



## AAC Publications

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### **Chitistone Mountain, Hot French Grotto**

Alaska, Wrangell Mountains, Wrangell–St. Elias National Park

**In March 2023, Elias Antaya, Ethan Berkeland, Jonathan Koenig, and I were having a productive cabin-based trip climbing beautiful ice lines throughout the Chitistone Valley in the Wrangell Mountains.** After repeating Broken Dreams (1,500', WI6, Comstock-Dial-Tobin, 1987), we were looking for a more leisurely day, which is what brought us to the base of Grotto Creek. Friends with whom we were sharing the National Park Service's Peavine cabins had explored partway up the creek during one of their many days of awaiting good skiing conditions, and told us we had to check it out. From the cabins, it was a mere two-mile approach to the creek along a flat, wind-scoured riverbed.

What we found was one of the most beautiful and aesthetically pleasing ice formations I've ever set eyes upon: a brittle and blob-filled staircase followed by spiraling WI4+ ice pillars. Climbing this 200' pitch brought us to the main canyon floor of Grotto Creek. With sheer 500' walls guarding access from above and the previously unclimbed ice below, it is likely a place no one had ever set foot before us. We postholed with giddy anticipation of the other ice that might be waiting ahead. A quarter mile up the canyon, after soloing past several short WI1/2 ice steps, we found what we would name the Hippy Death Train pitch. The ice burrowed into and out of the narrowing canyon walls, making the whole scenario more reminiscent of navigating a slot canyon in the Utah desert than climbing an Alaskan peak.

By 4 p.m., we realized that we'd gotten more than we bargained for on our "rest day." I was ready to pull the plug on our exhausting slog up the canyon, but Elias, Ethan, and Jonathan were curious to explore "just a few more turns."

There was only one more, actually—and it brought another spectacular ice flow. My lack of enthusiasm vanished as I racked up for St. Patty's Pillar, a beautiful 60-foot WI4 sheltered by the canyon's walls from the Alaskan sun (which was wreaking havoc on most other ice throughout the Chitistone Valley). But now we were racing the oncoming darkness.

"The ice ends here," Elias hollered down after he topped out the last of four ice steps, leading to a spot just below the canyon rim. Thank god, I said to myself. However, as we were preparing to rappel, Ethan untied and scrambled up for a better look at the cliffs above. To my chagrin, he yelled, "There's more ice up here!" Knowing we couldn't safely continue at that moment, we left with some FOMO of the left-undone.

Once back at the Peavine cabins, we decided we had to return. Three days later, we regained our high point, much faster this time, as the trail we'd blazed on the first attempt made for quick progress.

Above, we found three sun-affected WI4 ice steps through a 350' band of rock. These brought us onto snow slopes, on which we wallowed higher and higher, eventually finding a second rock band with four more WI4 ice steps that finished on the summit plateau of Chitistone Mountain. We were now certain that there could be no more technical climbing above. We rappelled the line, content at having established Hot French Grotto (IV WI4+). The route has approximately 1,400' of technical climbing (12 pitches) and 3,500' of total gain. After the initial WI4+ pitch, nearly every pitch weighed in at solid and sustained WI4. The full round-trip effort took us 14 hours.



## Images



Looking at the four ice steps leading up from the main canyon floor of Grotto Creek, starting with St. Patty's Pillar (WI4).



Tristan O'Donoghue preparing to solo the Hippy Death Train pitch (WI3) on the team's first foray up Hot French Grotto (IV WI4+).



Chitistone Mountain (6,844 feet) from the southeast, showing the upper part of Hot French Grotto through the eastern rock bands of the mountain. The upper wall of the Grotto Canyon gorge is visible below, descending to the left.



Tristan O'Donoghue hiking to the final rock band on Hot French Grotto, which had the most sun-affected pitches of the climb.



Elias Antaya and Ethan Berkeland hiking down from the final four steps of ice (WI4) that brought the team to the summit plateau of Chitistone Mountain.

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