

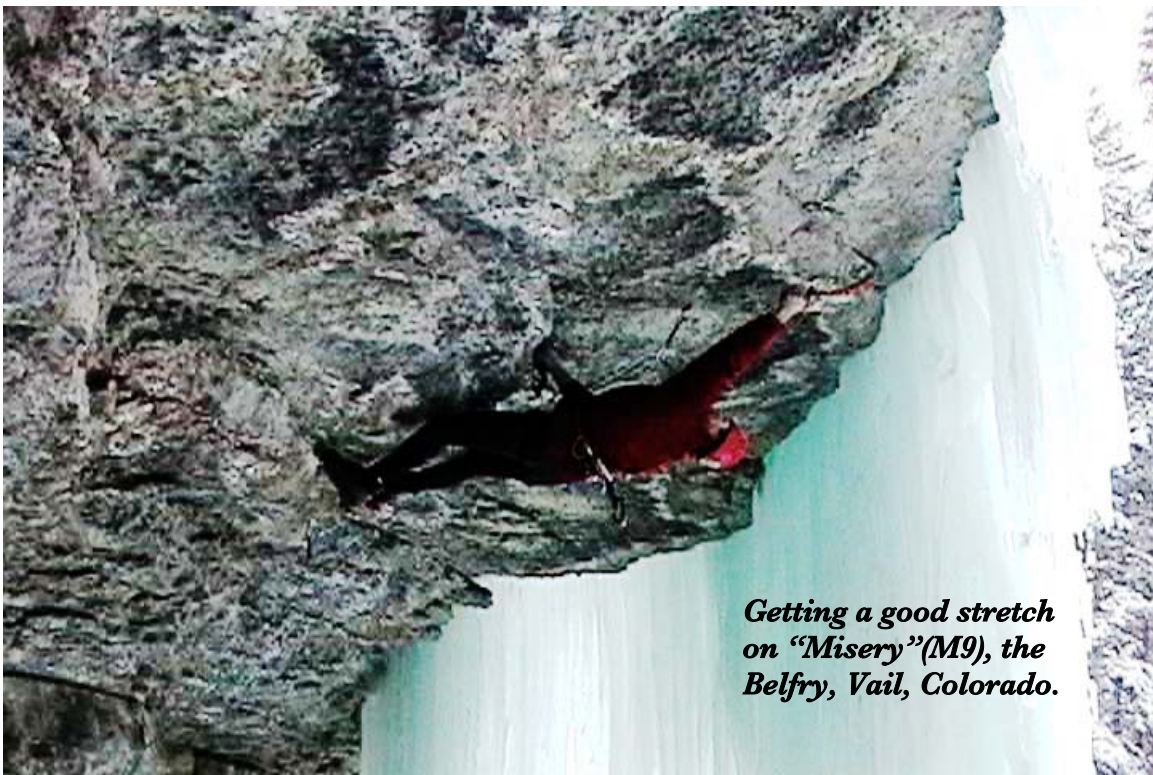
Vail Mini-Guide Part 1 The Belfry

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Modern mixed climbing, it can be argued, originated at Vail with Jeff Lowe's 1994 ascent of *Octopussy*, a groundbreaking M8 grade when it was climbed in the original form. Subsequent to this Will Gadd created the two-pitch test-piece *Amphibian*, the prototypic M9 followed by *Reptile* an early M10. Add to this the creation of *Fatman and Robin* (M9) by Pete Takeda and one can see that Vail was an early hotbed of extreme dry-tooling. Interest in route development waned somewhat following this initial flurry of activity until Rich Purnell initiated the current era of "drill n' tool" with the hand-bored *Misery* located in the Belfry. While the early lines such as *Octopussy* continue to attract ascents, the newer generation of routes such as those located in the Belfry are now the "must-do" routes for visiting climbers.

Vail is located two hours west of Denver on route I70. The majority of the climbs at Vail including those of the Belfry, are located on the south side of the road and so are north-facing. Generally speaking the Belfry lines come into condition by the first week of December and hold up pretty well until mid to late March. A hard frost is imperative to assure the integrity of the masonry at the Belfry, water readily percolates through the porous limestone there which when frozen improves but does not guarantee its integrity.



