

LÆRDAL: ICE CLIMBING GUIDE

Map: Statens Kartverk 1:50000 Turkart No. 2529

Access: From Bergen take the E16 via Voss, Gudvangen and Aurland (3-3½hr, normally clear of snow). From Oslo take the E16 via Hønefoss and Fagernes (4-4 ½ hr, high *ffjell* section often closed by snow). Alternatively, from Oslo go to Hønefoss, then take the RN7 to Gol, RN52 to Hemsedal (ski and ice climbing centre) continuing over the Hemsedalfjellet (1200m) to Lærdal (4½ -5hr, 1½ hr from Hemsedal).

Valley Base: Lærdalsøyri is the main town at the foot of the valley with shops, garage, a cultural centre with pub/restaurant and a café.

Accommodation: Lærdal Feriepark is the main campsite in the valley and is open in winter, offering comfortable heated cabins and apartments; full information on: www.laerdalferiepark.com , tel: +47 57 66 66 95.

Topography and Layout: The main Lærdalen runs a twisting course eastwards for 40km from Lærdalsøyri at sea level on a branch of the Sognefjord to Borlaug at 500m where the E16 and RN 52 routes join. There are two major side valleys, Råsdalen and Tynjadalen, which run south from the lower section of Lærdalen. The enclosing mountains are between 1400 and 1600m in altitude and in most sectors the valley walls rise precipitously to well over 1000m in height. The known ice climbing potential of the valley can be divided into five main sections:

- 1) Lærdalsfjorden and Erdal
- 2) Lower Lærdalen
- 3) Råsdalen
- 4) Mid- Lærdalen
- 5) Hoggeberg and Upper Lærdalen

Season and Climbing Conditions: Lærdal offers ice climbing at all altitudes from sea level to 1100m. Very few places in the valley receive any sunlight between December and February, and given a couple of weeks of cold weather low-level waterfalls can come into condition early in the season. By late-January most higher-volumes waterfalls are frozen and usually remain so until mid-March. By contrast lower level ice and any falls that have southerly aspect usually melt or collapse by the end of February.

Weather Forecasts: www.yr.no gives detailed outlooks by town and region (in Norwegian language)

ICE CLIMBING SECTORS:

1) Lærdalsfjorden and Erdal:

Vikaberget (grid ref MN154147, aspect NNW, altitude 400-550m) A major icefall 3km W of Lærdalsøyri, overlooking the fjord. Take the road W signposted Vindedalen from the roundabout by the *feriepark* and hotel. Approach by a rising traverse from Hjellen farm in Erdal (1¼ hr). The stream below the main fall may sometimes freeze allowing a continuous ascent direct from the road at sea level at WI 3 standard.

Main Fall 180m IV, WI 5 (climbed direct) or **WI 4** (climbed on left side): an excellent scenic route giving a steep second pitch then three pleasant slabby pitches of WI 3/3+ to the top; descent by abseil.

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Left-hand Fall 90m IV, WI 5 : a steep ramp 50m L of the main fall offers a fine sustained 2-pitch route

Other climbing: With a good freeze and generous water flow the cliff-band 400m E of the main fall will provide some superb testing climbs of 120m in strongly-featured rock with mixed climbing potential.

Stigagjeli: (MN 145732, aspect W, alt. 600-700m) **“The Stig” 130m II, WI 3** A nice slabby 3-pitch beginner’s icefall tucked away up in Erdal, well seen from the valley road (288). Park at road-end past Sel farm. Approach by footpath towards Mork for 1km then cut up on N side of Stigagjeli valley, traversing into the gorge at 460m (1½hr). Descend by abseil. The fall will be buried after heavy snowfall.

2) Lower Lærdalen

Stødnafossen (MN 192763, aspect S, alt. 250m) This accessible low level fall is 80-100m high and will freeze in early season to give good sport at WI 4+/5 standard; fully exposed to the sun so rarely in condition after early February.

