

MOUNT GILBERT & MOUNT THOMPSON



Mount Gilbert The North Couloir. Photo: Todd Vogel

The northeast couloir of Mount Gilbert (13,106 ft.) isn't one of the 'big names' of Sierra ice routes. However this is one of the best and one that deserves more attention than it generally gets. Thompson offers several short gullies that end some distance from the summit but these are fun, short and straightforward. The approach for both is the same and is short (for a Sierra climb).

Where

Both peaks are on the Sierra crest and are approached from South Lake.

Take East Line street from the center of Bishop and head west past the Buttermilks. About 15 miles up the road take the left turn to South Lake and the parking area.

Parking

In mid-summer parking is pretty limited at the trailhead. Get there later in the day on a weekend and you will not find any. Instead you will have to drop off your pack and drive back down to below Parchers Resort and hike back to the trailhead. Pay attention to the no parking signs or you might get a nasty surprise left by the Forest Service.

Strategy

This climb can be done in a day if you start early and move steadily making it a realistic day trip for many climbers. However if you want to take life more leisurely hike in late in the day to camp at one of the lakes below Gilbert. Next day climb and return to camp, pick it up and head to Bishop for dinner.

Equipment

Two ice tools, six ice screws, snow pickets (only in early season) a small rock rack, 60m rope, helmets. For the rappel descent of Thompson two 60m ropes are needed.

