

Climbing the Walls Beats Cabin Fever

By LINDA F. BURGARDT NOV. 20, 2005

LONG ISLAND may lack mountains, but it doesn't lack people with the imagination to create a mountaineering experience.

Children and adults who want to climb sheer vertical rock faces and rappel down need go no farther than Plainview, Garden City or Lake Grove to find out what rock climbing is all about. These are three of the best indoor places to climb and soar, offering a multisensory anti-gravity challenge to every flatlander brave enough to take it up.

More than 9,000 square feet await climbers at the concrete-covered walls of Island Rock in Plainview, the Island's largest indoor climbing facility. Climbers have their choice of hundreds of routes to the top and can select monoliths, slab walls, boulders or rigid paths on their way to a variety of peaks 30 feet off the ground, about the height of a three-story building. Children must be at least 7 years old to climb.

"Climbing is so popular because of the sense of exuberance and joy it gives you," said Mike Gruosso, a manager at Island Rock. "It's a sport that's satisfying at many different skill levels."

Dick's Sporting Goods at the Roosevelt Field Mall in Garden City has the tallest wall, at 45 feet, and offers three levels of difficulty. Climbers select a particular station, depending on ability and experience, and an instructor at the bottom guides

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Children who want to climb at Dick's Sporting Goods must be 44 inches tall and at least 6 years old; adults as old as 82 have made the trip to the top.

The wall at the Sports Plus Entertainment Center in Lake Grove is 33 feet high and, much like the walls at other centers, has the look and feel of real rock, with cracks, bumps and bulges integrated among the handholds and footholds. Children as young as 4 have made the climb, which offers three difficulty levels.

"Don't look down" is still good advice for first-time climbers who may find a touch of fear mixed in with their drive for vertical adventure.

How safe are climbing walls? Rob Sinkoff, the owner of Island Rock, said climbers could get the sensation of danger without the risk but with the combination of supervision and a well-designed set of ropes with a harness much like a seat and stationary bars that protect climbers.

"Once you're strapped into the harness and the rope is set in place, you can't fall," Mr. Sinkoff said.

The rope that holds the climber goes over a bar at a fixed point at the top of the climbing wall and is held there by a self-locking device. A safety expert at the bottom controls the other end of the rope to keep it taut and hold a climber safely in place.

These trained professionals are known in mountaineering terminology as belayers. Belay is a French word that means to protect; to belay is to secure a person by one end of a sturdy rope, which acts much like a belaying pin, a short bar inserted in a ship's rail for steadying a rope.

Even as you kick off from the top of a wall to go down, you do so under control. The quick and dramatic descent is called rappelling, in which a climber moves down a vertical face by means of a secure rope that is played out gradually. Children especially love an audience for their rappelling.

Workout clothing is recommended for scaling a wall, and girls and women should not wear skirts or dresses unless they wear shorts or slacks underneath. Sneakers are required at Sports Plus, while Dick's provides special climbing shoes in the price of admission. At Island Rock, you can wear your own sneakers or climbing shoes or rent a pair of theirs.

Because climbing walls come in different sizes, shapes and types, each offers a distinctive experience.

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provides a full fantasy experience -- and a great view of the merchandise. Because Sports Plus's climbing wall is set between a video arcade and the bowling alley in the midst of a pulsating entertainment complex, the sounds of customers enjoying themselves enhance the climb.

Prices to use the climbing walls at these sites vary. At Sports Plus, climbers pay \$7.50 per climb. At Dick's Sporting Goods, adults are charged \$5; children under 12, \$3. The charge for members of the store's rewards program who present a shopper's card, which is free, is \$3 for adults, \$2 for children.

Island Rock has a different system: climbers pay for day passes, which cost \$16 for adults and \$14 for students, plus charges to rent a harness and shoes and for a staff member to handle the safety ropes. A quick-start package, including a lesson, gear rental and a day pass, costs \$38.50, and seriously interested climbers can buy three-month, six-month or yearlong memberships.

If your idea of high is the top of your S.U.V., indoor climbing is probably not for you. But for those who want a dose of vertical challenge, it can satisfy that winter itch for adventure.

Look Up, But Not Down

SPORTS PLUS ENTERTAINMENT CENTER -- 110 New Moriches Road, Lake Grove. (631) 737-8881. www.sportsplusny.com. Hours: Thursday, 4 to 9 p.m.; Friday, 4 p.m. to midnight; Saturday, 10 a.m. to midnight; Sunday, 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. Closed Monday to Wednesday, except on school holidays, when it is open from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

DICK'S SPORTING GOODS -- Roosevelt Field Mall, Garden City. (516) 247-6400. www.dickssportinggoods.com. Hours: Monday to Friday, 4 to 9 p.m.; Saturday, noon to 9 p.m.; Sunday, noon to 6 p.m.

ISLAND ROCK -- 60 Skyline Drive, Plainview. (516) 822-7625. www.islandrock.net. Hours: Monday to Friday, 12:30 to 10 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 12:30 to 6 p.m.

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4

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