Haugsgjel (MN 213727, aspect NW, alt. 500-700m) **Main Fall 240m IV, WI 4+/5** (with left-hand start) **V, WI 5/5+** (with central start) A superb climb in a wild box canyon, and well worth the 500m slog to its base; in condition most of the season. Leave the road on the E side of Lærdalselvi just S of Haug farm; cross fields and climb through birch-wood to the boulder-field in the lower canyon; ascend the boulders to the sharp right-turn into the upper canyon; mainly snow from here for 130m to the base of the route (1¾- 2hr).

The Left-Hand route has a sustained 1st pitch of 55m, a shorter second wall of 25m, then traverses R to climb a central line through the upper tiers in three pitches; descend by abseils down the ice.

The Central start is steeper and harder, with difficult ice formations and some water flow. There are two lines in the final tier right of the normal route which look to offer wild 40m pitches of WI 5+/6.

Systemre (MN 217684, aspect NNW, alt. 300-600m) The “Three Sisters” drop in lovely threads down the forested slopes of Boahovden. They give long attractive routes with potential for thin sections of watery ice on slabby ground, but often melt out after mid-season. 1hr approach slog up woods from Grøtøyane. Descend by abseil.

Left-hand Sister V, WI 5+, 400m First recorded in 1984 by Dave Brearshears and Erik Enitch; thin and delicate to start, then easier; could be a grade easier in thicker ice conditions

Central and Right-hand lines Both look in the WI 4+/5 range but grade will depend on ice build-up.

Bøafossen (MN 228686, aspect NNE, alt. 200m) **IV, WI 4, 90m** An eye-catching line just above the valley floor; formation requires sustained cold as the water flow is considerable; usually melts out in early February; offers a good 2 pitch climb just 15 min off the valley back-road at Bø.

Gørigrovi (MN234683, aspect NNE, alt. 200-300m) A steep diagonal cascade close to the valley floor offering a 3-4 pitch route when frozen.

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Sandbakkfossen, Engelfossen, Kattgjelfossen (MN225700, aspect S, alt. 200-800m) These three cascades drop into the valley between Øygaard and Nedre, and are easily accessed from the E16. They offer pioneering gully expeditions with 500-600m height gain and large steep ice pitches. No records of any climbing have yet been discovered. Due to the southerly aspect the ice in these chasms is likely to melt out after early Feb. If any pitches are missing it would be difficult to find ways to climb round, because the enclosing walls are steep or slabby.

3) Råsdalen

Råsdalen is a splendidly wild side-valley, running south from the hamlet of Mo. A rough public road runs 8km up the valley to an altitude of 640m but in winter this is normally impassable beyond the hairpins at 3½km. Lærdal's biggest and hardest ice routes are to be found here, and they rank with any in the world for scale and grandeur.

Thorfossen (MN 284670, aspect WSW, alt.500-1000m) **VI, WI 6, 500m** (climbed direct all on ice), **VI, WI 6, M8** (climbed direct with dry tooling to gain the icicle), **VI, WI 5+** (with detour to avoid first tier of upper fall).

This waterfall drops down the hanging canyon of Haukeligrovi, and has an immense vertical upper plunge of 300m and a 90m lower section. For magnificence of surroundings and sustained quality climbing this climb has few peers, whichever way it is climbed. Ice quality is usually good and the season lasts till mid-March when increasing sun-exposure renders the upper pitches brittle and dangerous.

The first ascent appears to have been done by Guy Lacelle and party, using the detour and traverse to avoid the first pitch of the upper tier, which rarely forms. In 2005 Will Gadd and Andreas Spak climbed the upper tier direct gaining the icicle by 15m of bolt-protected M8 climbing. In the exceptional year of 2006 the icicle was fully formed and was climbed by Slovenians Aljaž Anderle and Klemen Premrl and by Ines Papert and party.

