



CLIMBING UP. WATERFALLS

In the dead of winter, when the seeps and cascades along Pictured Rocks cliffs turn to vertical ice, hundreds of climbers, from novices to the world's best, gather to scale the cool and slippery temptation (oh yeah, and party).

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY **AARON PETERSON**

ICE

echoes off the blue-white cliff face as jagged chunks the size of bowling balls break free, slide past a climber's helmeted head and plummet 30 feet, thudding near his partner before caroming down the forested hillside, branches snapping like clavicles in a car wreck. Wild eyed and adrenaline tweaked, the partners exchange a serious glance that melts into a hell-yeah grin.

**"Climbing."
"Climb on."**

It's the first weekend in February, the woods of the central Upper Peninsula are waist deep in snow, and the dozens of waterfalls that bring sandal-footed tourists to Munising in summer are frozen hard in dangling pillars. The seeping water that gives the cliffs of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore their dazzling colors are now sheets of vertical ice, cold and calling to a tribe of vibrantly clad and gear-bejeweled winter warriors from across the nation.

Ice climbers—500 of them—are gathered for one of the oldest winter climbing festivals in the country, Michigan Ice Fest. For over 25 years climbers have come to the sandstone cliffs outside this city of 2,500 to test themselves against what organizers call the largest concentration of climbable ice in the Midwest. Walls of ice a half-mile long with hundreds of routes up their faces, some routes a mere two or three stories high, other rise more than 200 feet.

In the beginning Michigan Ice Fest was a loosely organized band of climbers from southern Michigan, but like the ice itself, the festival built up from layer upon layer of nearly imperceptible seeps, and the movement congealed into the third largest festival of its kind. Today, backed by Marquette's Down Wind Sports and corporate sponsors like Patagonia, the event boasts an arsenal of demo gear and hands-on instruction and presentations from some of the sport's A list athletes.

"It's like signing up for a basketball camp and finding Michael Jordan, Larry

Bird and Magic Johnson are all there," says lead organizer Bill Thompson.

On Saturday morning of the three-day 2010 festival; the sky is leaden and pregnant with a snowstorm pushing in off Lake Superior. Many of Ice Fest's newest converts are gathered at an ice formation called The Curtains, a 30-foot-high, 100-yard-long wall of vertical ice where newbies can cut their teeth in relative safety (remember the falling ice?) under the tutelage of helpful volunteers.

A mixed demographic of college students, fit middle-aged couples, and old hands now volunteer to pass on their climbing experience to a new generation. In the early days of the festival attendees were mostly men, but organizers now say that at least half the climbers are women. Rounding out the party, some teens and younger kids make snowballs and sit in the deep powder waiting their turn for a rope to open up. Small group clinics (including women's-only and one for kids) blend classroom with ice time to prep new climbers.

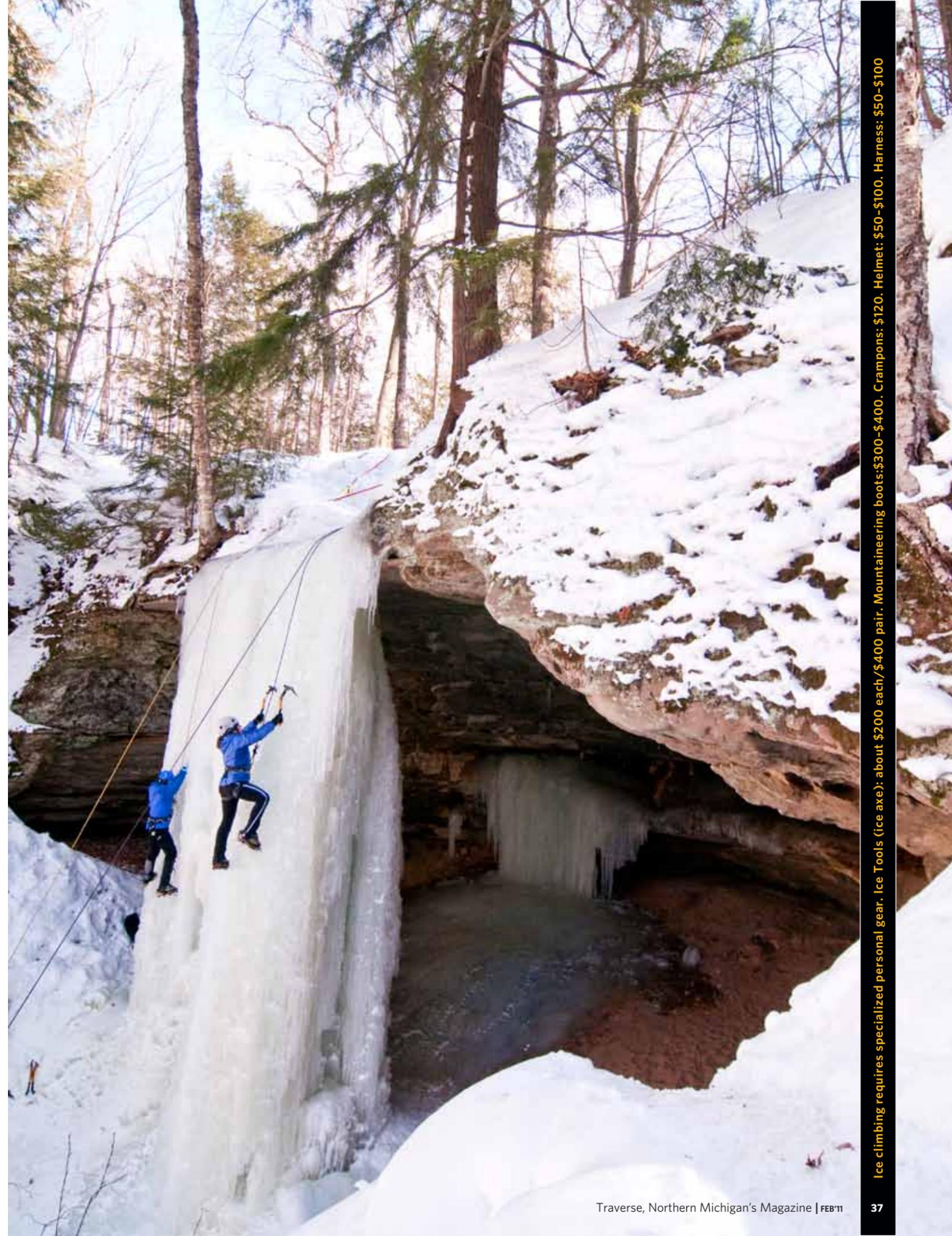
About a dozen volunteers are manning belay—securing the non-climber end of the rope—as novice climbers sidle up with newly rented demo helmets, a pair of ice axes in hand and mountaineering boots bristling with talon-sharp steel crampons. The instructors give some pointers, and the newbies turn to face the blue, toothy maw of ice before them.

