No other piece of gear generates as much debate as the humble ice-axe and that includes both cams and rock boots. Just type the words into any climbing website forum and you'll find countless discussions on which has the best pick, the best balance, the nicest colour (DMM take note) and a dozen differing qualities that define the perfect tool. The problem is that there ends up being far too much information, making it very hard to come to any useful conclusion. Isn't all this information supposed to make things easier?

You have to realise that the information comes from people who are generally only talking about ice tools they have got or have had, often giving half truths and expectations on other models they may never have used. But for some reason people just can't help but fall for their axes and so everyone will say that their axe is perfectly balanced, have picks that cut through ice like lasers and have grip designs you can hang from all day.

So if you're in the market for a new ice tool I thought I'd try and give a bit of order to the situation by giving my own five pennorth worth. The most important thing is to be able to view the weights, prices and also see the overall shape and design of the tool. Only this way will you be able to properly decide which tool to buy. I've added comment to the tools featured as well, to help give a little more guidance to those in the market.

The tools I've chosen go from basic do-it-all designs, right through to uber-techno jobs and my main criteria is that the tools must neither be technical tools, meaning there is a hammer version, or so technical they have neither hammer or adze (just to confuse things). Many people think that buying an axe comes down to a toss up between the Petzl Quark and the BD Viper but as you will see there's quite a lot of competition out there.

**TOOL TYPES**
The tools in this review are broken down into three rough categories; 'tech mountain', 'tech climb' and 'tech sport', in order to try and break up the axes into manageable groups. This is a rough outline of how I differentiate these models.

**TECH MOUNTAIN**
A technical mountain axe places greater emphasis on low weight and simplicity and will generally have a little less 'punch' than a 'tech climb' axe. The word mountain is used because the technical focus of the tool is not solely focused on the pick, meaning the shaft shape must allow it to be used for building axe belays and the grip design allow it to be easily plunged into the snow. The 'tech mountain' axe need not have replaceable parts, yet must still be able to function well on both easy ground and super hard ground.

**Grade Range:** Generally these tools are designed for grade I to grade IV ice and mixed, but in the hands of an experienced climber they will perform on any grade of climb, the difference being a more advanced tool may provide more security.

**TECH CLIMB**
A 'tech mountain' axe is expected to do many things well, whereas a 'tech climb' axe's main design brief is to climb steep stuff like a bastard. This means that some of the all-round mountain characteristics are sacrificed, such as having a more advanced shaft shape, bigger beefier grips, a smaller adze etc. These tools are for climbing rock and ice and turf and lots of it, meaning they will have variable pick types, with the weight/performace balance being pushed towards a solid swing. Of course, these tools are at home in the mountains, but some sacrifices will be made.

**Grade Range:** Anything from 1 to X.

**TECH SPORT**
These tools were originally designed for competition climbing, featuring concepts that would allow climbers to go longer without leashes. Very soon the lucky few who had been given these tools for comps started using them on rock and ice and, along with the ground breaking leashless concept, they began redefining what an axe could do. Now there are several sport tools on the market which, although feeling alien at first, really do make climbing easier and, more importantly, fun. These tools are a world away from the technical mountain axes, meaning on anything but roadside ice and mixed climbing the tools' overall abilities are severely limited... just try climbing a cornice with a pair.

**Grade Range:** I've climbed grade IV with these types of tools and it made the whole thing a million times more fun, but for most users you are looking at the upper grades, where getting your photographer into position is a bigger worry than snow mushrooms.

**THE AXES**
I've tried to cover most of the axes you will or may find in the shops over the winter, but due to the amount of space I will have to keep my comments short. Axe weights all include picks, but where possible it doesn't include leashes (who needs them anyway) and although prices are for each axe there are often great deals for pairs.
TECH MOUNTAIN

CAMP ALPAX SPECIAL
Weight: 555g
Price: £105
Pick type/price: T-rated/£35

The problem of having a good hand rest on an all-round tool is solved with the Alpax, which features a retractable finger rest which works well. Leashless or not this is a good solid axe that’s light and a good price.

