



Ice axe

Ice axes, with crampons and ropes, are the definitive tools of the mountaineer. Within this holy trinity the axe definitely owns the cool factor because in a major motion picture you can kill someone with it.

In addition to their offensive role axes assist in balance and provide traction in moderate climbing by plunging the shaft; in steeper terrain by using the pick; and on ice by chopping steps. If all these techniques fail to prevent head-ass inversion, an axe enables self-arrest with practice. Axes can also provide a helpful belay assist.

Walking axes generally have a long, straight aluminum shaft, and a stainless steel head and spike. The pick is slightly curved and ends in an adze (for chopping steps) instead of a hammer (for driving pitons and pickets). Axes made for climbing vertical ice are properly called ice tools, not axes, and have shorter, curved shafts and scarier looking picks. There are some crossover models that try to do both, but every mountaineer needs a traditional axe.

Choose Your Weapon

OK, that was a lot of information for a dumb climber. Grab a beer. Sit down. Hydrate. First you'll need to figure out length. While standing normally hold the axe head in your hand, palm on top, pick to the front in standard walking or "cane" position. If you listen to jazz, talk excessively about wine and are generally annoying and pretentious you will insist on calling this *piolet canne*. That said, the French terms for various ways of holding and using the axe are useful for instruction so you'll want to pick them up.

The traditional advice for sizing an axe is choosing one that almost but not quite touches the ground when you're holding it as described above. There's nothing wrong with going a bit longer for better downhill reach, but remember that an axe is not a trekking pole and you don't need a Paul Bunyan model.

In either case the length will vary according to an individual's height and arm length but for average people will usually fall between 65 and 75cm. This sizing works well for glacier walking and low to medium angle snow slopes, without compromising swingability much.

The shaft should be straight and clean with no rubber grips, pinky rests or other stuff that might make plunging the shaft into hard snow any more difficult than it has to be. When you plunge your axe for the 1,000th time on a long climbing day you'll thank me.

Next, check the head. Is it steel? It better be, or else you'll be watching your friend effortlessly chopping steps in alpine ice while your anorexic little aluminum number bounces off like Polish cavalry off Nazi tanks. The adze should feel comfortable under your hand when you rest your weight on it, because you'll be doing this a lot as you wheeze your carcass uphill.

Once you've found the correct weight, length, shaft and head you're pretty much there. Other desirable features include an adequately sized carabiner hole in both the head and in the spike, useful for deploying the axe as an anchor, to belay with, or for just racking the axe on a carabiner off your harness.

Breaking the Rules

There are times when a shorter and/or lighter axe is desirable. Ski mountaineering, adventure racing and throw-it-on-your-pack-just-in-case all qualify. A shorter axe is better suited to steeper terrain, stows on a pack more compactly, is lighter and swings easier. The last is important for building anchors and platforms, which can take a lot of hacking.

Therein lies a critical distinction. If you anticipate said hacking, go shorter but not too much lighter. The extra weight will get the job done much faster and will save effort when all is said and done. If it's simply a matter of just-in-case, maybe a summer day trip with a possible short snow-filled couloir or traverse, an all-aluminum model might do the trick.

As always it's about managing risk and consequences. That all-aluminum model will be only slightly more useful than a salad spinner if that slope turns out to be thinly-covered hard ice.

What's With the Ratings?

CE. ISO. UIAA. You see the acronyms, but really, WTF? Here's the beta: in Europe climbing gear is considered personal protective equipment, like a condom, and as such is required to meet certain safety standards. Very roughly speaking these are created by the UIAA, approved by the CE (also called CEN) and tested in accordance with ISO. These stamps are useful but by no means infallible, mostly because testing doesn't always accurately reflect real world conditions.

In America, we don't give a rat's ass and rely on reputation enforced by litigation. Crappy companies generally aren't around very long. So which approach is better? Neither. The bottom line: buy from a reputable company and stay away from brand-new or untested gear.

You may notice another stamp on your axe: a B or T on the head and/or shaft. This indicates it has met testing standards for Basic or more stringent Technical mountaineering. Either is fine; don't stress about it.

Pimp Your Ride

Time to accessorize, but there's really only one thing you absolutely need for your hooptie, and that's a leash. We're not talking about the shorties fancy clip systems you see on ice tools. It could be as simple as a sling girth-hitched to the head with a keeper knot for your wrist.

The purpose of the leash is to make sure your investment doesn't pull a Bernie Madoff, as in: "I dropped my axe and the mountain done made-off with it." The leash should be able to support body weight, which any climbing sling will easily, since it's possible you might have to use it as a very temporary anchor to free your hands for something else.

You basically have a two choices in sling design: a hand leash that secures your axe to your wrist, or a longer lanyard-style leash that attaches to the harness or body. The advantage of the lanyard is that you can easily switchback up a slope while swapping hands to keep your axe on the correct (uphill) side, without stopping to switch your leash. Make your own or buy one, it's up to you.

Two other accessories that are useful: pick and spike protectors and a head insulator. Pick and spike protectors are usually rubber or leather. They exist for transport and storage of the axe to keep the sharp pointy parts from tearing a new one in other, softer gear like your new \$500 down fart sack.

Insulating the head of your axe where you grip it is not a bad idea, since the metal is surprisingly effective at drawing heat out of your hand. You can buy a head insulator, but why would you? An old piece of closed-cell foam and some duct tape—with which it is actually quite difficult to catch ducks, may I say—will do the trick, and it gives you that seasoned mountaineer look that's so popular with the ladies. Don't take a bath for a week and you're there.