Park by the road in lower Råsdalen, directly below the Haukelgrovi and walk 450m up through woods into the lower gully (1¼hr). A full 60m of sustained WI 5 and a further 40m of WI 4 gain the amphitheatre below the upper fall. For the traversing option go to the R edge of the amphitheatre and climb 60m of WI 3 to gain a big terrace. Traverse 120m back L across this (45-50°, potential avalanche risk, no belays) to gain the fall at the base of the second tier. One 60m pitch of WI 5/5+ and shorter pitch of WI 4 lead to a short slope below the final tiers, which are climbed in two pitches of 45m and 40m (WI 5+, potentially difficult formations due to water spray at exit). Descend by 7 abseils (threaded rope anchor at top for first abseil).

The direct route up the upper tier gives a 25m WI 6 free-standing pillar (when formed) followed by 50m of sustained WI 5+. The Gadd-Spak mixed option is well-protected by 6 bolts and a peg but is fierce.

Kvignagrovi (MN 285665, aspect W, alt. 400-1000m) **“Fokus” VI, WI 6, 500m** The next canyon S of Haukelgrovi contains another monster route, climbed by Gadd and Spak in 2005. The first ascent party encountered “glasshouses of icicles”, “like slamming your axes into a tower of beer bottles...”, culminating in a tiptoe round the damoclean icicle of “Mr Death”. With solid blue ice they reckoned that the route could go at sustained WI 5, but it will always be a grade VI in overall length and commitment.

The route has two sections, and the base is gained by walking up a scree slope in ½-¾ hr from the road. The lower fall surmounts steep rock walls and gives 3 major pitches of WI 5 and 6,

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followed by easier ice to the upper gully. It is possible to avoid the lower tier by scrambling up tree-covered slabs S of the waterfall.

The upper fall offers 200m of WI 5 and 6 leading to Mr Death, which is quitted on the R side (WI 6, 50m), and an easier 60m finishing pitch.

The first ascent party descended the S edge of the canyon by scrambling and short abseils, but a direct descent of the ice by abseil is better recommended, so long as there is no imminent danger of falling ice. The climb has probably not yet had a second ascent.

Kjorlifossen (MN 297635, aspect NW, alt. 600-1000m) **V, WI 5, 400m** This is a major icefall, well-seen when looking down Råsdalen from the E16 in the main valley, and gives an excellent classic climb. The condition of the fall depends crucially on the first pitch where the water flow is channelled over an overhang. This needs a long spell of cold weather to freeze. The fall will usually be climbable from mid-Jan to mid-Mar, and the NW aspect protects the upper fall from severe melting.

Park in the valley (don't risk taking cars much beyond the hairpins when there is heavy snow) and follow the streambed 300m up into a snow bowl (¾-1¼ hr). The first pitch forms an impressive 50m candle and is often watery (WI 5 or even 5+). 200m of easier ice (WI 2/3) or snow-plodding leads to the upper fall. 90m of WI 4 gain the steep 100m headwall, which is usually climbed on the R side (steep grooves followed by awkward bulges, sustained WI 5). Descend by abseil down the ice.

“No Country for Old Men” (MN 295630, aspect WNW, alt. 600-800m) **IV, WI 4, 180m** This fine slabby waterslide is well-seen from the Råsdalen valley road where it surmounts a rise 1km after the hairpins. The fall lies ¾ km S of the Kjorlifossen and gives an enjoyable mid-grade outing.

Park and walk along the valley road until ¾ km beyond the Kjorlifossen stream. Cut up through woods and trend L up to the base of the fall (1¼-1½hr). Three pitches of sustained WI 3 and 4 (70-75°) lead to a steep but short exit (WI 4+ if climbed direct). Descend by abseil down the ice.

Øydalsfossen (MN 297616, aspect W, alt. 800m) This fall lies at the roadhead in Råsdalen, and in winter would only be accessible on snow-shoes or skis. The fall carries a major drainage line and is unlikely to exceed 100m in height; definitely one for the pioneering instinct!

Nysøttri (MN 286629, aspect ESE, alt. 700-850m) This savage band of overhanging cliffs sports many hanging pillars of ice and could be magnificent arena for mixed climbing. A party with drill and bolts plus plenty of ability and commitment is invited. The venue is exposed to the morning sun after mid-February so early-season climbing is recommended.