*Getting a good stretch
on "Misery"(M9), the
Belfry, Vail, Colorado.*

Access to the climbing at Vail is in a state of flux at the moment. Historically climbers have parked in the cul-de-sac on the south side of the road at the bridge that crosses Gore Creek. This had led to conflict with the homeowners there, cars get ticketed and so forth. The best place to park is to the west of the *Designator* cirque off the Frontage Road at the "blockhouse" where there are public toilets. Park intelligently so other people can crowd in as the day wears on. Another spot is on the north side of I70 at the academy/school, there was overflow parking for the Booth Creek trailhead here at one time although the school staff has objected to skiers and climbers parking in this lot during the week as their staff need the spaces (not a problem on the weekend when school is not in session). As always access is an issue so use common sense in parking (i.e., don't roll up in front of a 2.5\$ million ski home, take a big piss in the snow bank, strip to your drawers whilst scratching your hairy arse and start hollering the "F" word every other syllable). Lastly, use the snowshoe/hiking trail, stay off the groomed ski trail, and leave your bloody dog at home.

No special equipment is needed for the Belfry (or the climbing at Vail, in general), since the Belfry is an immense freezer most days a down jacket is indispensable for bouts of belaying and hanging out. You will want ice screws to protect the ice exits of these routes and for anchoring belays. If you leave draws on these routes be aware that other climbers may simply view these items as booty and remove (steal) them. A stick clip equipped with a Trango *Squid* is invaluable to clip and retrieve quick draws from the bolts in the Belfry.

The Belfry, Vail's Best Mixed Cave

Within the deep subconscious of all modern hominids lurks the desire to reside in caves. It's that blasted ice age, when our forbearers journeyed out of Africa in search of tasty mega-fauna and gave our now defunct Neanderthal cousins the boot from all those cozy limestone grottos. We seem hardwired to



Something for everybody, The Belfry in mid-winter conditions. Photo: courtesy of Rich Purnell.

retreat within their muted confines when the snow flies, time to flake out a couple of spear points, gnaw on a ripe lump of mastodon meat, see what's shakin' with Mrs. Ogg.

So, for that latent Cro-Magnon within us all, there is the Belfry at Vail, Colorado. The Belfry has all the modern conveniences, cold running water, a roomy if not frigid interior and climbs of all difficulty from WI4 to M9. You could spend a day at The Belfry, or the better part of a season, the routes are just that good. The Belfry is located uphill in the drainage above the popular ice route *Spiral Stairs*, you may reach it by first climbing *Spiral Stairs* and then trudging up the obvious track. Alternatively, The Belfry may be reached by following the trail east out of the *Rigid Designator* amphitheater along the hillside until a short dihedral/chimney is reached with a fixed rope hanging in it. Climb this (awkward, M4, wear your helmet) and once above this bear up the hill and left until The Belfry is reached, about 15-20 minutes above the fixed ropes.

There are two and sometimes up to three obvious ice climbs at The Belfry, they are from left to right *Pencil* and *Eraser*. Early in the season these routes

are little more than a collection of icicles and offer stiff leads in the WI5 range, though by late season they are immense, rutted-out and pretty much WI3+. The mixed routes are the real attraction. In total



Battling it out at the much-dreaded lip on "Svengali"

