

By Moira Creedon.

From a fairly recent recruit to the sport these are some suggestions to help make your first moves on rock enjoyable and above all safe.

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Scantly dressed sun bronzed rock Gods making suicidal gravity defying moves on vertical rock
- typically the image the average non climber has of the sport of rock climbing.

If you have ever glanced across the Glendalough valley at the tiny specks of colour on the crag, or wandered through Dalkey quarry on a balmy summers evening, you may have been stirred by curiosity. Ireland offers fantastic quality rock with accessible crags all over the island. It is an incredibly beautiful sport to watch, and deeply rewarding to practise, but it is not always that obvious to the would-be climber where to start.

Learning to climb

In the early days of Irish climbing most climbers started with little or no training – a rope around their waist, hobnail boots and blind faith. Most learned the hard way – picking up skills from friends, and learning by the occasional (hopefully well protected) fall.

Many still go straight for the nearest club and cliff without any preliminaries, but training is increasingly the preferred route. It will at least greatly increase your confidence when you do walk into your local club looking for a partner, and makes early nasty shocks a lot less likely as safety skills should be well developed before any serious risks are taken. It is also handy to

understand the language when you do turn up in the pub, where the initiated sit nursing pints talking incomprehensible gibberish about jugs, crimps, dynos, abbing, decking..... easier said than done to work out how to do a figure of eight from a book, let alone knowing when to use a clove hitch instead of an Italian.

For those lucky enough to be still in college, training is usually provided by your college Mountaineering Club. Otherwise a quick initial taste can be gained by a short course with a climbing instructor. Training is available from a wide range of qualified [BOS \(Bord Oilunt Sleibhe\) approved providers](#)

. If this whets the appetite, then 2 days courses are available from many sources. This may lead eventually to the Single Pitch Award (SPA) and the Rock Climbing Leader (RCL) Multi-pitch Awards. These last are aimed at slightly more experienced climbers.

Even after a short training course, it may still be fairly intimidating to move outdoors and start climbing, as the jump from climbing on a top rope, or even leading under the controlled supervision of a climbing instructor may be quite daunting.

The [Irish Mountaineering Club](#) run an introduction to rockclimbing on an annual basis in late April/ May each year, which covers all of the basics from basic safety issues of tying on, belaying and safe top roping, and gives climbers a good range of exposure to outdoor routes. The programme caters for both complete beginners and those who have already done some climbing, but would like to learn the basics in a more systematic and structured way. It is offered free strictly to members of the IMC only. It is the best way to join the club, as you instantly meet a couple of dozen people at the same stage of development as yourself which is ideal for striking up good climbing partnerships.

Equipment

Thankfully we are now a long way from the misty early days of hobnailed boots and the rope around the waist. Equipment has changed completely. Along with basic comforts like well padded climbing harnesses, there are shoes that stick to rock – well not quite like glue, but enough to give a brief idea of how Cat Woman must have felt.

Training courses provide basic equipment, so the first purchases are only made when you have

tried out the sport and know you are definitely interested. For the complete beginner, the initial investment is modest enough, as all you need to “second” is a harness, shoes, helmet, a belay device, a nut key and a few carabiners. “Seconds” follow the leader on a top rope, and are rarely in danger of falling in any serious way. This means that they do not need to place any protection themselves. Their role is however absolutely essential, as they are securing the safety of the leader as he/she climbs.

Equipment prices will obviously depend on the degree of performance and quality of an individual item, but indicative prices are:

Harness (E70), shoes (E90), Belay device (E20) Nut key (E8) and carabiners (E12 each) helmet (E50). Shopping on the web for climbing gear often produces great bargains, but is hard to do this as a beginner - without the advice and after sales a local shop can offer - and messy anyhow for shoes where fit is all important. Again clubs can come in very handy here as gear advice from experienced climbers helps a lot, and can also save a lot of money. MCI members get 10% discount in most retail outlets, which definitely reduces the pain of the initial expense.

As you progress, the level of investment in equipment rises, and a full rack of climbing gear represents a considerable expense. For your first few forays into relatively easy leading I would suggest a basic rack of nuts, extenders, a few hexes and a rope.

