



## Acadia Mountain Guides Climbing School



### CHOOSING A CLIMBING SCHOOL

*Director Jon Tierney, AMGA Certified Rock and Alpine Guide  
Accredited by the American Mountain Guides Association since 1993*

*Acadia Mountain Guides Climbing School is committed to helping you choose the guide or guide service that is right for you. We strongly believe in the value of guide education and offer the following information to help you make an informed choice.*

Most climbing schools and guide services appear to offer potential clients a similar product. Most commonly, this is an introduction to or an advancement of climbing skills and an increased awareness of safety considerations. You may be surprised to learn that historically, the training of mountain guides in the United States has been loosely organized and inconsistently regulated. While some guide services conduct in-house training, few guides have had any formal, external, consistent, or comprehensive training.

As a result, anyone can hang up a sign and claim to be a competent guide or climbing school! In Maine, only Acadia Mountain Guides Climbing School offers you the benefit of guides with both personal experience and AMGA guide education and evaluation.

Although risk can never be eliminated, proper training can minimize it. Climbing skills alone are not enough. Guiding experience and training, as well as evaluation of guiding-specific skills, are essential to maximize competency and to reduce risks. *Most people expect experience and formal training of a doctor or lawyer. Shouldn't you ask the same from your guide?*

There are many quality climbing schools and guides in the Northeast. However, there are differences in quality, substance, and even style that can make a particular school or guide a good match for one person and a bad match for another. *There are also many companies and individuals that provide substandard services and are potentially less safe.* In the United States, you are not required to be certified or even educated to teach rock climbing or to call yourself a guide. Granted, most people who guide in the U.S. are good climbers, but to properly protect someone in a new environment often requires techniques different than those used by recreational climbers. Government permits, licenses and the presence of insurance are not valid assessment tools either, as these are usually available to anyone who applies. Only a few climbing areas, such as Joshua Tree National Park, require any training or evaluation in order to guide.

The first place to turn for advice is the American Mountain Guides Association, an organization which represents the mountain guides and climbing instructors in the United States. One of the goals of the AMGA is to raise the technical and professional standards of mountain guiding in the United States to a worldwide level. A long-term goal of the AMGA is for "certification to become the standard for U.S. guiding." For the consumer, the AMGA can be a tool to help choose the right guide or climbing school. Ask specifically if a school's guides have taken any AMGA terrain-specific training, or has certified guides on its staff or if a school is at least accredited. The presence of trained or certified guides helps to insure that current industry guidelines are being followed.

AMGA credentials are important to look for when hiring a mountain guide or climbing school. But which credentials should you look for? The AMGA logo is used frequently and represents many different programs. The most important of these are certification, education, accreditation and membership.

**AMGA CERTIFICATION:** Granted to individual guides, AMGA certification is given to those who have demonstrated a broad range of experience and expertise in a specialized terrain discipline such as rock, alpine or ski-mountaineering. A fully certified international guide has been certified in all three disciplines. There is also a new top rope certification program for climbing instructors. Certification examines client care, climbing ability, judgement and decision-making, technical skills, rescue proficiency, and environmental concerns. The education and certification program is a process spanning several years and currently represents the highest degree of training available in the United States. Each certified guide has met an internationally recognized standard of expertise and professionalism and actively participates in continuing education throughout the year.

**AMGA EDUCATIONAL COURSES:** Of utmost importance to you are the training and experience of the individual guide who will lead you or your group. After all they are the one tied to the other end of your rope.

The AMGA offers guide training and certification in rock climbing, alpine climbing, and ski mountaineering. Specific courses and exams teach aspirant guides essential skills in different terrain. The rock climbing and alpine programs are outlined here.

The **Top Rope Site Manager Course and Evaluation** prepares climbers to safely teach top rope climbing and to manage group climbing sites. The **Rock Instructor Course** introduces aspirant guides to multi-pitch guiding skills on rock routes up to grade III in length and with relatively simple approaches and descents such as we find in New England or in Joshua Tree National Park. The **Rock Instructor Exam** then evaluates these skills. The **Advanced Guide Course** and subsequent **Rock Guide Exam** further prepares and evaluates guides on difficult terrain above Grade III such as Red Rocks in Nevada or the Wind Rivers in Wyoming or Yosemite. Courses and exams are usually taken years apart.

Alpine certification requires three courses and a ten-day exam for guides who work in snow, ice, or glaciated terrain. The alpine program begins with a **Alpine Guide Skills Course** covering skills essential to the terrain. The **Advanced Alpine Guide Course** focuses on greater efficiency and better risk management skills. The **Alpine Exam** is a comprehensive exam covering all aspects of alpine travel: glacier, rock and snow terrain.

**As a minimum, look for individual guides who have completed professional training courses for the terrain that he or she is taking you on, attends in-house training programs supervised by a certified guide, and who meet wilderness medical requirements.**

Acadia Mountain Guides Climbing School requires all guides to participate in AMGA educational courses. We employ several certified top rope site managers, three certified rock guides, two rock instructors and one certified alpine guide. Over 80% of our staff are individually certified.

**AMGA ACCREDITATION:** The accreditation program is intended to upgrade safety of climbing schools by bringing in review teams of certified guides to take a general look at staffing, in house training, permits, and insurance. For many climbing schools, the only reason to seek accreditation is for the marketing advantage. However, climbing with an accredited school does not guarantee you are climbing with a competent guide. As the AMGA states “accreditation is a general review not an in-depth evaluation of the company’s guides or their skills.” Be sure to also inquire as to what specific aspects of the program have been reviewed. For example, a full-service school may have only had its rock program reviewed. Accreditation is renewed every three to five years. A more demanding accreditation program is slated to go into effect in 2005 that links certification with accreditation.

Acadia Mountain Guides Climbing School has been accredited since 1993 and currently meets the new 2005 standard

**AMGA MEMBERSHIP:** Any individual or program may become a member of the association. Membership is not an indication of guiding ability, educational and safety skills or proficiency. All you have to do is pay a membership fee.