

## North American Classic Route

### Description



## Mt. Athabasca, North Face

Grade III, 5.4, mostly snow/ice at 40-55 degrees

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**Getting there:** Mt. Athabasca is part of the Columbia Ice Fields, a huge ice cap on the border between Banff and Jasper National Park. It lies 105km (65mi) south of the city of Jasper, and is also almost on the border between the two provinces. Access is via the Icefield Parkway. From Calgary, travel west on Hwy 1, then turn north on Hwy 93 when the two intersect.

**Accommodations:** The Columbia Icefields campground is almost at the base of the mountain. It is for tents only, and is often full during the main tourist season. The next closest campground is at Jonas Creek, about 30km (18mi) north. It will handle RVs as well. There is a hotel/restaurant called the Icefield Chalet, which you can find with a web search. Other facilities at the Icefields include a Visitor's Center with climbing wardens. You should go there to get the latest information on conditions, and to register for the climb (recommended, not required.)

**The Approach:** You'll want an early start (3-4:00am seems about right, depending on your pace), and fortunately the parking lot right at the base is open during the night. Ask at the Visitor's Center for directions, or just figure it out - there is only one spur road heading toward the west at the base of the mountain. During the day this road is open only to the big glacier buggies that ferry tourists out onto the glacier. You'll be able to hear their diesel engines all day as you are on the climb. When you come down from the climb, just wait for one of these to come along and open the gate. From the parking lot, start up a good climber's trail to the left of the roaring creek coming down from the glacier below Athabasca's North Face. The trail goes up a moraine, and eventually brings you to the edge of the glacier. Put on crampons and rope here, and traverse SE toward a small saddle extending down from the subsidiary peak to the right (west) of Athabasca. There are usually a few easily avoided crevasses in this section. This hump is called Silverhorn. At the saddle, you'll have a clear view of the face, and can pick a good line over the Bergschrund at the base of the face, the first crux section. Traverse over to your chosen line, and climb more or less straight up toward an obvious break in the rock band guarding the summit. The face is about 8 pitches long. This is an estimate, since I've only simul-climbed it. The rock band provides a short steep section that can be very poor rock, or iced over rock. There are a few poor pieces of fixed rock protection close to the crux, but I recommend placing a good screw just below the rock. After about 10m (30ft) of mixed climbing, you can move right to an alcove that has good fixed pitons for a belay. Now it is one more rope initially up a groove to the left, which opens up to become the summit snowfield. There is rarely a cornice here, so you can step over to belay on the other side of the ridge - just drop down a bit so the rope goes up and over, and you won't need an anchor.

If there are others on the route, you should pick a line away from them. Fortunately the face is quite consistent in angle from left to right, so this isn't a problem. Depending on conditions, a line can be chosen through the rock band to the right of the break that is not very much more difficult. This is a good option if the route is crowded.

**Descent:** Go down the West Ridge over the Silverhorn to the saddle, then go down to rejoin your approach route. This is a well-beaten path in high season.