Practice Makes Perfect

If you think you're going to self-arrest without practice, you're smoking the wrong end of the crack pipe my soon-to-be-short-lived friend. Practice self-arrest in all its glorious variations at least at the beginning of every season.

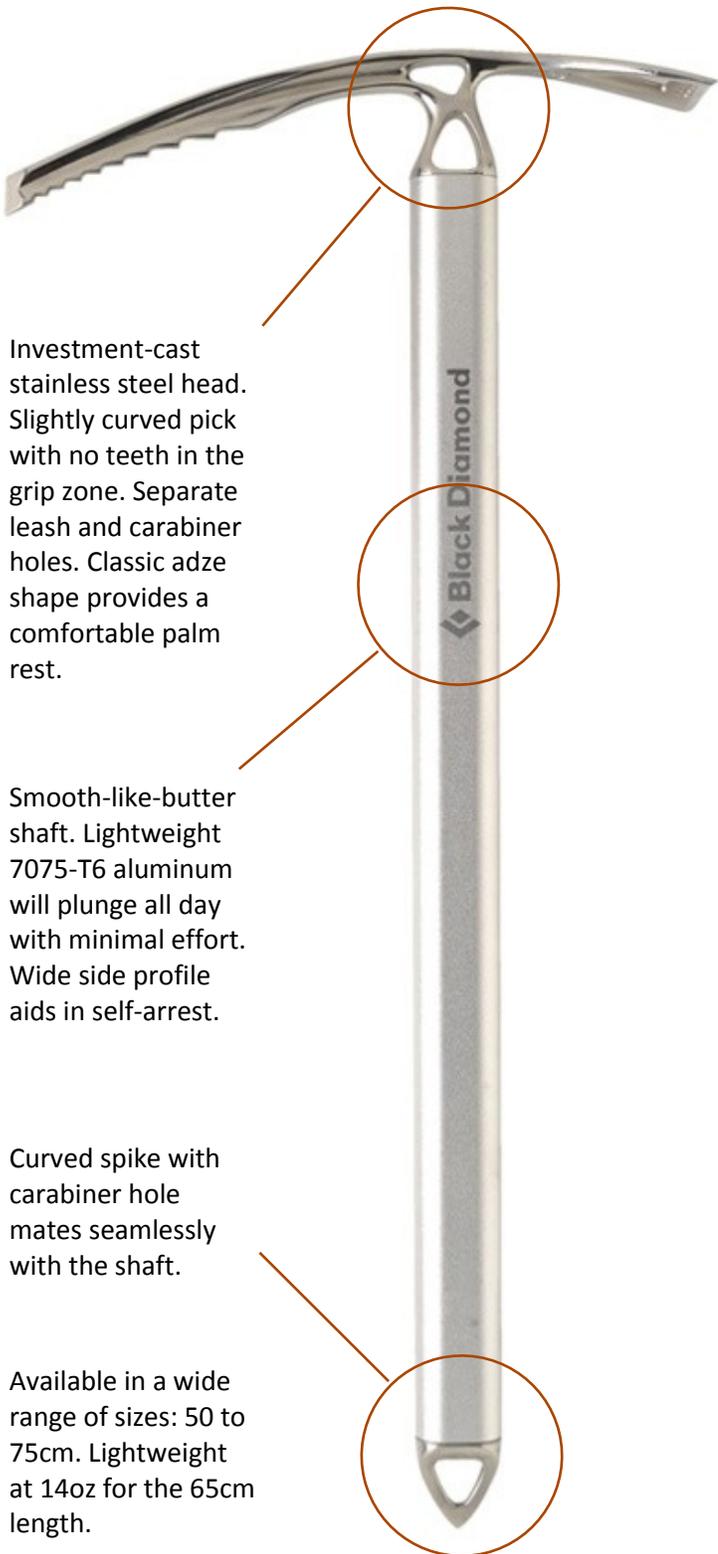
For good measure practice the boot-axe belay, chopping steps and defending yourself against hordes of marauding zombies. Your partner can play the zombie. Let him use his helmet: safety first!

The indispensable yet impossible to find Grivel Dragonne Spring Leash.



The All Mountain Axe

Black Diamond Raven Pro



Investment-cast stainless steel head. Slightly curved pick with no teeth in the grip zone. Separate leash and carabiner holes. Classic adze shape provides a comfortable palm rest.

Smooth-like-butter shaft. Lightweight 7075-T6 aluminum will plunge all day with minimal effort. Wide side profile aids in self-arrest.

Curved spike with carabiner hole mates seamlessly with the shaft.

Available in a wide range of sizes: 50 to 75cm. Lightweight at 14oz for the 65cm length.

The Sportscar

For fast and light snow travel the CAMP Corsa Nanotech is nine ounces toward a longer life.

The pick tip and spike are steel, everything else is aluminum. A slight bend in the shaft gives you a little extra reach-around.



Bicurious

These axes swing both ways and are equally at home on steep snow and steeper ice.

The Black Diamond Venom (left) is available with adze or hammer and has a removable pick.

The Grivel Air Tech Evolution (right) is a svelte T rated axe with a hot-forged head.



The Mutants

The Petzl Snowscopic (left) is an axe with a telescoping trekking pole in the handle. The basket pops off so you can plunge away.



If you want a skiing and trekking pole that can reliably self arrest, check out the amazingly useful Black Diamond Whippet (right). It comes with a pick guard and BD's rock-solid Flicklock system that won't slip.