



GEAR OF THE WEEK

Heat Holders Thermal Leggings, £24.99

These base layer thermal leggings provide high-performance insulation against the cold.

They have a tog rating of 0.61, which means they offer a good weight to warmth ratio.

The soft brushed inside maximises the amount of warm air held close to the skin.

They are suitable for winter walking, climbing, skiing and generally enjoying the great outdoors when it's cold.

The leggings come in male and female fit. There are matching long-sleeved tops too.

■ See heatholders.co.uk

ICELAND OF FREE

Skiers with season tickets for Scottish resorts will be able to ski or snowboard free in Iceland, thanks to a new deal.

Heather Negus, chairwoman of Ski-Scotland, said: "With daily flights linking Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh with Reykjavik, we believe many of our customers will take advantage of the chance to ski or snowboard on new terrain."

Skiers who have season tickets for one of the five Scottish resorts – Cairn Gorm Mountain, Glencoe Mountain, Glenshee, Nevis Range or The Lecht – or an all-area season pass from Ski-Scotland, can take up the offer.

The same will be true for Icelandic skiers coming to Scotland, thanks to the scheme created by the North Atlantic Ski Areas' Association.

TRAILBLAZER

The 57-mile long Cowal Way in Argyll has been awarded the status of one of Scotland's Great Trails by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH).

The Cowal Way is the 28th Long Distance Route (LDR) to be given the accolade, along with world-famous paths including the Great Glen Way and the West Highland Way.

Acclaimed as one of Scotland's most diverse LDRs, the Cowal Way, which was established in 2000, offers walkers beautiful coastlines, dramatic scenery, heritage and wildlife.

■ See www.cowalway.co.uk

Swing in the freeze

Have you tried?



FIONA RUSSELL

Ice climbing isn't for the faint-hearted and you're going to need skill and experience before making any attempts on Scotland's famous routes. Luckily, there are great indoor facilities for climbers of all levels to hone their skills – no matter what the weather

Advice and ideas

Ice climbing

What is it?

Ice climbing is the activity of scaling mountain faces when they are covered in ice and snow.

Tell me more...

Ice climbing is an increasingly popular winter sport in Scotland, thanks to a wide variety of climbing routes.

Many routes, such as those on the north face of Ben Nevis, are acclaimed worldwide.

Participants use ice axes and spiked crampons fixed to boots to help them climb the ice.

Practise and skill is required before attempting outdoor ice climbing routes.

The Scottish weather can also be fickle and many climbers practise on indoor walls.

There are two indoor ice climbing facilities, the Ice Factor Kinlochleven in the Highlands and Snow Factor at Soar INTU Braehead, near Glasgow.

After learning techniques indoors, it's possible to progress to outdoor ice climbing, although it's safer to go with a mountaineering guide before climbing with friends.

Try indoor climbing

Ice climbing walls allow all kinds of climbers, from beginner to expert, to practise year round.

It might seem a bit odd to find ice climbing walls indoors but both Ice Factor and Snow Factor feature exactly that.

Real ice and snow are used in chilled rooms to create artificial walls that feel and look like the real thing.

In fact, the indoor ice climbing wall at the Ice Factor is claimed as the world's biggest.

Some 500tons of real snow and ice reach to a height of 45ft, with a range of graded routes.

An Ice Factor spokesman said:



ICE WARRIOR Scot Anna Wells, of Team GB's ice climbing team

"Our indoor ice climbing wall is the ideal environment for learning and practising all aspects of ice climbing.

"There are easier angled snow slopes for beginners through to much more challenging vertical ice routes for more experienced climbers. Instructors can show people of all skill levels how to climb the ice."

The giant indoor ice climbing wall at Snow Factor features up to 20 roped climbs to try.

The routes are graded from easy to challenging – and there is also an overhanging section for a bigger test.

Expert view

World acclaimed Scottish climber Dave MacLeod appreciates the opportunity to climb ice, whatever the weather outdoors.

He said: "Thanks to Scotland's ice climbing walls, there is no need to wait ages for the right weather, walk miles up snowy mountains, or serve your apprenticeship in winter

mountaineering skills. You just step in a big fridge and start swinging some ice tools.

"Some people will just want to try it for fun, some will want to use it to fine-tune their ice climbing technique and some will train for the ice climbing world cup.

"It doesn't matter – the point is you clock up the metres on real ice without the normal hassles of winter mountaineering."

The novice

I tried ice climbing at the Snow Factor and found it to be challenging but enjoyable.

At first, it was hard to trust that the ice axes and crampons would hold me on the ice wall.

The instructor showed me how to place the points of the axes in the ice and kick in the crampon spikes.

It's important to engage core muscles and to have three points of contact for stability.

Tense muscles tire quickly and after about five short routes over an hour, I was exhausted.

Practise and experience will make ice climbing a lot more rewarding and then I might even venture outdoors but with an experienced guide.

What kit do I need?

Climbers should wear their own waterproof jacket and over-trousers, base layers, hat, gloves and thick socks.

You can use your own, or hire ice climbing specific kit, including stiff winter mountaineering boots, crampons, ice axes, harness and rope.

More information

Indoor ice climbing at Ice Factor at www.ice-factor.co.uk and Snow Factor at www.snowfactor.com

Book mountaineering guides for outdoor ice climbing.



SLIDE SHOW
Learning the ropes at Ice factor Kinlochleven

Join me on my adventures in Scotland's great outdoors by checking out my award-winning website at www.fionaoutdoors.co.uk – you'll find lots of great information about walking, cycling, running and other outdoor activities, as well as kit reviews.