



## Submerged in ICE SWIMMING's glacial waters

**T**hat first decision is not easy to make. A decision somewhat unusual in extreme sports, in that the extremity of this sport lies in a series of small, seemingly mundane movements on the way toward a final commitment that must be maintained through another series of small, seemingly mundane movements. Which is to say: you're not "all-in" in ice swimming until you're literally all in and staying in—submerged in the water, your body in full-blown crisis mode, enduring.

But that first decision is key: will I get undressed? You will be looking out at the bay or across a field of ice or over the surfline with a car-heat-er-central-thermostat-wool-mittens-fortified

confidence, even though you know that with the answer yes, life-sustaining warmth will begin to rush away from your skin. There is no equipment, no coach, no stadium full of spectators here. Instead, there are curiosity seekers and whoever drove you, shaking their head in disbelief the whole way.

For you, now, there is only the decision, the disrobing, and then the first shock of the water lapping at your feet. The sand may feel sharper until it dissolves beneath them. You are keenly aware that, only steps away, when the most tender skin is submerged, there will be a cutting blow. Lowering your face into the water, you expect the slap. Now you're awake, your head simultaneously hollow and keenly clear. Your teeth may ache. Then the

icy water takes your breath away: the lungs seize up, their contents becoming suddenly and wholly inaccessible to you, as if they are too full of air to admit any more, which, because you are incapable of breathing out just now, they are. The heart hammers in the chest as if it will wade back to shore without you and ... wait for it, wait for it ... a stinging pressure has begun to build in the extremities. It feels as if they will explode if they don't burn up first in the water-resistant fire that is consuming you.

And then, in an instant, the burn is exhilaration. Adrenaline and endorphins are riding their own full-moon high tide through your blood right into that moment when you realize: you have never been this alive in your life. ::



# Navigating the rushing slopes: SKIING & SNOWBOARDING

**R**ight now—and maybe for the rest of your life—there is no other place in the world that you would rather be. The only tracks up here are the ones behind you and, even halfway down the mountain, you are miles above civilization and a long way from any operable road. The sun is making diamonds of the snow, powder so thick that the mountain looks cushioned, a precipitously steep dollop of whipped cream, and the sky is bigger and bluer than anything you've ever seen. You feel at peace and at the same time elated.

A long time ago, you got tired of going up and down the mountain as many times as you could in a day, or snowboarding inside the dotted lines down the skull-and-cross-bones slopes. After a single backcountry descent, you wondered what you'd been doing with your life. Since then, no two places you've skied have ever been alike, and no single place you've skied has ever been the same place two days in a row. Sometimes you take a helicopter, sometimes you take a lift up and ski through a gate past an all-ye-who-enter-here sign and into a no man's land; other times, you slog with your skis on your back up a sheer precipice, scrambling on all fours up a spine of snow not much wider than your arms outstretched. But every time, going up is as extraordinary and demanding as getting down.

As deadly as it can be sublime, sometimes it takes discipline to walk away from a run. But fear is your friend. Some days you have to overcome it; other days you trust it. Nature isn't cruel; it's indifferent. You finger the toggle of your ABS airbag backpack and give your beacon a pat. In a world of bottomless crevasses, mercurial weather, and slopes that can split at their seams and churn over you like a blender, there's testing your limits and there's testing nature's limits, proving your mettle and pushing your luck. But you have also seen places that most people will never know they've missed. And you wonder how anyone can live, or even sleep, without seeing this. Without standing here. Exactly in this spot, right now. ∴





# On MOUNTAIN BIKING's icebound trails

**Y**ou're the kind of person who likes to find your own route and forge your own trail. You like to get there on your own two feet and often those feet are planted on pedals. You ride for the skills, to beat the guy who started out next to you, to beat the clock, and to beat the gnarly track. You ride for adventure. You ride to be with friends, you ride to be alone, and you ride just to be. You ride to get lost and are always a little sorry when you get found. You ride because it's one of those things that you and nature can always do together.

And because you mountain bike, winter bikepack, backcountry ski and snowboard, it was only natural, when they opened winter hiking trails to fat bikes, that you were all over it. Eating up roads or descending a steep grade on your super-chubby tires—in Norway, Alaska, Greenland, Iceland, Switzerland, take your pick—you feel as if you're wafting over the terrain (no bone-rattler, this!) while punching fresh tracks into powder. And when the snow is crusted with ice or just hard-packed, you feel like you can take whole bites out of the trail.