Nuts, hexes and “friends” are protective devices which are used to place in cracks in the rock as the leader climbs, so that if he/she falls, the fall is limited by the last piece of protection placed. Of these friends are a relatively recent development and still the most expensive with a single friend costing E50. I would personally recommend building up a fair degree of experience before making massive investments in climbing gear, both to be absolutely sure that your interest in the sport is genuine, and also because with experience you get a better idea of precisely what equipment works for you.

Learning to place gear – i.e. place the nuts into cracks and crevices in the rock securely enough to hold the force of a climber falling from above – is a huge challenge in itself, and definitely best done in the company of experience. The best way to learn is initially to practise at ground level in comfort and security, and develop an understanding of the multiple possible ways to place a nut. I personally found climbing with good people invaluable, to master the logic of gear placement: predicting how the rope will move to place pressure on the gear, and avoiding mistakes such as twisted extenders and knotted ropes.

Picking Routes - The Grading System

Climbing, like most human activities has a language of its own. One of the first areas to master is the grading system, so you know before you embark on a route whether you will be fairly comfortable, or hanging on by your fingernails. The basic grading system is:

V Diff (V.Diff) – this is the entry grade for most beginners, including the classic routes we nearly all started on such as Paradise Lost. At this grade there are usually reasonably distinct holds for hands and feet

Severe (S) – slightly more difficult than V Diff.

Hard Severe (HS) – a wee notch up in the difficulty stakes, though as grading is not an exact science, it can be hard to distinguish between these grades.

Very Severe (VS) – getting more technical and challenging at this grade, gone are the lovely distinct holds, although a route may be graded VS even though there is only one move of that degree of difficulty.

Hard Very Severe (HVS)– sustained difficult climbing, getting hard to rest to place gear.

Extremely Severe (E1, E2....) From the Extreme Grade onwards, the level of difficult rises dramatically, to the proverbial hanging on with your eyebrows stage. If you are worrying about these grades, you shouldn't be reading this article.

Grading can however be subjective, and it is often worth checking with another climber before realising half way up a climb that one mans V Diff is another mans VS...

The Club Scene

The transition from beginner with a bit of training to confident, competent and self-sufficient climber is often the messiest, and potentially the most dangerous phase. Most people at this stage are not really equipped to climb safely without some guidance from an experienced climber. The law of gravity constantly lurks quietly in the background. Leading climbs securely, and even setting up good top ropes requires a certain amount of experience.

There is also the practical issue that to climb you need a climbing partner, and as the sport is not everyone's cup of tea, this may not be as easy as it sounds. Having tried unsuccessfully to coerce your nearest and dearest into a climbing harness, you may conclude eventually that by far the best way through this phase is to join a climbing club. You thereby gain immediate access to decades of experience and crag knowledge, well-organised meets, and a whole network of potential climbing partners.

There is a very lively club scene in Ireland, with many new clubs appearing in recent years.

The following are the main clubs who either focus primarily on climbing, or have strong active climbing units within a larger walking club. The list may well not be exhaustive as this territory changes so fast, so I would be grateful for any corrections or additions.

[The Irish Mountaineering Club](#)

The IMC meets regularly on weekdays to climb throughout the year – Dalkey in Summer, UCD wall in Winter, and also organises an active schedule of weekend away climbing covering all Irish crags as well as regular trips to Wales, Scotland, Sardinia, France, Spain, and many Alpine regions. There is a weekly schedule of lectures and slideshows throughout the winter every Thursday night in a central Dublin venue - currently Church House in Church St, which serves as the main social activity for the club. The IMC Club Hut near the crag in Glendalough has been the first exposure for many to the joys of weekends away climbing.

The IMC actively encourages new comers to climbing and welcomes beginners throughout the year.

Dal Riada Climbing Club

Dal Riada was established specifically as a club specialising in rock and ice climbing, alpinism and expedition climbing to the greater ranges. A relatively small club, membership is distributed throughout the island of Ireland operating both at home and abroad at the cutting edge of Irish climbing and mountaineering.