PETZL AZTAR
Weight: 580g
Price: £120
Pick types/price: Quatro/Blue Ice/£30

A bread and butter tool that’s tough, simple and good value and a perfect tool for both the novice and up to the intermediate climber. The only drawback is that it can’t be used leashless with any degree of safety (come on Petzl get your finger out!) which is a shame. There is also the lighter Aztarex [500g/£105], saving 160g on a pair of tools, which strangely enough are better suited to leashless climbing and may be a good lightweight option for mountaineers once they add some grip tape to the shaft (Petzl now sell this tape).

PETZL QUARK
Weight: 645g
Price: £152
Pick types/price: Quad/cascade £30

The Quark remains one of the best tools on the market and like most radical tools it’s slowly become accepted as the norm (like the Predator, Quasar, Machine etc). The highlights of the tools are a well-designed grip, perfect balance, a good clipper leash system. Not a lot to say as it seems to speak for itself.

GRIVEL AIR TECH EVOLUTION
Weight: 495g (53cm) hammer: 520g (53cm)
Price: £100

Super lightweight, yet still able to climb moderate terrain, these are good, easy to moderate mountain tools, with the modular slider system being ideal for technical climbing, allowing the hand rest to be moved up or down the shaft when you don’t need it. As used by Steve House on Nanga Parbat.

BLACK DIAMOND VENOM
Weight: 493g
Price: £100
Pick types/price: Classic and Technical both £25

A modular technical mountaineering tool, the Venom is light, simple and excellent value and a great first tool, or a simpler technical tool for mountaineering. The steel headset is also very tough and features a good adze.

TECH CLIMB

CAMP AWAX FREESTYLE
Weight: 565g
Price: £130
Pick type/price: T-rated/£35

CAMP seem to have struggled since the days of the popular Hyper Couloir, but the Awax shows a return to form and I’ve found this axe far exceeded my expectations. Tough and very well-balanced this is a great technical tool and deserves consideration and with the hand hook fitted (£5) this is a top leashless performer, especially if weight is an issue. The size, balance and weight make this a good choice for people who are small and light (i.e. women, puny blokes or leprachauns).

PETZL QUARK
Weight: 675g
Price: £130
Pick types/price: T pick or B pick/£22

Well-established and a very light and simple technical tool that works well with very little fanfare, but not worth the price when you consider you can buy the far better DMM Rebel for £20 more... that is unless it’s on sale.

DMM XENO
Weight: 707g
Price: £130
Pick types/price: T-rated pick/£22

I’ve always been a big fan of the old Fly, which achieved great results with very minimal engineering and the new Superfly carries on that tradition, having a redesigned handle [similar to the Rebel], which is a great improvement and a tweaked shaft, which gives the tool a different feel and swing than the old model. Nevertheless the DMM Rebel is an infinitely better axe for only slightly more cash (£20 extra spread over a decade or more of use isn’t much to ask?).

DMM SUPERFLY
Weight: 775g
Price: £150 Clipper Leash £25
Pick types/price: Standard/£22

DMM do it again, although with no small degree of pain. The Rebel is a tough cookie that perhaps is diminished only by a lousy paint job (both on the shaft and the pick, which looks like it’s been dipped in paint). The proof though is in the pudding, and when your ‘pudding’ it in ice (sorry about that) you can just tell this is a very well thought out tool. How does it stand up against the main competition? Well I know three climbers who have switched from Grivel, BD and Petzl tools and off the record they all felt that the Rebel was equal or better, primarily because of a very well-built pick and a more UK-centric adze.
GRIVEL X-MONSTER
Weight: 695g
Price: £80
A more sedate Monster, designed for both ice and mixed (it has a thinner pick). People have climbed mountains using these tools, but I wouldn’t go quite that far (although I am prepared to be wrong on that) and, personally, I’d recommend them for sporty mixed, outcrop mixed (i.e. Scotland) and pure ice. They make ideal tools for someone who wants to dabble in the sport, especially Ryanair style winter climbing or on a tight budget. Not to be underestimated.