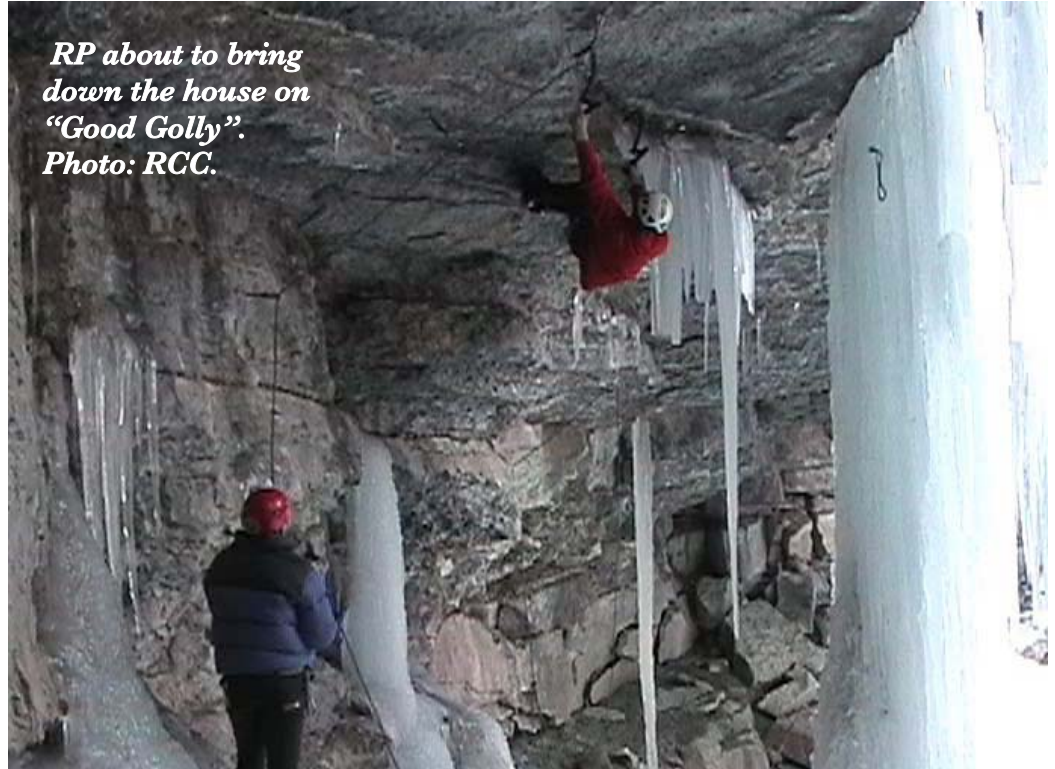
there are five distinct bolted routes and at least two noteworthy variations. Indeed the *Trilogy* of routes *Svengali*, *Quasimodo* and *Misery* should be on the shopping list of anyone that fancies being a "mixed climber". Do them all in a day and you've earned your pint for sure.

Viewed from left to right (east to West) the bolted routes are *Svengali* (M9), *Quasimodo* (M9), *Misery* (M9), *Esmerelda* (M7+) and *Bats* (M6). I will begin with *Svengali*.

If you are used to a lot of bolts on your M climbs then this and some of the other routes at The Belfry you might find a tad unnerving. There are bolts for sure, but just enough to protect the climbing and I will warn you that the fourth clip is often something of a moment of truth. Don't let my admonition put you off though, this route is stellar, three stars all the way, but inflated egos tend to have a way of losing some PSI on this little Colorado cactus. This is the left-most line of four bolts, surmount a short orange-yellow wall at the back of the cave and then execute a series of increasingly inspired reaches out a succession of overlaps clipping two more bolts on your way. Just when the ice appears tantalizingly close one must acquiesce to the counterintuitive and head left using a seam above the obvious overlap to sortie to bolt #4. Clip it if you can (you better!), then set up for a big throw to the lip discovering a well-worn but discrete hold. Having made your move it is time to get untangled and move right to gain the ice of *Pencil*. You will want an ice screw or two as this short but ferocious route tends to put the pump on board and a fall off the ice onto the last bolt from any height would be spectacular. There are

slings at the top of the route around the tree, take care up there as the ice exit is often wet and rotten.

Although originally done without them, spurs and leashless tools are a plus on this route. I believe the M9 rating is pretty accurate, the dry-tooling doesn't get any easier although as the *Pencil* adds weight it inches closer to the point where



Svengali surmounts the lip. You can get to *Pencil* after the third bolt, this variation is known as *Good Golly* (M8) and is an entertaining journey in itself incorporating the stellar opening moves of *Svengali* with some unique climbing out right along an icy overlap until one can swing onto the back side of *Pencil*. You can then climb around the front of *Pencil* for the glory, if you place a screw in the back of *Pencil* put a long sling on it so your belayer doesn't have to listen to you carp about rope drag higher up.