Ice climbing seems simple enough. Kick your newfound foot fangs into the wall



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of ice and wail away with the two handheld axes, but most new climbers find themselves at the halfway point quaking in exhaustion, like the crispy beech leaves still clinging to branches.

"Most people who come to Ice Fest have never climbed," says organizer Thompson. "It's not really the kind of sport where you can just buy boots, crampons and ice tools and go do it. Technique is everything, and you have to learn from somebody."

Nearby as Thompson talks, a college-age girl in jeans, puffy jacket and lightweight stretchy gloves is halfway up the wall, grinning in full out "I can't believe I'm doing it!" mode. An experienced dude in a converted hockey helmet and nylon wind pants mixes in with gear addicts sporting all the latest waterproof-breathable technology money can buy.

One of the belayers decides he needs to warm up a bit, ropes up for a climb and starts traversing the ice wall on an area the beginners have been avoiding, a section where needle-like fingers of ice fringe a cave. He disappears into the cave, then reappears feet first, laid out horizontally above spires of ice poking up from the cave floor, picking his way effortlessly along, spiderlike.

The energy at The Curtains is contagious, a sort of slow burn of initial anxiety, then physical exhaustion and finally pride as ice climbers hone technique, using less energy to get higher on the ice with each climb. Unlike other ice climbing regions in the West and on the East Coast, all of the ice in the Munising area is exhaustingly vertical, so climbers don't get a break during their route. At only 30-feet high, this might be considered beginner ice, but it's still serious ice.

"If you can ice climb in Michigan, you can ice climb anywhere," Thompson says.

Even though Michigan Ice Fest has been alive and kicking for over 25 years, the ice of Munising was still relatively untapped and unknown to the climbing world until recently.

In November 2009 *Climbing* magazine put an epic shot of a 200-foot Pictured Rocks ice climb on the cover, along with a mega seven-page photo spread inside, and the secret was out. Climbers who've been hitting the Munising area nearly every weekend for the past decade said last season was the first time they'd seen out-of-state plates.

"*Climbing* is a publication that goes all over the world, so this really validates what we've been saying for 25 years; that the climbing here in the Upper Peninsula is fantastic," Thompson says.

A trail from The Curtains meanders along a sandstone cliff that was once a Lake Superior shoreline, and spills into a natural amphitheater a hundred yards across. A 70-foot-high frozen waterfall punctuates the center. Unlike The Curtains where hundreds of people are climbing or waiting to climb, this formation, called The Dryer Hose, has attracted only a half dozen intermediate climbers who are packing their own gear, setting their own ropes and climbing independently. Most of them admit to falling in love with the sport at a previous Ice Fest. Some are kicked back eating lunch. A few beers chill in a snow bank. A longhaired kid has set up a band of climbing webbing between two old-growth hemlocks that he's gracefully treading tightrope style—shirtless and shoeless.

The world may have discovered Munising ice may, but organizers laugh when asked if it'll ever be overrun. "The number of climbs is endless. Simply endless," Thompson says. "There's ice that never gets climbed at Ice Fest."

