

THREE SISTERS

The Three Sisters are a signature landmark for the Bow Valley and the town of Canmore. They may even compete with Mount Rundle above Banff as the most photographed and painted mountain scene in the Canadian Rockies. Technical rock routes have been done to all three summits, but long approaches and generally poor rock have kept development to a minimum.

Approach

Three Sisters Resorts owns and is building a number of developments along the mountain front and up Stewart Creek and this complicates access via the two approach routes—Stewart Creek on the eastern side and Three Sisters Creek on the west.

Via Stewart Creek

This is the preferred access route for all climbs except the Grassi Route on the First Sister. Park opposite the “Visit Canmore” sign on the Trans-Canada Highway west of Dead Man Flat, climb over the animal control fence (locked gate slightly to the east), and go almost straight across the power line to a flagged trail through the trees. Continue on this for some distance until it intersects a large gravel road (the Mine Haulage Road) and then go left along this to junction #15. Turn right and follow the Stewart Creek exploration road up into the valley. From then on continue up the valley following sections of road and trail. Note that a mountain bike may be used for much of this approach.



The Three Sisters from Canmore. The First (Little) Sister is on the left.

Via Three Sisters Creek

Probably the easiest way of reaching Three Sisters Creek, which goes underground before it reaches the Trans-Canada Highway, is to hike in directly from the Bow River bridge. Park on the east side of the river, just off the highway, go through a gated fence, and follow a good trail on the bank above the south side of the river. After about 300 m, turn left on a flagged cutline that heads back at an angle almost directly toward the First Sister. Follow it to the new paved road (currently not open to traffic) and continue directly across following the continuation over the Mine Haulage Road to the main power line. Cross this and pick up a good trail that angles right, away from the cutline, toward the valley. Follow the trail until it turns right to cross the nearby creek and continue straight on paralleling an old wood stave pipeline to reach the creek higher up. Cross to the west bank and follow a dirt road to an old concrete dam a short distance higher up. In its lower section, the dirt road diagonals up from the Mine Haulage Road and provides an alternative access route from Canmore through the Threes Sisters development. It leaves the Mine Haulage Road at junction #8, which is clearly marked. This route is readily accessible by mountain bike but is subject to any restrictions that may be in effect (check with the Three Sisters Resorts security staff). Above the concrete dam, follow a trail on the east side of the creek, bearing left at a fork, for about 300 m to where the way is blocked by a small cliff and a waterfall. To access the Grassi Route on the First Sister, turn left and follow a deep, overgrown creekbed directly up the hillside toward the First Sister, which is just visible above. Take the left fork in the drainage higher up and follow game trails on scree to the ridge below the north side of the peak. Perhaps a better way of reaching the upper ridge, but a little harder to find, is to angle up from the trail before it reaches the creek and locate a small game trail that climbs up through reasonably open trees on the right side of a rounded ridge. The ridge is left of the overgrown creekbed noted above, and higher up it opens out and curves around toward the peak. The main trail continues up Three Sisters Creek to Three Sisters Pass and can be used to reach climbs on the Second and Third Sisters (see Kananaskis Country Trail Guide, Volume 1).

First Sister

The First Sister, aka The Little Sister (elevation 2700 m), is the prominent, blocky peak closest to the Trans-Canada Highway. It is fairly steep on all sides and only two routes have been climbed—the long approach and poor rock quality have kept most new route suitors away. The geology of the peak is interesting. It is composed of Palliser limestone folded in such a way that the strata are horizontal at the lower, northern end but are bent upward past the vertical on the western side. This can be seen on careful examination of the peak from Canmore and is shown on geological maps (see Ben Gadd's book, *The Handbook of the Canadian Rockies*).

Descent

The normal descent is to the col between the First and Second Sisters. It is now fixed for rappel with one 50 m rope and a minimum of downclimbing. From the summit, walk toward the head of Three Sisters Creek for a short distance to the first rappel station. Sections of easy downclimbing and scree lead down past six more stations directly to the col. To locate the fourth section, scramble up left (east) through a small notch and then down.

