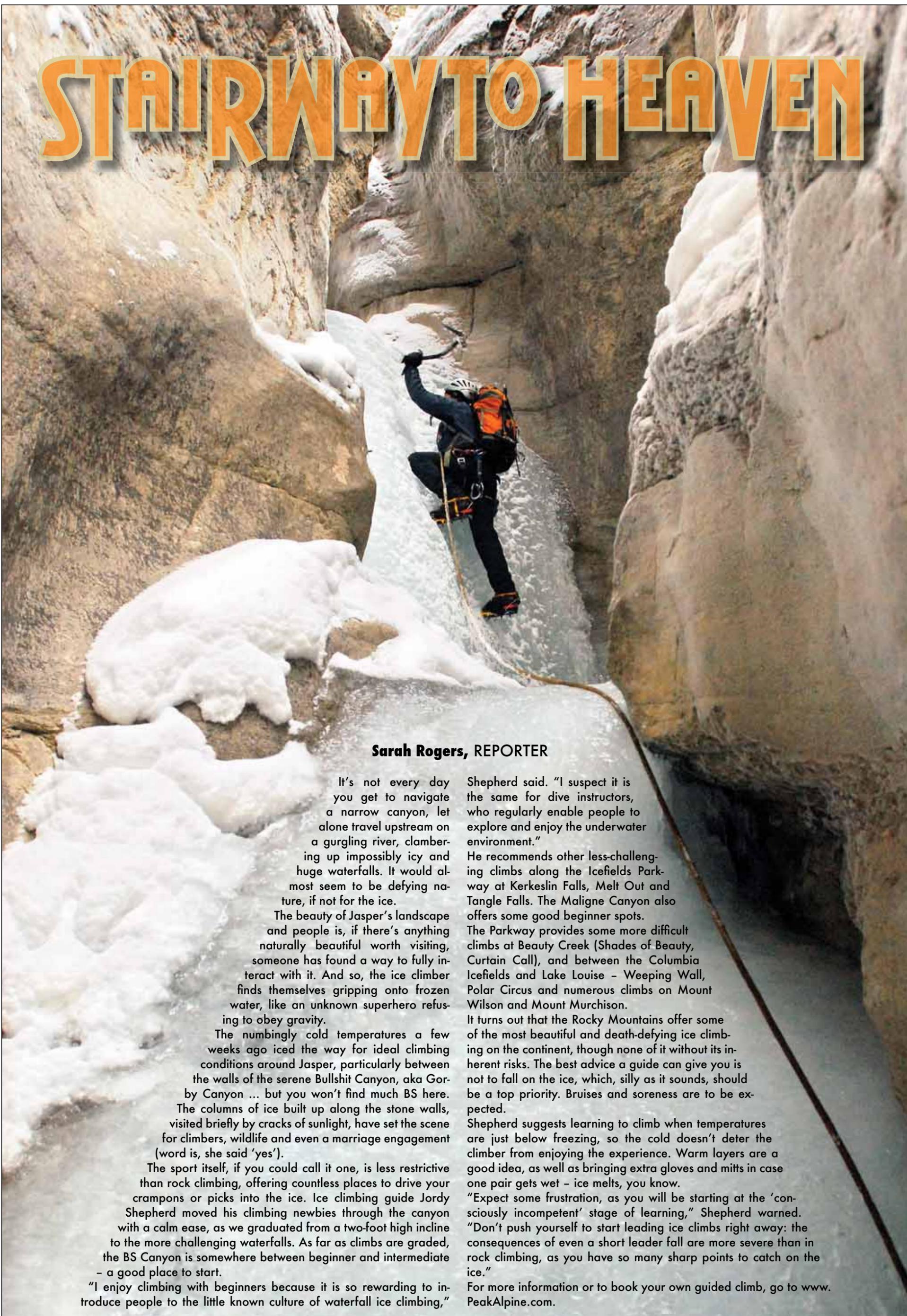




STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN



Sarah Rogers, REPORTER

It's not every day you get to navigate a narrow canyon, let alone travel upstream on a gurgling river, clambering up impossibly icy and huge waterfalls. It would almost seem to be defying nature, if not for the ice.

The beauty of Jasper's landscape and people is, if there's anything naturally beautiful worth visiting, someone has found a way to fully interact with it. And so, the ice climber finds themselves gripping onto frozen water, like an unknown superhero refusing to obey gravity.

The numbingly cold temperatures a few weeks ago iced the way for ideal climbing conditions around Jasper, particularly between the walls of the serene Bullshit Canyon, aka Gorbey Canyon ... but you won't find much BS here.

The columns of ice built up along the stone walls, visited briefly by cracks of sunlight, have set the scene for climbers, wildlife and even a marriage engagement (word is, she said 'yes').

The sport itself, if you could call it one, is less restrictive than rock climbing, offering countless places to drive your crampons or picks into the ice. Ice climbing guide Jordy Shepherd moved his climbing newbies through the canyon with a calm ease, as we graduated from a two-foot high incline to the more challenging waterfalls. As far as climbs are graded, the BS Canyon is somewhere between beginner and intermediate - a good place to start.

"I enjoy climbing with beginners because it is so rewarding to introduce people to the little known culture of waterfall ice climbing,"

Shepherd said. "I suspect it is the same for dive instructors, who regularly enable people to explore and enjoy the underwater environment."

He recommends other less-challenging climbs along the Icefields Parkway at Kerkeslin Falls, Melt Out and Tangle Falls. The Maligne Canyon also offers some good beginner spots.

The Parkway provides some more difficult climbs at Beauty Creek (Shades of Beauty, Curtain Call), and between the Columbia Icefields and Lake Louise - Weeping Wall, Polar Circus and numerous climbs on Mount Wilson and Mount Murchison.

It turns out that the Rocky Mountains offer some of the most beautiful and death-defying ice climbing on the continent, though none of it without its inherent risks. The best advice a guide can give you is not to fall on the ice, which, silly as it sounds, should be a top priority. Bruises and soreness are to be expected.

Shepherd suggests learning to climb when temperatures are just below freezing, so the cold doesn't deter the climber from enjoying the experience. Warm layers are a good idea, as well as bringing extra gloves and mitts in case one pair gets wet - ice melts, you know.

"Expect some frustration, as you will be starting at the 'consciously incompetent' stage of learning," Shepherd warned. "Don't push yourself to start leading ice climbs right away: the consequences of even a short leader fall are more severe than in rock climbing, as you have so many sharp points to catch on the ice."

For more information or to book your own guided climb, go to www.PeakAlpine.com.