



## Spiti Valley, New Ice Climbs

India, Himachal Pradesh

Karsten Delap on the black ice of Frozen Diesel (HWI 6+). Photo by Austin Schmitz

**Karsten Delap and I spent the first two weeks of January 2019 ice climbing in the Indian Himalaya, just outside the village of Kaza in the Spiti Valley. The Spiti Valley is a trans-Himalayan desert, near the border with China. It is extremely remote, with only a rudimentary road in and out. During our expedition, we observed snow leopards and a wealth of biodiversity.**

The village of Kaza is located at an elevation of approximately 12,500 feet. Because of its topography, for centuries, it has been cut off during the winter from the rest of the population of India and its neighbors. The local people suffer great economic heartache during the harsh winter months. Many of the residents in the village of Kaza are forced to leave their home and the region because of the lack of economic opportunity at this time of year.

Our expedition grew out of a chance bar meeting with Karn Kowshik at the Michigan Ice Festival. Karn, who lives in the Himalayan foothills, was one of the organizers of the planned Piti Dharr ice climbing festival in Spiti, and he invited me to participate. We had a mutual desire to help the emerging Indian climbing community in the region with badly needed gear and climbing education, and the expedition emerged.

During our short visit, we established nine first ascents, including Snow Leopard (180m, HWI 7), north of Kaza near the village of Kibber, now the hardest water ice line in the Indian Himalaya. (The Himalayan Water Ice, or HWI, grade system was developed locally and does not correspond directly to Western water ice grades; it also takes into account the high elevation of the climbs.) With the local Spiti climber Bharat Bhushan, we also established Frozen Diesel (HWI 6+) near the village of Tabo. The route is a continuous 360m of ice, ending in a spectacular pillar pitch that is fed by a mineral-rich spring, giving the route an unusual black-ice aesthetic. Climber Karn Kowshik and I established Cowboys in the Mist (150m, HWI 5) and Karsten, Karn, and Prerna Dangi established Stairway to Something (380m, HWI 4).

As a part of our trip, Karsten and I also helped establish a safe teaching crag with bolted anchors, donated climbing equipment, and taught at the Piti Dharr festival.

We passed hundreds of potential new ice routes while traveling in the region and only scratched the surface. Perhaps the most significant accomplishment was not our first ascents but helping this emerging community with knowledge and badly needed equipment. Since our departure, the locals have established numerous new routes and held a second year of their ice climbing festival. With responsible practices and input from the local community, ice climbing can offer the people of Spiti Valley severely needed help in the winter months.

– Ari Novak, USA

## Images



Karsten Delap on the black ice of Frozen Diesel (HWI 6+).



Ari Novak on the first ascent of Cowboys in the Mist (HWI5) in the Spiti V



Ari Novak on the first ascent of Cowboys in the Mist (HWI5) in the Spiti V

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