East Face 5.7

A. McKeith & C. Perry, July 1973

The route up this large and complex face follows a generally leftward-trending line with a traverse right at the end. Overall, the climbing is broken and lacks technical interest. Beginning at the left side of a broad, grassy slope beneath the face (easily picked out from the Trans-Canada Highway and reached from Stewart Creek), follow a series of gullies, traverses and steep walls up and left to the base of a huge dihedral in the upper part of the face. The route goes through a small arch in this lower section. From the foot of the dihedral, make an easy traverse down and left into a broad, steep basin with a cave entrance. Climb the slabs of the basin and then the ridge on the left to reach a ledge system. Follow ledges back right to a large notch in the northeast ridge not far from the summit.

Grassi Route 5.3

L. Grassi, A. Drinnan, M. Geddes and T. Moffat, 1925

This climb was probably the first technical rock climb in the valley. Cursed by bad rock throughout, the only reasons for doing the route are its history and because the peak is so prominently "there." The base of the climb is reached from Three Sisters Creek (see above). The climb begins on the right side of the northeast face, moves to the northwest face and finishes up the northeast ridge. Where the north ridge steepens at a rock buttress, traverse left on to the face overlooking the highway to an obvious crack and gully system. Climb slabs to gain the base of the crack and follow it past an overhang, above which it widens into a gully. The gully leads to a large ledge about 100 m above the base of the crack. Now descend scree-covered ledges to the right to a large gully that forms the general line of ascent on the northwest face. Climb slabby rock to the left to avoid an initial loose section, then continue easily up the gully trending right on broken ground to the northeast ridge. Follow the ridge past a few rock towers to the summit of the mountain.

Second Sister

The Second Sister, aka The Middle Sister (elevation 2769 m), is a popular scramble from the southeast side via Stewart Creek. Consult Alan Kane's *Scrambles in the Canadian Rockies* for more information. A well-defined prow faces the First Sister on the north side and this is climbed by two routes that follow the same line for the first three pitches. The North Ridge route uses some aid lower down and finishes up the left side of the ridge, The Ecstasy and the Agony eliminates some of the aid and finishes up a more difficult corner system to the right of the ridge. So far, a completely free ascent of the ridge has not been made.

Approach

The col between the First and Second Sister can be reached either via Stewart Creek or from Three Sisters Creek on the west side. Both approaches are equally tedious and take 2-3 hours. The former is probably easier and is better for the descent, which is normally made in that direction.

Descent

Follow the hiking trail east into Stewart Creek. A descent down scree is also easy into Three Sisters Creek.

