



[IMPACT Magazine](#) > [Features](#) > Iron Roads



Iron Roads



Via ferrata take hikers high into mountain adventures

By **Carolyn Kausser-Abbott**

With Weak knees and short breaths, a harness snug around your hips, you grip two metal bars on a steep rock face and gaze at the breath-taking views below.

You would normally never be found hanging off a mountain, after all, what would your mother think. Your reasons for shying away from vertical ascents are many, including a primitive fear of heights.

While you consider yourself a capable hiker and own a trail guide, you've never contemplated rock climbing. Via ferratas may be the answer.

Designed to provide a protected approach to tackling steep grades, the skill requirements for via ferrata climbing vary from rudimentary to expert as hiking trails fluctuate from benign to vertigo inducing and physical restrictions are typically limited to being able to climb a ladder.

Via ferrata is an Italian term that means iron road. The phrase described alpine military routes created during the First World War in the Dolomites of Northern Italy. Wooden ladder rungs and heavy ropes were installed to fixed points in the rocky ledges with the express purpose of moving troops to mountain peaks as rapidly as possible. In the 1930s, the Italian Alpine Club began converting makeshift army equipment into more permanent installations. Now, there are more than 1,000 available routes in the European Alps.

But this hiking concept is a relative newcomer to Canada, with alpine operations now available in British Columbia, Alberta and Quebec. Canadian Mountain Holidays (CMH) offers three different via ferratas as part of its summer programming in British Columbia's Purcell Range. CMH guests can spend the day on Mount Nimbus, the Conrad Glacier or tackling the Sky Ladder.

The Mount Nimbus route is the most technical of the three. It opened for clients in 2009 and, with a guide, it takes six hours to complete. Jeremy Roche at CMH says the Conrad Glacier is a highlight for adrenaline junkies as it includes multiple zip lines and canyon crossings. In summer, there are guided via ferrata tours around the uppermost point on Whistler Mountain in B.C. In roughly four hours, you will have walked on the glacier, used an ice axe and climbed a rock headwall to reach the summit of Whistler Peak, where you are rewarded by seemingly infinite views of the Fitzsimmons Range.

Andy Fenwick, head operations manager at Whistler Alpine Guides, says there is a lanyard cable system that hikers clip on to that is designed to provide for the safety of participants of all fitness levels.

Mike Adolph is a certified member of the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides and owner of Custom Outdoor Experience in Nordegg, Alta. In 2008, Adolph and a group of accredited climbers built the first via ferrata in Alberta.

Located in the David Thompson Corridor, west of Nordegg, the three-hour circuit includes 300 iron rungs and an altitude gain of 150-metres. Adolph says the route is climbable all year and testimonials, such as "Beyond anything that I've ever tried before," make him smile.

Mount Norquay offers this adventure on the sheer limestone buttresses overlooking the town of Banff. You can choose between the Explorer, a two-hour introduction to the concept, or Ridgewalker, a four-hour commitment to scaling the mountain's cliff faces.

After spending a few hours with your guide, hanging onto rocky ledges and soaking up jaw-dropping Bow Valley views, you will understand how the equipment works and will have certainly tested your vertigo limitations with a suspension bridge crossing.

Norquay's John Thornton says its via ferrata routes are designed for a wide range of users. He has been up three times with his 17-year old daughter, who loves the adventure. Norquay's two via ferrata routes make access to the top of a mountain and the spectacular vistas attainable to almost anyone.

Just two hours from Ottawa is Quebec's Parc des Chutes Coulonge with an exhilarating via ferrata route that includes crossing churning white-water on a zip line.

These Canadian adrenaline adventures offer a chance to test your skills and banish fears. Most cost upwards of \$110 per person, but offer access to priceless natural wonders and, often, a sunny, mountain patio where you can toast your achievement.

With via ferratas close to home you can pack your fears away, take along a daypack, lace up your hiking shoes, then let the guides show you the ropes.



Town of Banff lies far below the Norquay via ferrata