

## A young mountaineer reveals how learning a few skills has opened up a whole new world.

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hether I am hiking or climbing, I have found that spending my spare time outdoors in the fresh air on the hills is one of the most rewarding experiences there

is. Finding new views and dealing with the challenges offered by the hills and mountains is immensely satisfying in so many ways that are hard to describe.

The feeling I get standing on a peak, looking at a breathtaking view, is wonderful! Whether walking on a regular route in the Wicklow Mountains, exploring somewhere new in Scotland or climbing on a 4,000 metre peak in the Alps, the challenges vary greatly but the feeling is basically the same.

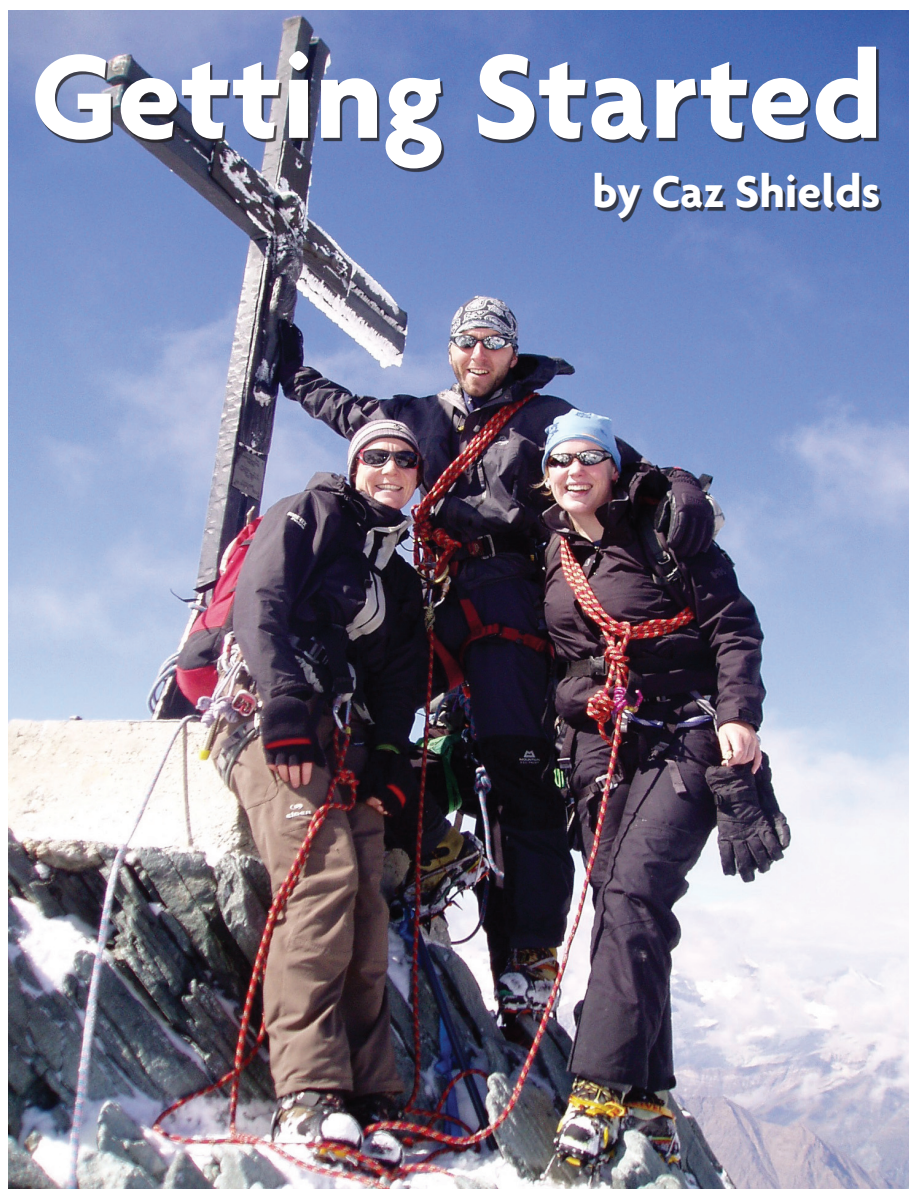
For me, it began with simple walks in the Dublin/Wicklow Mountains as a young, and at the time somewhat uninterested, scout. Later, as a scout leader, I became more interested in going hiking or on small expeditions. In the summer of 2004, one scout camp brought me to Kandersteg International Scout Centre in the middle of the Swiss Alps. The towering mountains and endless opportunities for hikes and climbs made it impossible not to fall in love with the mountains there.

The following summer I found myself in Kandersteg again, but this time for three months working in the Scout Centre. My main job there was as a hiking and climbing guide for the groups of young scouts who visited the centre. During that season I must have done some routes more than ten times and I loved them each and every time! Whenever I could, on days off, I found a new route on the map to follow and a new view.

While in the Alps I developed a new hobby that went beyond the hiking I was used to, alpine mountaineering. Near the end of the season I found myself on a glacier, with crampons and an ice axe, and little knowledge of what to do with either! But I was soon practising crevasse rescues, getting out of crevasses and pulling others out of them.

My first alpine route followed; a long day, 3,243.5 metres (and the .5 is important!) and a patient friend as my guide. Utterly exhausted by the end: I knew I was hooked.

Then suddenly I found myself back in Ireland without glaciers or the need for ice axes, but with a desire to learn, discover and see more. While not totally disillusioned with the Wicklow Mountains, I wanted more



and heard from a friend about the Youth Winter Skills course run by the MCI. I saw it as a chance for a student with little money and few contacts in Ireland to do just what I wanted to do, learn more about mountaineering safely.

This time I was a little more prepared when I found myself up the Cairngorms. I at least knew what to do with the axe and how to put the crampons on, but other challenges lay ahead: navigating through whiteouts, leading a mixed climb (albeit a very easy grade) and assessing the terrain for avalanches. All of this led to a more confident and eager young mountaineer.

The MCI Youth Winter Skills course also offered me the chance to meet other young people with similar interests and to know there was someone I could call upon to head to Dalkey, if I wanted. I also learned it didn't matter what the height or the conditions were. Mountaineering is about challenging myself, mentally as well as physically. Wanting to reach the top, to discover what

the other side holds, to see that new amazing view and, most importantly, to have fun.

I am lucky enough to be back living in the Alps now and each season, winter or summer, brings with it new challenges and experiences. On every expedition, big or small, I learn something new and continue to develop my skills. Although I know all the paths around so well at this point, I am still surprised to be overwhelmed by the view surrounding me while I cycle to work in the morning, let alone when I am climbing on one of the 3,000 metre peaks.

The possibilities now seem endless for discovering new heights and new places. The basic skills I learned in the Wicklow Mountains and Cairngorms have taken me far and have even allowed me to show others the beauty of mountains and mountaineering.

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