BLACK DIAMOND VIPER
Weight: 675g
Price: £150 (with lockdown leash) £170 (with an Android leash)
Pick types/price: Fusion/Lazer/Titan all £30
Well-established as a modern classic, this tool shines on all terrain and it’s impossible to fault it. Like the Quark this tool features a highly sophisticated grip, perfect balance and a super tough headset. People try and compare both tools and I would say that the Quark wins by a hair, on balance, but the Viper’s adze wins on useability and strength, especially for UK climbing.

DMM VENOM
Weight: 650g
Price: £110
Pick type/price: T-rated pick/£22

I’m not a fan of bent-shafted tools (compared to curved) and so I’m not a big fan of the Venom – basically an updated DMM Alien, finding it not as nice to use or as easy to plunge as a curved shaft. The main benefit of the bent shaft is that it makes it easier to use the other side of the axe’s head (pick & hammer) and perhaps giving a margin more security when hooking, which could prove useful for some mixed climbers.

GRIVEL ALP WING
Weight: 679g
Price: £135
Pick types/price: Goulotte/Evolution/£35
As far as technical mountain tools goes the Alp Wing is one of the best tools around, featuring a hot forged head, indestructible picks and a very lightweight but well-balanced design. When fitted the modular ‘horn’ hand rest these are also great leasless tools.

GRIVEL TAA-K-OON
Weight: 730g
Price: £140
Pick types/price: Mixte/Cascade/£35
Like the Viper and Quark the oddly named Taa-k-oon sits at the head of the table, featuring a well-balanced and super robust headset, good grip and great balance (it feels very different to the Quark or Viper though).

GOING LEASHLESS – WHAT’S STOPPING YOU?
I meet loads of climbers who ask me about going leashless. Many of them have tried with their tools and quickly switched back to leashes. The problem in making the switch generally comes down to one or all of the following three.
• Wrong gloves: climbing leashless requires you wear a dextrose glove that will give you the best grip possible. Leashless climbing actually allows you to climb with much thinner gloves, as you can shake out as often as you want, or stick your hands under your armpits far more easily (make sure that you have your mitts handy). Using big gauntlets or thick mitts (thin sticky palmed mitts work well) just makes you grip harder – not good. There are tons of good gloves on the market, such as the Grivel TaaKoon Glove, Rab Baltor I’ve used these at -20°C or BD Drytool glove, with the Outdoor Research Alibi probably giving the best grip (they considered banning these gloves at one comp).
• Your tools aren’t up to the job. Make sure your tools are set up for leashless climbing, meaning they have a significant hang hook. Generally the leashless tools begin in the technical climb category.
• You’re scared of dropping your tools. This is, of course, the biggest problem with climbing leashless and anyone who tells you that once you’ve mastered it, it won’t happen is talking bollocks. Basically unless you’re a full timer, who gets their tools for free and climbs in ideal conditions, then you’re going to drop a tool. The actual dropping of the tools isn’t so bad as the fear of doing so, meaning you can’t unlock the amazing freedom leashless climbing brings, feeling more like winter juggling. The only option at the moment is to buy a Grivel Spring Leash and give it another crack.

MUST HAVE
GRIVEL SPRING LEASH
Of all the pieces of climbing gear I own one of the most important is my Grivel Double Spring Leash. This simple set up comprises of strong elasticized tape sewn into a Y-shape, forming two arm length strands, with a small wiregate krab sewn into each of the three ends. The central point is clipped into your belay loop, with the two arms being clipped into the spikes, or head of your axe (depending on conditions).

Why is this piece of gear so important? Well the answer is that with it I feel 100% confident that I won’t drop my tools, meaning I dare go leashless, be it in Scotland on mixed routes, in the Alps on big faces, or on expeditions, where losing a tool can mean losing your life.