It's Saturday night of the three-day fest and standing room only in the upstairs of Sydney's Restaurant, an inexplicably Australian-themed bar and grill that's always been Ice Fest HQ. Organizers brag that beyond the awesome climbing opportunities around Munising and the presence of the world's best climbers, it's the event's Northern Michigan style that makes it special. Sydney's is part of that style, where it's fish fry



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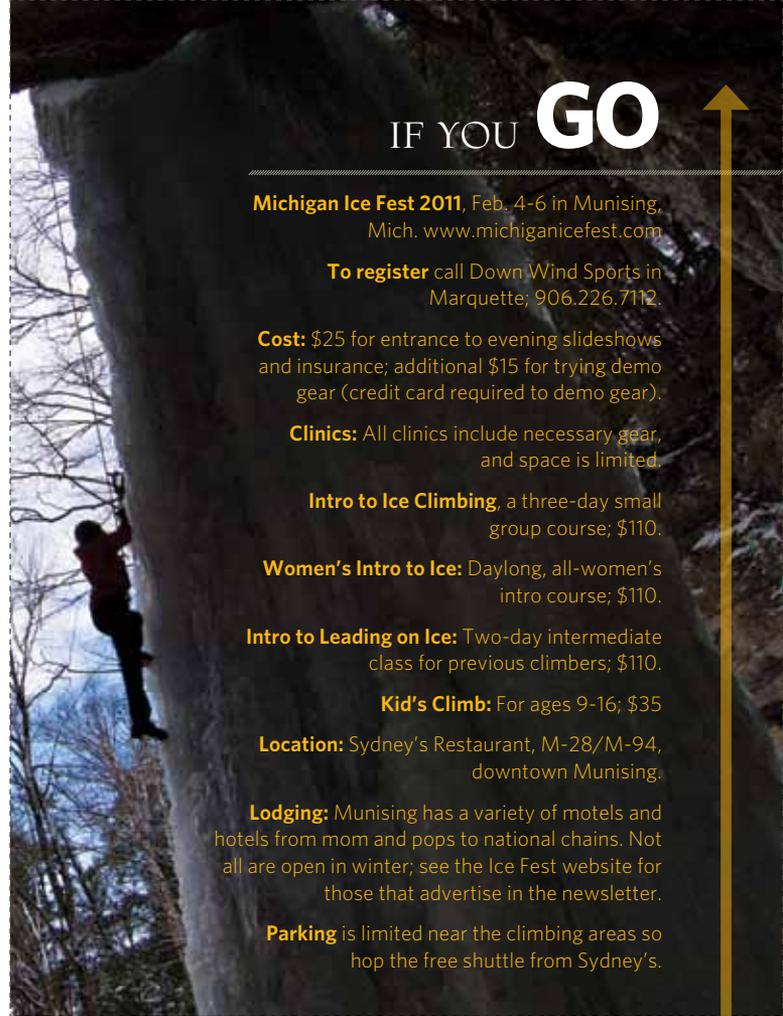


downstairs and global ice climbing soirée upstairs—a down-home grass-roots vibe that all the climbers dig. After experiencing Michigan Ice Fest’s unique culture for the first time, Colorado-based mountaineer Pete Takeda reveled in the fact that “there’s still somewhere where they smoke, drink and deep fry everything.”

I’m chatting with a friend who’s an outdoor gear rep and enjoying tall glasses of dark beer courtesy of a corporate sponsor. The atmosphere is close in, smells of dried sweat, beer and everyone exudes the mellow, ruddy afterglow of winter physical exertion. My friend introduces me to a guy he knows. I say I’m a writer and photographer. So is he. We chat about writing and photography. He asks if I climb, I laugh and say no way. I ask him if he does and he says, “yeah, you should give it a try.” I say I might.

Then the lights dim and he excuses himself, making his way to the front of the room and a projection screen where he gives a mind-boggling presentation of amazing photos and stories from his climbing exploits around the globe. This is the beauty of Michigan Ice Fest—these climbers are present at festivals in Colorado and New Hampshire too, but in Munising you can talk shop with them over a free beer and a deep-fried fish. **■**

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Michigan Ice Fest 2011, Feb. 4-6 in Munising, Mich. www.michiganicefest.com

To register call Down Wind Sports in Marquette; 906.226.7112.

Cost: \$25 for entrance to evening slideshows and insurance; additional \$15 for trying demo gear (credit card required to demo gear).

Clinics: All clinics include necessary gear, and space is limited.

Intro to Ice Climbing, a three-day small group course; \$110.

Women’s Intro to Ice: Daylong, all-women’s intro course; \$110.

Intro to Leading on Ice: Two-day intermediate class for previous climbers; \$110.

Kid’s Climb: For ages 9-16; \$35

Location: Sydney’s Restaurant, M-28/M-94, downtown Munising.

Lodging: Munising has a variety of motels and hotels from mom and pops to national chains. Not all are open in winter; see the Ice Fest website for those that advertise in the newsletter.

Parking is limited near the climbing areas so hop the free shuttle from Sydney’s.

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