North Ridge 300 m, 5.10a A1

E. Bohren & E. Salzgeber, August 1979

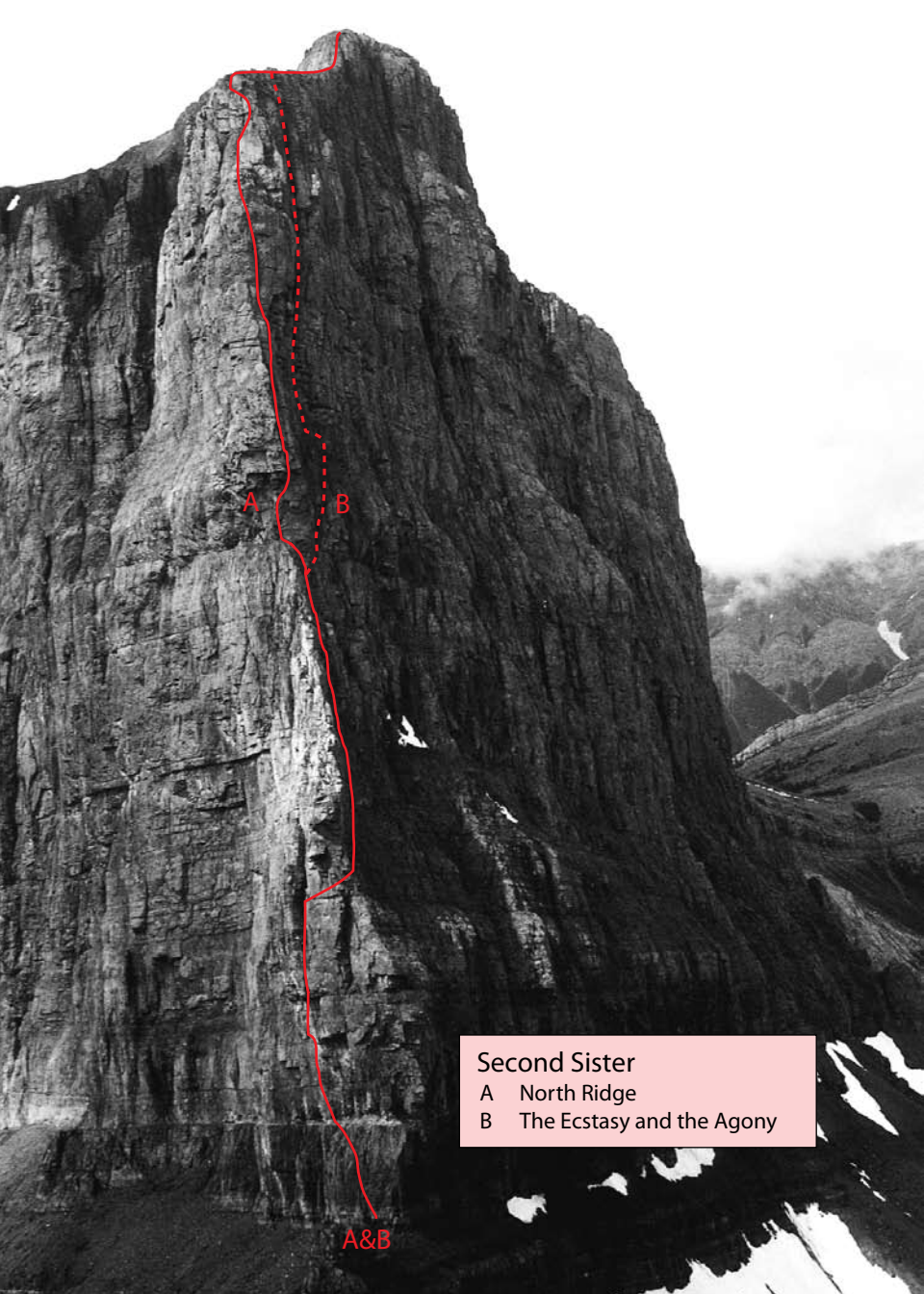
This is the steep ridge that rises from the col between the First and Second Sister. The climb starts on the ridge below an initial steep section.

- 1) 5.10a Climb a steep slabby wall trending left and then move up to a ledge.
- 2) 5.9 A1 Climb a corner to a bulge that is climbed using aid. Continue up to the easier-angled middle section of the ridge.
- 3) Follow the ridge, moving right in places but avoiding the steep north face.
- 4) Continue up the ridge until it becomes difficult and then move left below an overhang to the base of the upper corner.
- 5-9) Climb the corner past a bolt higher up (5.8) moving left at the top to easier ground. Continue up to the summit.

The Ecstasy and the Agony 300 m, 5.10a A1

J. Everett & G. Reisenhofer, 1990

- 1-3) 5.10a A1 Climb the first three pitches of the North Ridge.
- 4) Continue up the ridge until it becomes difficult but instead of going left, move right and belay at the bottom of a corner.
- 5) 5.10a Climb the corner (pitons) until nearly at an overhang. Traverse left into a second corner and climb up to a ledge (bolt). Move right and up into a gully. Climb to the top of this and belay at a steep wall.
- 6) Use a few moves of aid to surmount the wall and continue up easier ground.
- 7-10) Continue up the ridge on easy ground to the top.



