

Staying on top during the Bozeman Ice Festival

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Blue ice clings to canyon walls, creating a colorful contrast to the steep rock faces of Hyalite Canyon. Climbers inch their way up the frozen surface with axes and crampons, many having traveled from around the world to experience this world class venue.

Now embarking on its seventeenth season, the Bozeman Ice Festival continues to attract climbers of all abilities to Hyalite Canyon. This festival showcases the best of what ice climbing in Southwestern Montana has to offer. The climbing clinics, gear demos and live entertainment, including the UIAA North American Championships, make this a world class event.

Hyalite Canyon is a natural venue, offering a variety of climbing options ranging from beginner to advanced in difficulty. It's a place of striking beauty but there is a darker side to Hyalite recessed deep within the canyon walls. High above the valley floor, long-narrow drainages make perfect avenues for avalanches. Because many of the climbs in Hyalite are situated in tight narrow gullies, the consequences of even a small slide are magnified. Sadly in 2009, professional climber Guy Lacelle was killed in Hyalite Canyon when he was caught in an avalanche while climbing and swept over a 70 meter cliff.

Because many of the starting zones originate high above the climbs in Hyalite, it is sometimes difficult to know if you are in a run-out zone or not. As a general rule of thumb, the west facing side of Hyalite Canyon is more prone to avalanche activity. This area is home to popular climbs such as the Genesis I and II, Mummy's/Scepter, Avalanche Gulch, Silken Falls, and the Dribbles area. On the east side, special attention should be given to the slopes around Twin Falls and Cleopatra's Needle.

During the Ice festival, climbers are encouraged to check the avalanche advisory (available on the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center's website at www.mtavalanche.com) and stay informed on current snow and weather conditions. While recreating in the canyon, it is imperative that climbers know the whereabouts of other climbers and use common sense when traveling above or below other groups. Due to the confined nature of Hyalite's terrain, there is risk of climbers kicking ice and snow onto climbers below. Active communication between party members and other groups is a good way to avoid accidents.

Using good judgment and keeping informed on current snow conditions will help to make this year's ice festival a safe and memorable experience for all.