

Ice climbing a ?process of self betterment?: SOIceFest organizer



Alisha Nachman climbs Rollercoaster at Bancroft's Eagles Nest in February 2017. / SUBMITTED

By Angela Long

Peach Sparrow. Kermit's Finger. Where Egos Dare. If these names sound intriguing, it's time to strap on your crampons and head out into a landscape filled with ice pillars and rolling flows. Here you will find ice covered cliffs and frozen waterfalls with climbing trails ? *lines* in ice climber speak ? leading up into the sparkling winter sky.

But don't forget a guide.

"You generally do not want to fall ice climbing," said 2018 Southern Ontario Ice Climbing Festival organizer and photographer Peter Hoang. "Falling while you're ice climbing hurts a lot."

Ice climbing, a sister sport of rock climbing, can be "very, very safe," said Hoang, but you need to know how to "assess the ice fall." Terms used to describe ice conditions include fat, thin, brittle, sun-rotted, plastic-y, dense and sticky. Unlike rock, ice is organic and changing all of the time, said Hoang, posing a unique set of challenges.

That's why this year's festival ? in North Hastings from Feb. 23 to 25 ? will highlight ice safety and include experts from the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides flown in from Calgary. They'll lead clinics for both beginner and advanced climbers, said Hoang's fellow SOIceFest organizer Andriy Kolos.

Learning how to navigate ice is well worth the effort, said Kolos, author of guidebook *Southern Ontario Ice*. You engage with the immediate environment, he said, listening to ?chickadees chirping away on branches,? or observing deer roaming in the wilderness. ?Being outside in winter is stunning and the silence is deafening,? Kolos said. ?Until the snowmobile comes around.?

While southern Ontario is not exactly Vermont, the Canadian Rockies, or Norway (some of the most ?emblematic? mountainous locations for ice climbers, said Kolos), the region is blessed with numerous lakes and cliffs. Because it's not as well-known a destination, climbers can enjoy the spoils in relative isolation. Such peace lends itself to what both Kolos and Hoang describe as the mental discipline required of the sport.

?Your greatest enemy is kind of yourself,? said Hoang. ?When you're out climbing you're basically battling your own physical fitness, your own mental ability, to get you through the climb.?

The sport is not for the faint hearted, according to the increasing number of Ontario outfits offering ice climbing courses, such as Guelph's ONE AXE Pursuits and Bracebridge's Liv Outside. You dress for being pressed to a wall of ice from sunrise to sunset. You wear metal-clawed crampons attached to stiff-soled boots. You swing a deadly-sharp ice axe above your head, hauling yourself up a slippery cliff face, one hold at a time.

The physical and mental stamina required to endure below freezing temperatures while performing such feats is why Kolos has pursued what he calls ?this somewhat esoteric activity? for two decades. Ice climbing provides a space for an ?ongoing process of self betterment,? he said.

The concept of self betterment extends beyond the climbers to the communities they visit. Since 2015, SOIceFest has donated thousands of dollars to local organizations in the North Hastings area.

Ro Munich, owner of Maynooth's Arlington Hotel, remembers the first ice festival in 2015 when attendees slept on mattresses on the

restaurant floor and a "really good" ice climber band entertained everyone. He describes the climbers as a people that "go out into the cold and come back soaking wet with big grins on their faces."

They don't just come to Maynooth and leave without leaving a positive impact, Munich said, instead they make community betterment "part of the fabric of their thinking."

And then there are the names: Naked Soul, Himalayan Monk Pants, Comfortably Numb.

"Whoever puts up the line first can name the climb," Hoang said. "One Andriy and I had fun naming is right by Papineau Roadside. It's called Maynooth Goes Boom."

The 2018 SOIceFest will take place from Feb. 23 to 25. Check out its website for details www.soicefest.com.