

Romancing the Ice

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Nearly 500 feet above the forest, Tommy Lopresto takes the final swing of his axe, punching into the snow-covered ice, before taking a quick look around. The storm has just cleared over a turbulent Lake Superior to his left. Off to his right is the falling snow, which once dusted him, now hitting nearby ridges. Below him is a forest quickly becoming darker. Exhausted from the climb, hands screaming in agony, it should be hard to appreciate the beauty. But it's not. It's intoxicating. It's ice climbing.

The Montreal River Harbour, Ontario area is becoming a favorite destination of ice climbers. The number of climbs is one reason for the area's popularity; the accessibility of those climbs is another. The adventuresome can undertake long treks to big climbs, but a good number of climbs are just minutes from the car. Perfect for the nature photographer wanting to try something new.

Located about one hour north of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, on the southeast shore of Lake Superior, Montreal River Harbour/Agawa Canyon boasts incredible photo opportunities. Take a course in ice climbing at the North of Superior Climbing Company for some fun and photography. Or grab the snowshoes or cross-country skis and hit one of the many trails. Snowmobiling is also popular.

On some of the climbs, photographers can walk up next to the action for eye-level shots of climbers without needing to be tied off with rope. Feel like having more fun?

Climb part way up the ice or repel down, tie-off, and shoot climbers headed up.

If ice climbing doesn't do it for you, scour the shoreline or local trails for spectacular landscape photography. Keep an eye out for moose, wolves and black bear. While hiking out from a climb one evening, the beams of our headlamps bounced from one wolf print to another as they trailed a set of deer tracks. One lucky climber spotted a wolf the day before I arrived.

The area is as cold and snowy as it is beautiful. Being prepared for frigid temperatures is a must. Climbing and shooting in the cold, wind and snow presents a challenge. Adopt the tried and true philosophy of layers, layers and more layers. A few lightweight wicking under garments coupled with a layer of fleece under my Gore-Tex bibs and jacket are sufficient while hiking, snow shoeing and climbing. While some like fleece liners that zip into their shells, I prefer not to zip them in. Then I can vent just the shell and keep the fleece layer closed if desired.

The real trouble starts when you stop moving. The cold wind sweeping off Lake Superior will freeze you solid if you don't do something quickly. Stored inside my pack in a small stuff sack is my cold weather best friend. My down jacket is the first thing I put on when I stop for any length of time to rest, shoot or when I've reached the top of a climb. I bought it a size big so I can put it on over the top of my shell and everything else I'm wearing.

Attached to my pack with a small carabineer is a pair of huge, warm mittens. These fit right over the top of my climbing/shooting gloves and are perfect for standing around waiting to climb or shoot. A heavyweight fleece hat keeps my head warm under my climbing helmet. I wear a sock liner under a pair of heavy mountain climbing Smartwool socks inside my plastic mountaineering boots. With boots, you need room for air to circulate. I wear boots 1/2 to 1 full



size bigger depending on the boot.

I also carry a few chemical hand warmer packets. You can place them anywhere you are getting cold. They can also be used to keep cameras warm and bottles of water from freezing. An insulated thermos with a hot drink will warm the insides.

In extreme temperatures in remote areas, I use film cameras instead of digital. That way I don't have to deal with battery and file storage issues. Lithium batteries in all cameras and flashes save a little weight and work better in the cold.



Most of my camera gear, along with food, water and extra clothing, is carried in a Lowepro Pro Trekker. I attach a small daypack to the Lowepro to use when climbing. A smaller camera goes in a Lowepro topload zoom pack attached to the front of me with a chest harness. This allows me to access a camera for opportunities I see when hiking or during quick stops. I don't have to take off my backpack and dig out a camera.

The ice-climbing season runs through April, and the biggest climbs are formed by then. So there is still plenty of time to head up there. It's definitely worth the drive. Heck, the beautiful drive is worth the drive.

If the cold scares you there are excellent year-round adventure possibilities. Kayaking, backpacking, rock climbing and mountain biking are also quite popular in the warmer months.

Sound interesting? If so, there is only one place to stay. The Mad Moose Lodge is located north of Sault Ste. Marie on Highway 17. Owners Darlene Cicora and Denny Thomas go out of their way to make you comfortable. The rustic lodge and cabins are situated right on the Lake Superior shore. They also have campgrounds. And their food is incredible. Lucky for guests since it's the only place to eat for miles. Mad Moose Lodge is also home to the North of Superior Climbing Company, operated by Shaun Parent, a Canadian mountaineer who has developed most of the area climbs. He can help with all of your needs.

For more information contact:
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About the images...

- Top - Nikon N80, Nikon 20-35/2.8 AFD, built-in flash, Fuji Provia F
- Center - Nikon F5 Nikon 20-35/2.8 AFD SB-28DX Fuji Velvia
- Bottom - Nikon N80, Nikon 24-85/3.5-4.5 AF-S ED, Fuji Provia F

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