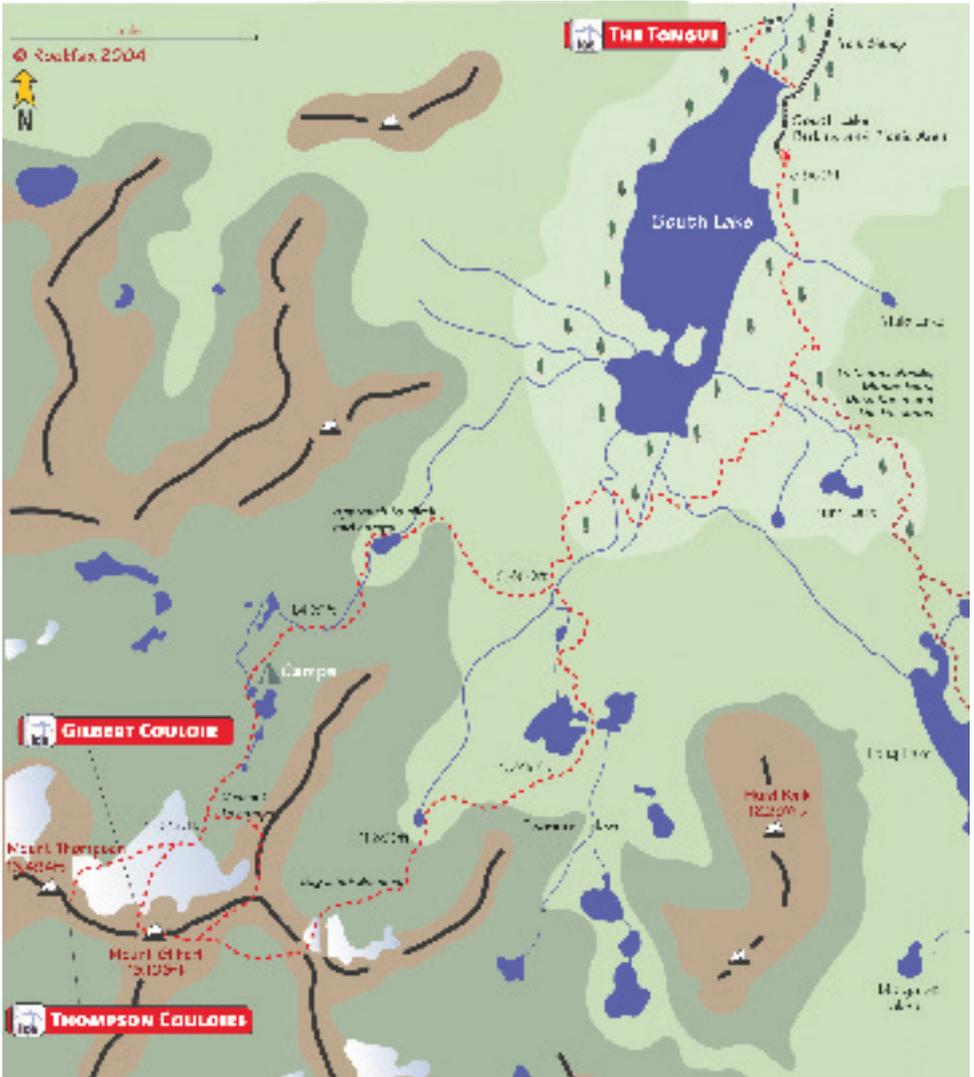


The Harrington Couloir on Mt. Thompson

Approach

From the South Lake parking lot take the Bishop Pass Trail around the lake about 3/4 miles to the turnout to Treasure Lakes. Leave the Bishop Pass Trail and follow the Treasure Lakes Trail as it contours across the south side of South Lake, crosses the main drainage and then climbs up the hillside and crosses the stream to the east side. Leave the trail here and pick a route up the slabs and rock contouring to the north. Gain altitude steadily and cross the ridge at about 10,700 ft. to 10,800 ft. The ridge here is actually two crests so climb gently to the second ridgeline and enter the stream drainage at about 10,950 ft. crossing to the north side of the creek just below the lake. (This route avoids almost all of the talus and moraine by staying on slabs). Go around the lake on the north side and pick a way up the streambed crossing to the south side at the head of the valley as it turns west. Stay a little above the streambed and look for a campsite at about 11,650 ft. This area is pristine with little sign of human activity. Keep it this way.

In the morning take care and you will avoid the worst of the moraines. Take the east side of the highest lake and stay on the east side on slabs and maybe snow. (This may be firm in the morning.) With luck you will find a snow-filled gully that leads to the top of the moraine and then a short descent will put you on the snowfield below the North Face of Gilbert.





The approach/descent gully above camp heading to Gilbert.

The first few rope lengths are best belayed from the right side of the gully and fixed anchors will usually not be found. After several rope lengths the gully narrows and belays will be better protected from falling ice if they are placed on the left side of the gully. Often the ice is good enough to provide ice screw belays and these are advised as the rock is often poor quality. The crux ice pitches are at the top of the gully and in good years these last two pitches approach 60° and are smooth, green, and narrow.

At the top of the gully drop down twenty feet and then climb a fourth class corner and gully to just west of the summit. If you want more adventure take the chimney directly above the couloir's top with some 5.6 climbing. A two- inch piece will be handy for this.

For Thompson you can avoid the worst of the moraine by taking slabs toward a small lake directly west of Lake 11,650 and then go up to a small rocky knob to the south. Gain the moraine crest aiming for a giant block on the moraine. Then a short bit of moraine hopping will put you on the snow at the base of the couloirs.

The Gilbert Climb: A13

The gully is obvious, ending up just west of the actual summit. The bergschrund generally presents little problem but often the slopes below the gully are quite icy and, despite the low angle, use caution and a belay.



to four half rope-length rappels lead to the snow and talus below. (Long raps will probably hang up or pull down loose rock so just be patient!) Below, talus and snow will take you back to the gully below the moraine you used on the way up.