Sure, in order to float down the flanks of a 700-meter mountain in the French Alps or the Dolomites or the Rockies, you had to lug the bike up to the top in a spitting drizzle. There were spots on the descent when you couldn't slalom through the trees, they were so thick, or you were sinking into a meter of powder: sink, climb out, step, sink, climb out, step... and pedaling wasn't an option.

But then, for 40 minutes of your life, you found yourself balancing on a ridgeline narrower than your downtube, the snow glittering and your fat tires ploofing away on a razor's edge. You couldn't feel the cold in your fingers, not because they were numb (although they were numb), but because the whole world lay stretched out before you as if it had just been made, and it was glittering too, glittering and outlasting everything. And for a few minutes, you got to feel a little eternal too. ∴

# Treading new and yet unspoiled HIKING paths

It's not a marathon, but your legs are burning, your breath turning to vapor with each exhale. Fresh powder glitters heavily on the boughs of the trees. Your soundtrack today? A hawk's echoing keening, the trill of running water, the crunch of pine needles releasing their perfume beneath your feet.

You've lost your phone signal but found a deeper connection. You've come to the snowy hinterlands to pitch a tent, to see the sun rise, to remember what it feels like to be hungry, to let exertion instead of boredom exhaust you. You want to know what it feels like to be very, very cold and to have to make your own shelter. And at the end of the day, tucked into your mummy bag, before you fall headlong into sleep, you think: I am a part of this world, a line of the code, not a glitch.

You wake up every morning to the supernatural visitations of bears, badgers, and birds, take bird-baths in rivers swollen with snowmelt, and traverse dense forests whose long indigo shadows open into glades as quiet as a church. You're remembering what it's like to lose track of time, to lose your way—and find it again. Or, you don't find or lose the trail, you make it. Carefully. Along the way, you have to conserve body heat, triple knot your laces, duct tape your blisters, apply sunscreen, ford streams that were ice an hour ago and re-apply sunscreen. You have to stay on track, stay hydrated and stay ahead of the last ray of light.

When you're navigating tracts of virgin snow, you feel like the last person left in the world. Or the first. In a world where none of your experiences have taught you what you're capable of, walking into the outdoors to find out becomes a secret rite of passage. It's not so much man versus nature as it is recalling your own nature.

Meanwhile, nature looks on, indifferent, as you become aware of the stiffening soreness, the pinch of a boot, the distance diminishing impossibly slowly. Nature is the pitch you're on, and sometimes the view is beguiling, but mostly, the matches pit you against you. It's tough competition, but you usually win. And when you don't, well... lesson learned. Win-win all around. ::





# The slippery peaks of ICE CLIMBING

**Y**ou've got spikes on your hands and spikes on your feet. You're hanging like a Christmas tree ornament from a vast column of ice, sweating. From this waterfall, otherworldly and frozen mid-cascade as if time had stopped, you're looking into an immense sky and over the valley into which the waterfall will be pouring thunderously come spring. You're in nature's house, Jack, almost 100 meters up, climbing the beanstalk, and when you reach the top, you'll feel like a giant. Isn't that how the story goes?

But the top can wait. You clip into your pommel, put a screw in, and just look, feeling very small in the grand scheme of things, but triumphant. You know your strengths and weaknesses. You know your limits. And you know an opportunity when you see one. You're a problem-solver, a risk-taker, a planner-ahead. Over the years, you've learned to read the ice, looking for columns that are detached or fractured, brittle ice, melting ice, and mixed ice, and the ice you can't cut with a diamond. With an axe in hand, even a straight wall feels like an overhang, but you trust your foot-holds and you self-belay, driving the axe deep enough that you can bet your body weight and your life on it. You've learned that gear isn't toys, it's survival: the belay rope, your crampons, your helmet. You don't prepare to take a fall. You prepare not to fall in the first place. You avoid close calls while embracing the friendships that form around them.