In the past I’ve used lanyards on my tools, but they were always as a back up to my axe leashes, but with the Spring Leashes things become far simpler, less tangle some and much more secure. Strength wise I’ve fallen onto my leashes three times and although I wouldn’t recommend it, they held me solidly every time and provide a very big boost to one’s safety in the mountains, as you’re not only safe from dropping your tools, you’re also safe from your tools dropping you. A secondary benefit of this is that when placing pro you’re backed up to your other tool – which I know Stevie Haston would call cheating, but it’s your neck on the line not his.

Tangles have always been a problem with this type of system, but once you take your axe leashes out of the equation, this is greatly reduced. When tangles do occur it’s simply a case of unclipping the leash from your tool, pulling it through, and clipping it back in again. Some axes (like my Quarks) don’t feature a big enough hole to clip the leashes karabiner through, meaning a loop of 4mm cord must be threaded through the spike. On tools like the BD Viper you may have to drill a hole through the plastic hand hook to achieve this.

When plunging the shaft I generally unclip the krabs and clip them together around my shoulder (one into another), but another alternative is to clip them into the head of the axe, but again this may require another small loop of 4mm cord. At the moment I think a lot of people are rightly put off from the whole leashless thing for mountain and trad because they fear dropped tools. The Spring Leash is the only answer at the moment and as a guide to how good they are just check out Grivel North America news pages for people like House, Cordes and Prezelj using them to great effect.
Originally intended as a sport tool the Taa-k-oon has become a very popular mountain tool due to its ability to be able to live with a lot of abuse yet still climb hard and steep ground.

**TECH SPORT**

**BLACK DIAMOND FUSION**
- Weight: 696g
- Price: £180
- Pick types/price: Fusion/Laser/Titan all £30

One of the top dogs, this is a awesome tool, but standing between the Reactor and Nomic I think it’s probably no longer a good buy.

**PETZL NOMIC**
- Weight: 635g
- Price: £160
- Pick types/price: B-rated pick/£30

New last year it’s fair to say that the Nomic is probably the high watermark in leashless technology, but as such it is a tool that’s limited to pure sport ground and ice (it has no hammer). Like most tools it takes a while to get used to, but once mastered the act of climbing becomes a great deal easier and more fun.

**GRIVEL MONSTER**
- Weight: 670g
- Price: £80

Seen as a bit of an oddity, I think the Monster is perhaps a little too Continental for UK climbers, but may be worth considering if you want to try your hand at sport mixed climbing. For my money I’d skip to the better X-Monster.

**BLACK DIAMOND REACTOR**
- Weight: 675g
- Price: £130
- Pick types/price: Fusion/Laser/Titan all £30

BD’s new leashless tool, this is a slightly detuned Fusion, with a simpler grip and could be considered as a leashless tool for the masses. I’ve yet to try this out, but knowing the people who developed it I don’t doubt that it will perform. Featuring a mini hammer on each tool (you can fit the Viper adze), I think this is perhaps a better general leashless tool than the Nomic (it’s also cheaper), but at the detriment to out and out performance. A great introduction to full-on leashless climbing.

**DMM ANARCHIST**
- Weight: 680g
- Price: £175
- Pick types/price: Standard/£22

I’ve yet to try the Anarchist, but suspect it’ll be a great tool, but again I feel that now we have the Nomic (which I’d say is a step on from the Anarchist, which is more comparable to the old Petzl Ergo) and the cheaper BD Reactor I’m not convinced that it’s a good buy.

**ROUND UP**

When I started looking at buying my first axe there were definitely good, better and not so good axes on the market, but due to better CE regulations on shaft and pick strength, a huge growth in demand for technical tools and great leaps in axe design, now there are really amazing axes on the market. What is true is that whatever axe you buy I’m confident that you will feel you made the right choice once you’ve used it in anger, slowly growing to love it like a Marine loves his rifle. All that remains then is to log onto UK Climbing and tell the rest of the world why.

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Sandy Ogilvie in a tight spot on the American mixed climbing classic Birdbrain Boulevard (Wi5/M6) in Ouray, Colorado. [Ian Parnell]