

North face of the Grand Teton and Black Ice Couloir

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The Tetons make up the main chain of the Wyoming Rockies. They are of an Alpine nature with sound rock and reasonable snow, making them an excellent area for general mountaineering. Routes of all grades can be found, many of the newer ones the work of Beckey, Chouinard, Corbet, Ortenburger and Robbins.

Apart from the climbing attractions of the area there is a prolific wild-life population which one does not experience to the same degree in the Western Alps of Europe. It is not uncommon to come face to face with elk, deer or even bears on the main mountain trails *en route* to high camps.

The flora is another attraction in an attractive yet rugged and compact range. The Tetons, like Yosemite, are accessible and one finds during the summer climbing season a large climbing community around Jenny Lake, the equivalent of the Chamonix Biolay.

The North face of the Grand Teton is one of the classic routes of the range, 5.8 (old Teton grade VI) and approximately 2800 ft. The route is rock except for two snow-fields midway which in themselves present no problem. This route I had climbed in August 1968 with Dez Hadlum, Howie Richardson and Tom Winkler (U.S.A.). We bivouacked below the face late the previous evening on the Teton glacier. On arrival we could pick out a red bivouac sack two thirds up the face and later we were to meet another party on their way down after what was evidently an epic on the face.

Leaving in the early hours of the morning, we made our way across the Teton glacier and crossed the main bergschrund guarding the North face route. By this time we had split into two ropes of two, Dez leading one and myself the other. When conditions allowed we were able to move together. As we progressed we periodically came across slings left by the party that had made the first winter ascent in February that year. Objective dangers turned out to be less than expected, but another party who started the climb shortly afterwards turned back after 800 ft and had an exciting time roping down.

The climb took about nine hours and we were pleased with our good progress as route-finding can cause some delay on this climb. On making our way down the ordinary route we had a chance to see another aspect of this superb peak—the West face, which is very steep and drops down to an impressive ice-field a few hundred feet below.

From our position looking down and across the face we could see, and hear, a lot of falling rock and our glances at each other summed up our thoughts at the time as we continued down the ridge to the valley below.

Later, in conversation with American climbers we had met at Jenny Lake we heard of one of the most serious ice climbs in the Tetons—Black Ice Couloir—which Chouinard had attempted in 1958, but had been driven back by rockfall. To date this climb has had only a few ascents. However, all that was food for thought as we lay back sipping beer and bronzing under a hot sun.

In fact it was August, 1969, when I returned to the Tetons, this time in company with Gordon Mansell, Davey Todd and Tom Winkler, who had just returned from Europe and looked like 'King Spring' with all the latest climbing gear.

On our second visit Gordon and Davey intended to climb the North face while Tom and I tackled the West. The trip round to the West is a real slog though through some grand scenery. We were a little disappointed that the route did not have the aesthetic line of the North face route, yet glistening and leaning back slightly in the corner of this inner sanctum of the mountains was a superbly forbidding couloir rising from a broad opening into a very steep and narrow gully—Black Ice Couloir.

However, we had come to do the West face. Up to our bivouac that evening the climbing had been fairly mixed as there was still some ice on the face. The rock climbing had been around 5·4 except for the 500 ft of slabs that are often running in water. In fact, they were covered in névé which made them quite delicate.

Dawn saw us on the move after a spartan breakfast—we were unable to cook our dehydrated food because of the lack of water—and the first hour was again over mixed ground until we reached the edge of a very impressive ice-field. It was here that we got the first full view of Black Ice Couloir, cold and quiet.

The ice we were looking on was unusually blue and the situation impressive. Straightaway we could see how hard the ice would be, yet it was here we abandoned the West face in favour of the Couloir.

As soon as we started up the Couloir we were aware of the great exposure though the ice does not exceed 60°. The situations are seriously superb. From our position at the edge of the ice-field we cramponed up for a few rope's lengths to where the ice abuts on the rock below the West face proper. Here we found good rock belays before traversing diagonally right into the steepest section. Now it is about 700 ft to the Upper Saddle where one joins the ordinary route.

Periodically this section is interrupted by rock buttresses allowing one to get a reasonable stance and relieve the strain in the calf muscles after crampon work. It was in this upper section that I heard Tom swear and, before I even turned to look, the tinkle of his ice-axe as it plummeted down the couloir. It had slipped out of the strap on his sack as he started a rock section and from here on he used a long ice-peg.



61 *Steep ice on Grand Teton.* Photo: J. Noble

It was pleasant to leave the confines of the couloir after about eight hours for the Upper Saddle. The seriousness of the climb left us and we could relax a little in more hospitable surroundings.

Back at camp we met Ted Wilson, one of the Teton Park Rangers who had come to see us. Rumour had had it that there were two climbers in the couloir and we had only registered for the West face. We also found out that Chouinard and Lowe had made the seventh ascent of the couloir only a week before so ours was the eighth.

Though the system of registering for a climb does not meet with everyone's approval the method they adopt in the Tetons does not in any way detract from climbing plans. It's just to advise the over-ambitious when checking in for a climb and asking about their previous experience.

One could not hope to find a more genuine approach from the Rangers in passing on detail and information on climbs. They have a great selection of photographs showing routes which are a tremendous help to climbers. The Tetons are already beginning to attract a number of British climbers who visit the United States.