Ice climbing festival returns



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By Nate Smelle

Ice climbers from across Canada and the northern United States descended on North Hastings over the weekend to take part in the fifth annual Southern Ontario Ice Festival.

One of two major ice climbing festivals in Ontario ? the other taking place in Thunder Bay ? the Southern Ontario Ice Festival gives climbers a chance to explore the highlands in and around Bancroft and Hastings Highlands. Much of the climbing takes place at Diamond Lake, south of Combermere, the Eagles Nest in Bancroft, however the main hub of activity is based out of The Arlington in Maynooth.

As one of the co-founders of the festival, Andriy Kolos says he has seen the event grow in popularity each year since its inception. Organized by an umbrella organization called the Ontario Alliance of Climbers, Kolos says the festival started out as a social gathering for ice climbers. Since then, he says the festival has evolved into a dynamic event that is educational and enjoyable for everyone involved.

?The first festival didn't have any clinics and it was more of a social gathering to pull people together,? says Kolos.

?With that initial success we were able to recognize the potential, not only to get people together, but to help grow the community. So, there has been a very deliberate effort to help subsidize the clinics, making them more accessible to beginner climbers.?

Kolos says the organizers of the annual event would like to expand the clinics, so that local residents can learn to ice climb. He says they have reached out to the schools in Maynooth and Bancroft in hopes of creating an outdoor educational experience for local students. Kolos says the festival has thrived because of the many partnerships organizers have nurtured throughout the climbing community and the ecotourism sector nationwide.

He says the event's organizers along with their partners the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides have used the Southern Ontario Ice Festival as an opportunity to lobby for better industry standards for guides in Ontario. While in Alberta and British Columbia mountain guides are required to meet certain qualifications and possess several certifications, in Ontario they are not.

Another of the main goals of the festival, Kolos says is to benefit the communities and the area where it is located. For instance, this year proceeds raised from the festival will be donated to the Maynooth and Hastings Highlands Business Association to fund children's programming throughout North Hastings. Each year, Kolos says its organizers also make a point of advocating for their members to act as responsible stewards of the areas where they climb.

?It's a win-win-win all around,? says Kolos.

?Climbers, like many hikers are returning stewards. They often return to visit the same areas over and over again, which makes them

more likely to pick up trash on the trails. So, they really tend to make the places they visit their home away from home.?
Kolos says they decided to make North Hastings the festival's home partly because of the "warm reception" they received from the community during the first gathering five years ago. With every festival that comes to pass, he says returning climbers build stronger connections with local residents and business owners.
?We meet a lot of locals at the breakfast stops along the way, whether it's in Bancroft at Tim Hortons or the Sun Run Cafe in Maynooth we are building interconnections with the locations that we climb,? Kolos says.
?Whether it is east of Maynooth, west of Maynooth, or north of Maynooth and closer to Algonquin Park, these are not isolated experiences, they are continually growing and building upon the last.?
These are not the only relationships fostered by the ice climbing festival that are being developed, according to Kolos. Through his own experience of ice climbing in North Hastings, he along with many other climbers have become connected with the natural environment.
While climbing near Watt Lake west of Maynooth at the festival last year, Kolos says they heard a pack of wolves begin to howl. Realizing that they were close, he says they quickly climbed the ice to see if they could catch a glimpse of them. After listening to the wolves sing to one another, Kolos says they followed their tracks back to their car when the silence of the winter forest returned.
Kolos says it is the opportunity to have experiences such as these, that makes North Hastings the perfect place for the ice climbing festival and other nature-based tourism activities. They also help inspire climbers to feel more connected to North Hastings each time they return, he says.
?There are plenty of opportunities for self-powered ecotourism to bring people up from the indoor climbing gyms in Toronto to enjoy nature and the solitude outside,? Kolos says.
?One of the most amazing things about ice climbing is the complete silence. When climbing in the summer you hear the birds chirping or the river moving but in the winter it is completely dead silent and then you have the beautiful ice climbs in front of you.?
For more information on the Southern Ontario Ice Festival visit them online at www.soicefest.com.