Ice climbing has readied you to overcome any obstacle, literal or metaphorical. You can lead and you can follow. You know when you've got a good stick in the ice, when things are getting sketchy, and when it's time to turn back. But you won't turn back today. Sure, there have been times when you thought you couldn't make it up and you didn't have the strength left to get back down again. But then you did. And standing at the top, again and again, has taught you that you'll solve it, surmount it, succeed. That, if you put your mind to it, you can do anything. You already have. ∴

# Maneuvering through ICE SAILING's hard waters

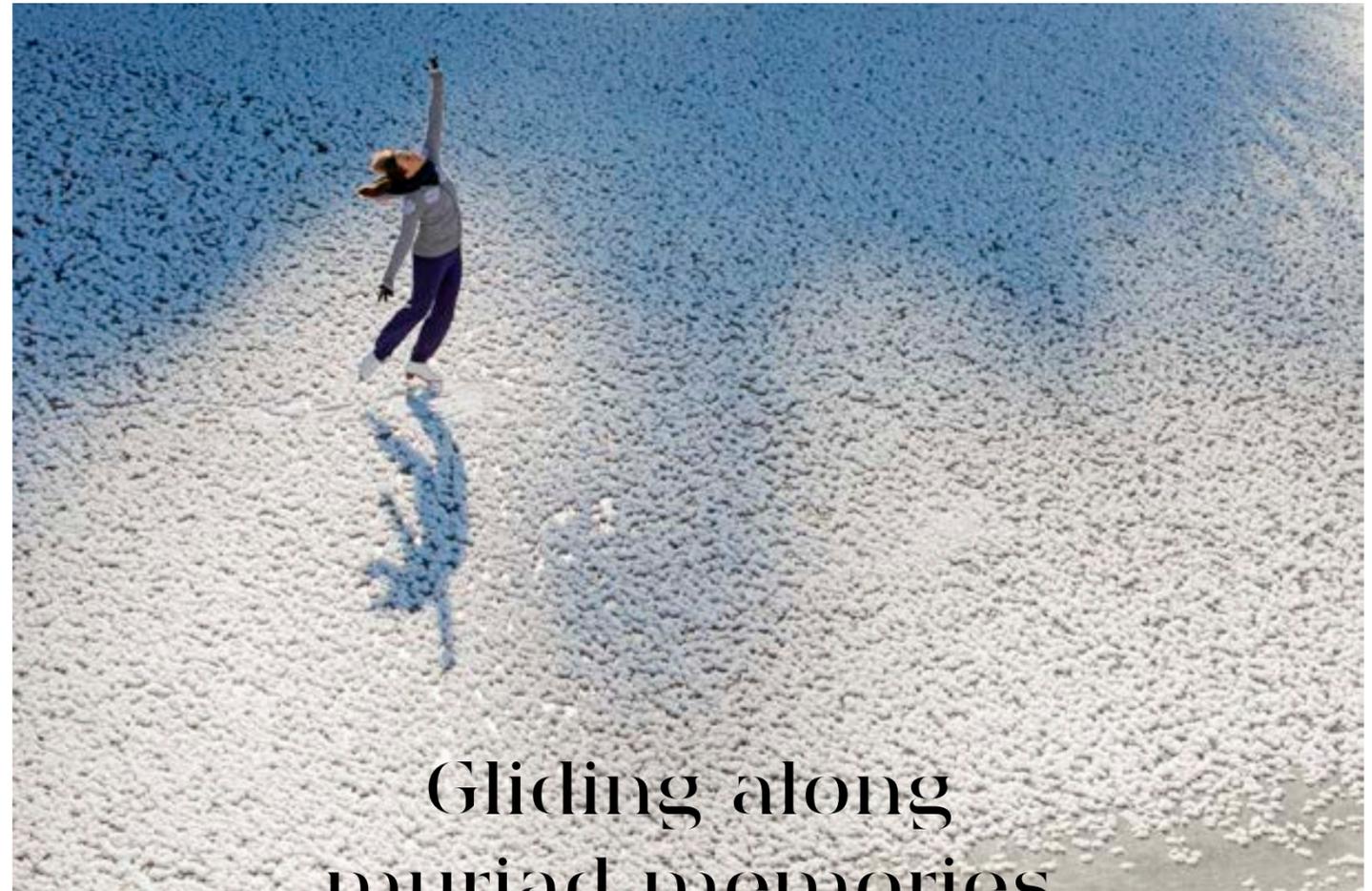
At your feet, you can feel the kick of the pedal. The three runners, scraping softly, respond to your sharp and smooth steering. The wind is scattering puffy white clouds overhead and gushing in a torrent past your ears, sloughing off any remaining sleep as if scrubbing you clean and awake. You are cupped in a sleek skeet-bug-shaped hull, beneath a jaunty 5-meter-long mast and a tanbark-striped sail, mirrored in the ice below, with only a soft blur to distinguish which of you is the reflection. As your mittened hands trim the sail, dawn is turning the ice into abalone and you begin, soaring up to 90 kilometers per hour.

