

Mount Victoria – South Summit 3464 metres (11,365 feet)

FA August 5, 1897: Norman Collie, Charles Fay, Arthur Michael, *Peter Sarbach* – Southeast Ridge

Routes Described: Southeast Ridge (II), Southwest Face (II)

Gear: Rope, ice axe, crampons, glacier gear for South Face

Time: Southeast Ridge – 6-9 hours return from Abbot Pass

Southwest Face – 8-10 hours return from Lake O'Hara



Descending Southeast Ridge on Mount Victoria

The Southeast Ridge of South Victoria is one of the great alpine climbs in the Canadian Rockies. A long, elevated sidewalk in the sky, the ridge follows the narrow spine of the Continental Divide and offers spectacular views of surrounding high peaks, particularly of Lefroy, Hungabee and Deltaform on the return journey. In places, the exposure is exhilarating, especially in the Sickle, a slender snow notch with long drops towards Lake O'Hara on the B.C. left and Lake Louise on the Alberta right. As a guide once said, it's just walking, but it's fancy walking.

Though it is essentially a scramble on loose rock to reach the ridge and then a long, exposed walk, the route can be more demanding and even dangerous with too much snow on the ridge or ice among the lower rocks. Combined with unpredictable weather, it's perhaps not surprising a considerable number of climbers turn back well shy of the summit. Try to climb the route when it's reasonably dry.

Even under good conditions, round-trip times from the hut can range from under four hours for fast, experienced parties to a long day for fledgling mountaineers. Those

attempting the route should be comfortable with short roping or soloing most of the route, since the only protection against a slip along narrow sections of ridge is for a roped mate to jump off the other side.

Though it can be done more comfortably in one day, the Southwest Face route is considerably less aesthetic. It follows the standard Mount Huber approach to the Huber-Victoria Col and then ascends a long gully to intercept the Southeast Ridge just below the summit. Some climbers, traveling light, do a loop journey, going up to the hut, climbing the Southeast Ridge and then descending the Southwest Face back to Lake O'Hara, thus saving several hours on the way out.

History

Compared with the tribulations and tragedy on Mount Lefroy next door, the first ascent of Victoria's main, South Summit was decidedly routine, though the unguided Walter Wilcox and Samuel Allen failed on an attempt in 1893. Two days after Lefroy was finally toppled in 1897, four members of the same party headed up Victoria, including perhaps the leading British and American alpinists of their day – Norman Collie and Charles Fay, respectively.

Having just been up the Death Trap between Lefroy and Victoria, the climbers quickly found their way up the lower Victoria Glacier to Abbot Pass. They then went up "a series of small terraces of excessively rotten rock," wrote Collie, who didn't appear overly awed by the subsequent walk along the narrow Southeast Ridge and didn't even mention the Sickle. "The climbing along the arête was not difficult but required care, and it was only the last five hundred feet that were at all narrow. About midday, after breaking many steps in soft snow, the summit was finally reached – a small pinnacle of snow, 11,500 feet above sea level." In his account, Fay admired all the leading Collie did, especially through the knee-deep snow; no mention was made of Sarbach, the Swiss guide.

In 1909, the Southwest Face was climbed by an Alpine Club of Canada group led by John Forde, who had been on the first ascent of Goodsir's North Tower the same year. The party included Elizabeth MacCarthy, whose husband, Albert, was on the first ascent of the highest peaks in the Rockies and in Canada – Robson and Logan. Forde reported the route provided a much shorter and easier access to the summit, "with the long and tedious walk along the ridge from Abbot's Pass to the summit avoided."

After four defeats because of bad weather, the illustrious team of Val Fynn and guide Rudolph Aemmer finally succeeded on the Northeast Face (III) in 1922, though nasty conditions on the upper glacier and brittle outcrops of rock made things interesting. "The bergschrund was easily crossed just below the main summit but the following ice slope was covered with deep powdery snow which all but defeated us," wrote Fynn, undoubtedly the best amateur climber of his generation in the Rockies and perhaps the first to deliberately seek out harder face routes, such as the one on Victoria.. "A hard, two-inch crust was all that enabled us to negotiate this nasty bit. All protruding rocks were glazed and very treacherous."

Several decades later, new routes were fashioned on the South and West Faces and the South Ridge, the latter with rock climbing up to 5.3 in difficulty. In February of 1968, a winter ascent of the Northeast Face was completed by an all-star collection of local climbers – Brian Greenwood, Eckhard Grassman, Charlie Locke and Don Gardner.

Like Lefroy, Victoria had a famous tragedy, albeit more than half a century later. In 1954, four Mexicans descended from the South Summit but made the mistake of traversing onto the Northeast Face in soft snow. They perished when an avalanche sent them tumbling some 600 metres to the Death Trap, the worst accident in Canadian mountaineering at the time.

Southeast Ridge: From Abbot Pass, go behind the hut outhouse and under a cliff to where it peters out. Begin scrambling up loose ledges on a somewhat zigzagging line; it's quite easy to wander off course here. Gradually work your way left (cairns) to gain the ridge proper about 200 vertical metres above the hut. A short section of snow ridge leads to the first buttress, which is climbed to the right of the ridge on fourth-class rock to reach a subsidiary summit. The more level ridge now begins an undulating course over snow and along the U-shaped Sickle, which can be quite exciting if narrow and icy. Beyond, bypass a prominent rock step, the second buttress, by scrambling up easy rock on the right (east) side of the ridge. Regain the ridge and follow it over alternating patches of snow and easy rock to the distant summit, again going onto the right, or Lake Louise, side of the ridge where necessary but not straying too far onto more exposed slopes.

Descend the same way, taking care on the loose ledges above the hut. An alternative is to go down the Southeast Ridge for a few hundred metres and then, at a prominent notch, descend the Southwest Face to the Huber-Victoria Col (see below for details, in reverse). If time permits, it's a relatively short ascent to the summit of Mount Huber via the Northeast Ridge.

Southwest Face: Victoria Southwest Face: Follow the standard Mount Huber route from Lake O'Hara to the Huber-Victoria Col (see pages). Go slightly north across the glacier to a prominent gully, aiming for the highest point of snow meeting the rock. Cross the bergschrund (may be difficult in dry years) and ascend the gully on snow/ice towards a prominent bulb of rock. From here, one option is to continue up the gully a short ways and then take a rising traverse left through a break in a rock rib, scrambling up the left side of the rib to reach a prominent notch in the Southeast Ridge. The other option is to take a rising line left earlier, from the rock bulb, going through a slot to reach the left side of the rib, which is ascended on good rock to the Southeast Ridge. The summit is reached in about half an hour over a relatively level ridge.

Return the same way or go down the Southeast Ridge to Abbot Pass.