The club is deliberately informal with no training courses, newsletters, or organised meets. It is aimed at experienced climbers and specifically for climbers leading a minimum of VS and above – the objective being to offer a circle of contacts for future projects for climbers aiming at more ambitious projects.

Dalraida have a beautiful albeit fairly rustic climbing hut at Murlough Bay in Co Antrim ideally placed to enjoy the delights of the Fairhead crag.

[Colmcille Climbers](#)

Derry based Northern climbers, very welcoming bunch, mainly climbing in Derry, Donegal and Antrim according to their (excellent) website, but also to be seen both all over Ireland climbing hard, and indeed turning up climbing even harder in the Alps. They climb regularly every weekend, and mid week during the main season. They welcome newcomers and beginners warmly.

[Club Cualann](#)

A Dublin based, mainly walking club, but with a good core group of very active climbers and an actively welcoming and encouraging policy towards beginners. Traditionally they climb

Wednesdays, weather permitting in the quarry in Dalkey, and otherwise at the UCD wall from about 6pm onwards. They also organise an annual beginners' meet to introduce new members to outdoor climbing.

[BARF – the Belfast Association of, Rockclimbers and Fell runners.](#)

A rather fit bunch of people who run up and down mountains, and also climb hard.

[Rathgormack Climbing Club](#)

Very much a climbing club, this is a relatively recent but hyperactive addition to the climbing club scene - a dedicated bunch doing hard stuff in the sunny Southeast. Rathgormack CC meets weekly in the winter at the wall in the Rathgormack hiking Centre.

[Clare Outdoor Club](#)

Based mainly in Ennis, and primarily a walking club, the Clare Outdoor Club climbs regularly in Ailladie and other Burren crags during the season.

University Clubs

UCDMC, DCUCC, UCGMC, DUCC, Limerick University, UCCMC, QUMC and Jordanstown MC are all Mountaineering clubs with a strong nucleus of climbers. If you are in the lucky position of having access to a college club, it is a great way to start. Access to equipment, walls, training and absolutely brilliant craic on weekends away means joining your college Mountaineering Club is probably one of the best things you will do during your studies. One decision which will probably remain with you for years to come, as mountaineering friendships tend to last for life. Check your local clubs board for contact details.

Moving further afield

You have joined a club, and if you are based in Dublin, you have probably by now led Mahjong for the thirtieth time. That borehole is beginning to look very familiar.... It is time to look further afield.

Irish Crag

Ireland is both lucky and unlucky in having a relatively underdeveloped climbing scene. There are still huge opportunities for new route development on the island, and it is extremely unusual to find a crowded crag - a cause of amazement to UK climbers who visit and are used to routinely queuing for climbs at home. Climbing venues like Fairhead and Ailladie in the Burren – impressive by any international standards – are often blissfully peaceful even on weekends of blazing sunshine.

The Mountaineering Council of Ireland publishes guidebooks to all of the main climbing areas in Ireland. The following is just a selection of some of the most popular Irish crags courtesy of climbing.ie and MCI guide books. Contact the MCI directly or go to any outdoor shop to purchase guidebooks with detailed maps and climb descriptions. Climbing.ie also has a crag index which includes just about every small crag in the country, and some of the major crags.

Ulster

Fairhead, a fantastic venue for sea cliff climbing, this is a daunting monolith of rock, mainly in the form of vertical basalt pillars up to 120m high. The crag is a massive 2 miles long, and has hundreds of routes. This is generally not regarded as great place for beginners, as the climbing is hard and the exposure can be very intimidating.

The Mourne mountains: There are climbing crags dotted all over the Mournes, and once you get used to the slightly curvy granite this is a rich resource with routes at all grades

[County Donegal](#) has crags scattered all over the county both directly on the sea, for example [Muckross Head](#), and inland in stunning locations such as [Lough Barra](#) and [Lough Belshade](#).

[Gola Island](#) is probably regarded as one of the magic meccas of Irish climbing, with stunning sea cliffs, and inland crags on the island which has to be one of the most tranquil places to spend a weekend climbing – if you are lucky enough not to be there the weekend the 600 students are camping nearby.