Moving right along, *Quasimodo* (M9) is the next line of bolts, the second set from the left. The last of the *Belfry Trilogy* to be added¹, *Quasi*' powers up over a short orange bulge (often topped with ice) to stick a major pocket in the roof high above. Generally speaking the reaches are expansive on this route, the holds follow a shallow corner/overlap towards *Pencil*, but then move back right in a technical sequence to surmount a satellite curtain (an alternate exit exists to climb straight up from the lip!).

Quasimodo is another four-bolt rig, again the spur is useful on this one. *Bellringer* is the 3 bolt variant (M8) that travels straight to the *Pencil* without sampling the brutal crux of *Quasi*, this is quite good as well. Traveling further right still is *Misery*, the first route to go-in, the holes drilled by hand no less. Originally sporting both pins and bolts, there are now five bolts plus a knife-blade piton stuck in the roof between 4 & 5. The rather scratchy opening

¹ *Svengali*, *Quasimodo*, *Misery* and *Bats* were all bolted then led by Rich Purnell, *Esmerelda* was bolted by Pete Takeda.

moves move up the black wall at the back of the cave then a big move past #3 bolt begins the final sequence out the roof. As you pass the fixed blade pause

to admire the fossils embedded in the roof above you, consider the embrace of the warm tropical sea as you try and thaw your hands out! A game reach is needed to gain a key hold at the crux of *Misery*, With the curtain so close you can lick it composing



Besotted by the beauty of "Esmerelda" (M7+), Vail, Colorado.

oneself is necessary before the ice can actually be attained, fantastic route, three stars!

Moving on to the West, *Esmerelda* is the next set of bolts and the only "moderate" route (M7+) to gain the main ice features at the Belfry. This is a quality route on four bolts that gains the ice curtain to the left of *Eraser*, an excellent introduction to the climbing at the Belfry. Even further to the left (west) in the rock scar is *Bats* (M6), thin, meditative hooking up to a pee-yellow curtain replete with roots and vegetables, absolutely fabulous.

That should keep you guys entertained for a while² A final note, it is not really possible to top-rope the harder M lines in the Belfry as the horizontal distance they span is roughly that of the height of the routes, if you fall off on TR you will probably just smash into the ground. Lastly, this is a popular cave, not your potty, don't poop or pee inside the cave or anywhere near it, there, I said it.

² Bored? From the Belfry walk east along the cliff wall for 20 minutes or so, you will come to "The Abbey", contained herein is *Nosfaratu* (M10), an imposing test-piece and one of the more substantial roof undertakings at Vail. Plenty of room for more bolts here, although the majority of lines will not find ice.

WARNING!!!

Mixed climbing is a fun and rewarding activity but it is always exceedingly dangerous. In the twelve or so years I have been climbing at Vail I have personally witnessed or viewed the aftermath of any number of spectacular accidents, the majority of them involving “expert” climbers. There is no bigger drag than hiking up to the crag to be greeted by a big patch of bloodstained snow, the hazards at Vail include but are not limited to bolts pulling out or breaking, ropes getting cut, being impaled by your or someone else’s ice tools, being crushed by falling masses of ice or detached blocks of razor-sharp stone, ground-falls, knocking your teeth or an eye out with an ice tool, getting avalanched, or having an ice climb fall on you. Be on your guard at all times! Don’t loiter under hanging icicles or other climbers engaged in climbing routes, and don’t smoke pot when you climb. Pay attention to your guy when you are belaying them and do not talk to or otherwise distract people who are belaying. The presence of bolts does not connote safety, there are plenty of scissor blocks on established routes at Vail just waiting for you to pull on them so they can decapitate you or some poor sod below. Wear your helmet at all times, get in the habit of residing in sheltered areas well away from danglers or established routes and if an area is crowded move along to another area of the crag. Although a carnival atmosphere can ensue at Vail especially on weekends, it is prudent to trust your own judgment and avoid the “monkey see monkey do” mentality in choosing what route to do, two parties attempting to climb the *Fang* at the same time is sheer lunacy and that is that.