

North American Classic Route Description



Mt. Edith Cavell, East Ridge

Grade III, 5.3, mostly snow/ice at 40-55 degrees

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Disclaimer: No written description is a substitute for route-finding skill. Use your own judgment in all cases rather than depend on the information here, for which neither the author nor the publisher makes any claims of accuracy or usefulness.

Getting there: Mt. Edith Cavell is in Jasper National Park. It lies 25km (15m) south of the town of Jasper. Take Hwy 93 south for 7km, then turn right on Hwy 93A. Turn right at 5.4km onto the spur road to the mountain (well signed). This steep twisty road takes you 12km to a large parking area at the base of the North Face, with toilets, but no camping.

Accommodations: The most convenient campgrounds are Whistlers and Wapiti, both within easy driving distance. Whistlers is one of the biggest in Canada, with 781 sites. There are non-campfire sites for the asking if you'd rather breathe air than smoke. Wapiti CG is actually closer to the route, just 1 km south of the turnoff to the spur road on Hwy 93A. Jasper is a major tourist town with many hotels and restaurants, and a mountain shop called "Gravity Sports". The Park Headquarters and Visitor Center are in town, and are worth a visit to inquire about weather, conditions (ask for a climbing warden), and to register for the climb (recommended, not required).

The Approach: If you start from town ~ 4:00am, you'll have first light early on the approach trail, and not have to carry a headlamp (I'm assuming regular season of June-August). Hike the main trail leading around the east side of the lake. This is paved at first, then gravel, then it turns uphill to the left. You don't want to go that way, so leave the trail and travel over a rough moraine directly toward the saddle at the base of the East Ridge. There will be a few cairns to help, but it isn't too important to try to stay on a trail, of which there are many, all poor. The final slope up to the saddle is a permanent snowfield. Use crampons and ice axe on this, the most frequent site of accidents requiring rescue in Jasper Park! It looks easy, and is, but tourists without the right gear take the big slide down this every year.

The Route: From the saddle, pick out a line up blocky terraces about a rope length left of the true ridge. Wander (3rd class) up and gradually right to the ridge crest. A few snowfields will be found on the way to the big shoulder. After a long flat section of ridge, the real climb begins. Gain the rock right (north) of the ridge crest, and scramble up steep but easy rock to a terrace area below even steeper rock. The crux chimney is above and left. Two leads of low-5th class climbing with good protection put you above the major difficulties. Scramble up on easy rock to a final major wall on the right side of the ridge. Although this looks difficult, the holds are boot-sized, so it is barely 5th class, if at all. This is the best section of the climb, with good steep rock and substantial exposure. Above this wall, which is about a rope-length long, the ridge kicks back to more blocky scrambling. A few rope-lengths later, you'll meet the summit snow slopes. The summit is a short distance away.

The Descent: The most efficient way down is to retrace your steps, with a few rappels over the steep sections. However, route finding is much more difficult going down on this route; subsidiary ridges that merge with the main one give no problem on the way up, but they provide a profusion of alternatives going down. Even parties who have done the route before have gotten lost on the East

Ridge descent. The usual descent is down the West Ridge and SW basin, accomplishing a full traverse of the mountain.

Go over the summit, at first sticking to the ridge. At a difficult step, traverse out left (S), and then back N to the ridge. This is the crux of the descent, and can actually be the most dangerous part of the entire climb, since it often has black ice over crumbling rock slabs. A fall here would be serious, but crampons can eliminate the danger. Once back to the main ridge, stay on it to the obvious big saddle below. Now begin a wandering descent of terraces, all covered with unstable piles of rocks, to the valley below. This is a long and tiring descent. If your route finding is good, you'll avoid doing any difficult climbing. It is so complex that a description is impossible, but generally head down to the main drainage, cross it to the right, then back to the left on a major terrace about two-thirds of the way down. Multiple zig-zags are necessary as you reach each terrace and traverse it to find the path of least resistance to the next. See image 27J20 in this collection for a diagram.

When you reach the meadow, follow the creek small down and right (W). A climbers' trail has developed on the right bank. After ~30 minutes of this, you'll intersect the main trail along Verdant Creek. This intersects the trail in the Tonquin Valley. Turn right and trudge back up to the road. Now at least one person in your party will need to hike up the road to fetch the car. Drive back to town for a well-deserved beer.

You'll also want:

- Map 83 D/9, Amethyst Lakes
- Selected Alpine Climbs in the Canadian Rockies, by Sean Dougherty

Suggested technical gear:

- Mountain boots, capable of taking crampons. Rock shoes unnecessary.
- Ice axe & crampons.
- Rope & small rock rack (medium stoppers to 2" hex, ~ 8 pieces total).
- Slings, single and double, ~ 6.