Connacht

The Burren is probably best known for Ailladie, fantastic sheer climbing on near vertical limestone, much of which involves abseiling down to the waters edge, and climbing back up on beautiful clean cracks. There are however many other lesser known crags in the Burren, catering for all tastes and levels of climbing – from Ballyryan, generally regarded as the best place locally for beginners, through to Murrakilly, a huge crag with a wide range of grades set in classic Burren limestone paving landscape.

There are also some major classics in Galway – seventh Heaven and Carrot Ridge are two of the best-known multi pitch classic mountain routes in the country. Carrot ridge can easily be tackled by any climber with good rope and security technique, as the climbing is not very difficult, but the exposure is nonetheless high and should be treated with respect.

Other pockets of routes have been developed throughout the province including the Aran Islands, Achill Island and the Mayo coast.

Leinster

Dalkey Quarry is probably the single most frequented climbing venue in Leinster by virtue of easy access to Dublin City – and of course to local pubs. Dalkey offers a phenomenal range of climbing in a small space, with hundreds of routes overlooking Dublin Bay and Dun Laoghaire Harbour – not bad for a summers evening after work.

There are imposing multipitch crags all over Wicklow, of which the best known are probably Glendalough above the Miners Village, and Luggala, beside the Guinness Estate. There are many other smaller crags with accessible climbing such as Barnbawn near Gleneally, a veritable suntrap in winter, or Hollywood at Hollywood village.

Ballykeeffe Quarry has fairly recently been developed as a climbing venue by two local climbers, and has the distinction of being the only climbing venue in Ireland where “bolting” (fixed metal protection which is permanently bolted to the rock) has sneaked in. In general bolting is frowned upon in Ireland as “traditional” climbing (climbing using traditional forms of protection, i.e. nuts etc.) is possible in most places as the rock allows for the placement of temporary protection. Because this is always removed there is no environmental damage. However much of Ballykeeffe would be too dangerous to climb without bolts, and the bolts create a chance to get a bit of outdoor climbing in this south facing suntrap, which is pleasant long after most other crags have become wet and miserable.

Munster

Kerry – there are long “mountain” rock routes on Carantouhil itself - Howling Ridge is a relatively easy but exposed climbing/scrambling route that leads from Heavens gates directly to the summit of Carantouhil - watch for loose rock, helmets are essential. Nearby Primroses is more technically demanding, with some sections up to VS moves, and as it gets less traffic some grassy patches, but well worth the effort for a fantastic day out. There are several climbing crags in the Gap of Dunloe – many with very easy access from the road, and some are doable even in rain as the overhang often provides enough shelter without making the climbing undoable. Brandon, Loo Bridge and the massive sea cliffs on Valentia Island also offer spectacular climbing.

Cork – there is climbing at the old Head of Kinsale, Roberts Cove on the Cork Coast, and plenty of other smaller crags listed on the website.

Waterford has climbing crags in the Comeragh Mountains, in particular all around the corrie lake at Comshingaun, and also some routes developed in Ardmore and at the sea cliffs at Helvic Head. Check the IMC website for details on Helvic and Ardmore.

Climbing Abroad

Nobody will ever exhaust the possibilities of Irish Crags. Nonetheless the weather may eventually have you looking at the atlas wondering how you will ever get to wear that skimpy sexy outfit you thought would work well on an Irish sea cliff.

Overseas options are obviously vast, but cheap flights to Europe influence choice when seeking climbing on hot rock in the sun.

Popular destinations for Irish climbers in recent years include Freyr in Belgium (cheap Ryanair flights to Charloi help make this one particularly accessible); El Chorro in southern Spain; Ceuse in France; Siurana in the Prades mountains of Northern Spain; Fontaineblau in Northern France for the fine art of bouldering (climbing on very difficult moves at relatively small distances from the ground – on big boulders) and Sardinia, all over the island but mainly at Cala Gonone.