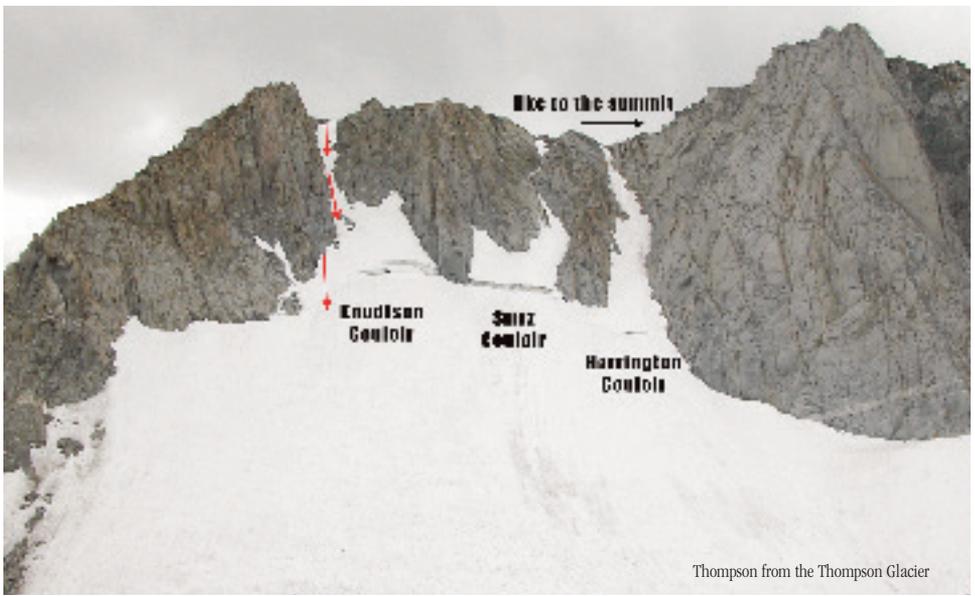
The Gilbert Descent

Which way you go depends upon whether or not you are a day warrior or a two-day sluggard.

If doing the climb in a day head east across the summit plateau and drop down the bowl on the southeast side of Gilbert aiming for the low point left of a small pointed peak (12,490 ft.). Cross the ridge at about the 12,400 ft. level and head down a small snow slope (may be melted out totally or if icy may require rappels) and aim for a small high lake west of Treasure Lakes. From this lake contour east onto the ridge and drop into the bowl on the other side and descend to the trail at Treasure Lakes.

If you need to return to pick up a camp below the peak drop down the sandy slopes just below the NE ridge line aiming for the peak to the northeast. A line just below the ridge seems to work best and is easy. Go directly to the top of the small peak designated 12,800+. This actually has a summit register on top in an old can.

Here the ridge suddenly becomes sharp and exposed. Drop down the ridge two hundred yards or so on 4th class terrain. Just before a steep step in the ridge look for a rap anchor on the north side of the crest. Three



Thompson from the Thompson Glacier

The Thompson Climbs: AI2-3

There are three obvious couloirs on the north face. Recently modern climbers seem to have wanted their piece of the action and the couloirs have been called (named from the east) the Knudtson, Smrz and Harrington Couloirs. However Norman Clyde is said to have climbed Thompson over twenty times and it seems unlikely that this prolific first ascensionist and climber of most of the Palisade couloirs would have missed out on these, especially since they would not have tested his skills excessively.

All are about the same level of steepness with the presence or absence of water ice determining the difficulty. So take your pick.

Leave the snow and ice gear at the top and hike for about 30 minutes up the easy slopes to the summit and a great view of the Goddard and Paiute areas.

Further up under the summit is another couloir, that is currently called the Moynier Couloir. This is the steepest of all of the couloirs, but is also the most prone to melting out, leaving less than 50% snow and ice and a majority of unpleasant loose rock. As a result, it is best climbed in early season or after a big snow winter. The crux is a chockstone a little above halfway up the couloir.



Chris Simmons in the Moynier Couloir

The Thompson Descent

The regular descent back into the drainage has generally been down the northwest ridge and then down the east slopes to gain the glacier/snowfield at the base of Thompson. This is unpleasant, loose and can take as long as the ascent. So if you want, take it, but you are on your own here. Much better is to take the recently-placed rappel anchors in the furthest east gully, the Knudtson Couloir and then downclimb the snow at the bottom. This descent is set up for two-rope rappels so come prepared.