4) Mid- Lærdalen

Seltunfossen (MN 301687, aspect N, alt. 500-650m) **V, WI 4+/5, 180m** This wide icefall on the S side of the valley offers a magnificent classic with room for several independent lines across its 100m width. The fall lies on the L branch of the Fossagrovi stream, above Seltun farm. Although the fall faces N it forms over rock slabs and may collapse after a long thaw, but it is usually in condition from Jan to early March. Park on a side-spur of the E16 directly below the fall. It is often possible to ascend the lower stream on ice (WI 3+) to gain the bowl beneath the fall; otherwise scramble up the R side of the stream, crossing to the L side where the angle eases (¾hr). Climb the fall in 4 pitches of 50m each, usually slightly easier on the R side (sustained WI 4+ and 5). Descend by abseil down the ice.

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Fossagrovi (MN 299686, aspect NNE, alt. 600m) **IV, WI 4-5+, 100m** The main stream valley R (E) of the Seltunfossen steepens to a fine plug of ice which offers several 2 pitch lines. Approach as for the Seltunfossen then scramble R up main stream valley to the icefall (1¼-1½hr).

5) Hoggeberg and Upper Lærdalen

Hoggeberg (MN 355667, aspect N, alt. 500-600m) The old Lærdal road makes a tight southward loop through the gorge between Husum and Borgund. Turn off the main E16 200m E of the Seltun tunnel and follow the old road for 3km past Husum into the gorge. On the S side of the loop a fine line of icefalls forms on a rocky tier low on the N-facing Hoggeberg slope and these offer an ideal arena for training or shorter days, with a series of enjoyable 80m lines at **III, WI 3, 4 and 5**. Park at Grimsøy farm, cross the footbridge and follow the farm track up a series of loops until just below the L end of the iced tier (½hr). Cut up to the base of the tier, then traverse R along the base of the icefalls and choose a line. Short technical problems on steep pillars and hanging icicle abound. Trees offer good abseil points at the cliff-top. To the R of Neshagen farm a lower tier sports several fine 25m hanging icicles. Approach by crossing the bridge then turning R and scrambling up through the woods (½hr).

Upper Hoggeberg (MN 347667, aspect NE, alt. 800-900m) The cliffs up and R of the main Hoggeberg icefalls sport a spectacular hanging icicle and offer possibilities for short dramatic mixed climbs. From Grimsøy farm cross the bridge, traverse R along the river bank, then climb 450m up the relentless wooded slopes to the cliff base. In drier icy conditions this could be done most entertainingly by following the stream bed on low angle ice (1¼-1½hr). A 60m slabby ice pitch of WI 3 gains the base of the hanging candle.

“Big Bertha” WI 6, 80m The icicle may form to give a slender pillar but also develops thick ice against the rock behind. An ascent should therefore usually be possible. An introductory pitch of WI 4+ gains a cave beneath the icicle. On the 1st ascent the pillar was gained on the L side and climbed to a watery exit (35m). Abseil from trees to the L of the exit (1 x 60m just reaches the ramp below the route).

Heggsnosi (MN 726411, aspect SW, alt. 800-900m) The slopes of the Heggsnosi in upper Lærdal have several ice lines. These can become banked out and covered after heavy snowfall or else readily melt out in a sunny spell. The main icefall in the stream above Hegg Farm is an obvious objective and is usually in condition until early Mar despite its SW aspect.

Heggfossen IV, WI 4+ (with top-pitch climbed n L side) **WI 5** (top pitch climbed direct) **140m** Park in lay-bys on the main road and climb 300m up the gully bed or scree slopes on its R to gain the base of the icefall (1hr). Two long pitches of WI 3 and WI 4 gain a snow bay beneath the main 40m pillar. Either climb this direct (sustained WI 5) or by a groove on its L side (WI 4+). Abseil down the ice.