Guides to most of these crags are available among others from [Rockfax](#)

This is of course ignoring all the related activities and destinations of Alpine climbing and ice climbing which you may feel compelled to explore once you get addicted to the adrenaline of that vertical feeling.

Indoor Climbing

A relatively recent development in the climbing world, indoor climbing now looks set to potentially outdo outdoor crag climbing as the most popular climbing activity.

Indoor climbing is definitely a huge support to performing well on outdoor rock in that it builds up muscle strength and stamina. Nonetheless, the transition from indoor to outdoor can be fairly traumatic, as the challenge of supporting yourself outdoors on a “foothold” that seems no more than a few millimetres deep can be quite a shock after the comfort of all those lovely coloured holds at the wall. The advent of better “textured” walls, which seek to imitate the texture of outdoor rock, will probably help, but personally I still find the move outdoors pretty tough each year. That said, the impact of walls on high performance climbing is clear, as climbers who are pushing up their grades are typically training hard during the winter, and it certainly enormously helps with confidence to know that the muscle is willing, whatever about the mind. The reality is that good climbing demands power, endurance and flexibility.

There are several indoor walls in Dublin, but most such as the Larkin Wall and the DCU wall have restricted access. The publicly accessible walls are at UCD sports Centre and in Westwood Gym in Clontarf. Trinity College also has a climbing wall, which is however restricted to members of TCD Climbing Club

Middleton has an excellent wall in a local Community College, with good value public access and frequently updated routes

Limerick and Galway Universities both have on campus climbing walls with public access.

Northern Ireland has two good walls in the Ozone in Belfast, and the MCI owned Hotrock Climbing wall in Tollymore in the Mournes.

County Waterford has a local climbing wall in the Rathgormack Hiking Centre – a hostel which also offers excellent accommodation. The wall has limited access, so contact the local Rathgormack Climbing Club.

Other local climbing walls include a wall in Killarney town, and a wall at St Columbs' Park Leisure Centre in Derry.

In all cases it is best to contact your local club first for details of local opening hours, training requirements, and of course to pick up good climbing partners – it can be lonely and intimidating going to a wall on your own, but once you know one or two people they are very sociable places.

Competition Climbing - The Irish Bouldering League

The Irish Bouldering League, organised by the Mountaineering Council of Ireland, is the main competitive event in the Irish Climbing Calendar. Apart from providing a good incentive to stay in condition through the Winter by training regularly indoors, the league also means that climbers stay in close contact through the long dark wet months. This makes it that bit easier to organise quick escape trips to climb in the Sun., and keep up the muscle and motivation for when the Irish climbing season opens again.

The event is held all over Ireland, normally in five rounds, two in Dublin, and one each in Galway, Cork and Belfast. The format is simply a sequence of bouldering problems, with points awarded for getting up, preferably on the first go.

Do not be put off as a beginner by the word “competitive”. The event is great fun, and absolutely not intimidating, regardless of what grade you climb at. The atmosphere is incredibly encouraging, with fellow “competitors” screaming advice to help you get up that move. It is pretty exhausting as you find yourself pounding up climbs on sheer adrenaline, which you would probably normally not even attempt.

All in all a great way to spend a winter weekend, and probably the quickest way to get to know loads of other climbers.

Check the IBL section of this site for details of dates and venues closer to the time, the league normally starts around November each year.

Insurance

The [Mountaineering Council of Ireland \(MCI\)](#) offers third party liability cover to climbers.

Most climbers particularly if active overseas have additional personal accident insurance, which is specifically geared for climbers. This is offered by the [British Mountaineering Council](#) and the [Austrian Alpine Club](#) among others, but these two are the most popular providers used by Irish climbers.

Footnotes

Contact the [Mountaineering Council of Ireland \(MCI\)](#) for details on:

- curricula and content of training courses
- contact details for training providers
- Irish climbing guidebooks are also published by the MCI, and can be bought from retail outlets or directly from the MCI office.
- contact details for your local climbing club
- Membership of the MCI entitles the holder to a 10% discount on equipment purchases at most outdoor retailers in Ireland. For details of local outlets and discounts available contact the office as above.