Second Sister

A North Ridge

B The Ecstasy and the Agony

A&B

Third Sister and Traverse

The Third Sister, aka Big Sister (elevation 2936 m), has a steep ridge on its north side and an interesting scrambling route on its slabby south side. The latter is approached from the Spray Lakes road and is described in Alan Kane's *Scrambles in the Canadian Rockies*. The peak is made of Livingstone Formation limestone, like the upper cliff band on Mount Rundle, and is similarly unappealing. One of the more interesting unclimbed challenges in the Bow Valley is the traverse of all three Sisters via technical rock climbs on their steeper northern sides.

The north ridge can be climbed directly (easy fifth class), but is very loose. A second route called the North Face Route has been climbed slightly to the right of the ridge. It was originally reached from a camp in the upper part of Three Sisters Creek but the hiking route to the summit of the Second Sister, from Stewart Creek, may be a better approach. The obvious descent is down the south side to the Spray Lakes road, but presumably on the first ascent a return was somehow made to the camp in Three Sisters Creek.

North Face Route

R. Cuthbert & A. Purdey, June 1968

This obscure and probably unrepeatable route climbs the steeper north side of the peak. The first ascent was done relatively early in the season with snow on the face and the rock climbing crux was described as "hard" (perhaps 5.7?). The route does not start up the obvious buttress on the crest of the ridge but at a less well-defined one on the right. Begin by climbing a gully (iced up on the first ascent) and continue up to the crest of the ridge that is followed to a large ledge about halfway up the face. Climb a rotten overhang on the wall above and continue past a second overhang for about 10 m to reach easier ground (crux pitch). Follow the ridge until it merges into the face and then move left along a series of ledges to the northeast ridge. Continue up this to the top.

THE ORPHAN

The Orphan is a descriptive name given to this recent addition of Bow Valley rock climbing formations. Sandwiched between the impressive Rimwall and The Three Sisters, this buttress is often overlooked as the climber's eye wanders to the larger cliffs. From the Trans-Canada Highway it appears as a thumb-like formation sitting on the blunt end of a ridge at the upper east side of the main Stewart Creek drainage. The larger west side is home to a winter waterfall ice climb known as Twisted Sister. The one current rock climb is on the smaller, yet steeper eastern face. This side also has better rock and will likely produce more quality routes.

Approach

Although the climb faces east and the Trans-Canada Highway, it is best approached from the west via a col known as Boulder Pass. From Canmore, drive south along the Spray Lakes road and park approximately 2.6 km south of the Spray River Ranger Station at an obvious rocky canyon drainage. The drainage is about 0.7 km north of the Driftwood picnic area and boat launch. Hike up the drainage to the pass in 1.5-2 hours and the top of The Orphan appears as a gentle rounded hill to the left. From the pass, descend easy slopes and contour left (north) below the northeast face of The Orphan.

Descent

From the top, descend easily to the pass.

Older, But Boulder* 300 m, 5.10c

G. Powter & B. Wyvill, July 1998

Older, But Boulder climbs the first obvious left-facing corner as the cliff is approached from Boulder Pass. The more prominent right-facing corner situated farther to the right was the original objective of the first ascent team and one pitch of that line was climbed "before common sense prevailed." (This being the case, the name seems somewhat inappropriate.)

- 1) 100 m, easy 5th Scramble up slabs to the base of the corner proper.
- 2) 50 m, 5.10a Follow the corner and the walls to either side on generally good rock to a ledge.
- 3) 50 m, 5.10b Continue in the corner with good face climbing to the right for most of the pitch and then thrutch up a steep crack to a belay in the corner.
- 4) 50 m, 5.10c Step left and then move up and back right into the corner. Follow this to a constricted stance where it widens into a chimney.
- 5) 50 m, 5.7 Continue up the corner to its top and then go straight up to the summit.