Years ago, you started with soft sailing on the sea, and at first the ice felt surreal. Since then, depending on the conditions, you've followed the good ice on pilgrimages to Block Island to sail Middle Pond, to Pushaw Lake in Maine, and even to Friesland, not far south of the grim North Sea.

There are sailors on the ice today skipping trim purpose-built yachts, but you figure if sailing gives us wings, it demands that we build them. You adapted your vessel from a sailboat and windsurfing gear. It was the boats that turned you into a carpenter over the years, and a very patient person too.

Now, you reckon, the winds have picked up to a steady 45 kilometers per hour. You feel the sail shudder through the ropes as you tack and catch a gust that lifts your port skate off the ice, sending diamond shards skittering from the other blades. It pushes you hard to starboard and when you tack into the wind to compensate, you can see with a strange clarity that, on the ice, your reflection is doing just the opposite.

The lift will slow you significantly, but you're not racing today. You like feeling like a feather in a storm, speeding for speed's sake or, during calm moments, feeling like a skittering white cloud or a seagull gliding on a column of air, able for a moment to stop fighting its way forward. True, you used to be cautious, maybe overcautious. Now, if there's good ice somewhere, you go to it without deliberation because it won't be there long. Which is pretty much how you live these days: not waiting for life's good ice to come to you. ∴



## Gliding along myriad memories and layers: ICE SKATING

**Y**ou can feel yourself gliding in a way that humans weren't built to glide, the cool air sweeping over your face. You can feel the weight of your white-laced, glittering steel ice skates and it grounds you while something else in you flies. The same way your blades carve traces in smooth ice, they've left their traces in your memory too. Ice skating is one part of your childhood that was really enchanted. As a kid, even when you skated as fast as you could, time and the air, even as they rushed past you, seemed to slow. And they still do. As a kid, when you fell, ice was the definition of hardness. And it still is. Ice taught you to get up again and your skates taught you how to do it. Ice taught you to be a little cautious. And your skates

taught you how to carry yourself with grace. And over the years, the ice and your skates have taught you that falling isn't really so hard after all.

For you, skating is not one of winter's consolations, but one of its gifts. Depending on where your ice is located, you become part of the landscape or a defiance to the city. Maybe you're in a rink, ringed with bus fumes and honking taxis, but there's that view upward that looks like a hole punched in the ceiling of Central Park, and sometimes you skate with your face to the sky. (And sometimes this has resulted in collisions and maybe you're happily married to one of those collisions right now.)

Maybe, on the other hand, you're making your mark on a pond, or a lake, or even—if you're

Dutch—a canal that has hardened into sleek opacity. And during those seasons when it seems as if the whole world has frozen over, you watch that world sharpen its blades and pick out fresh laces and glide past you with ruddy cheeks and shining eyes, smiling at you for no reason at all. And you find yourself thinking that nothing is as friendly as ice.

You may skate in a crowd, everyone threading together at that determined 65-degree angle, sometimes falling into friendships and sometimes just falling. Other times, you skate in solitude, alone in a hushed, clarified, white world. Skating is as much a form of meditation as a sport. You think, with regret, that the cold snap won't last, that it's all ephemeral, and then you think: that's how it should be. ::



# Into the crepuscular depths of ICE DIVING

Sometimes before a dive, you sit on the edge of that triangular hole cut from sea ice and you count the number of people who have been down there on one hand. You're swaddled in layers, a hooded dry suit, three-finger mitts, scuba gear and back-up scuba gear, but you're prepared for the sting of the  $-1.5^{\circ}\text{C}$  degree water slipping over the bare skin of your face.

At 10 meters, you look up, your eyes following your tether, which looks strangely distinct in this light. You look through the ragged chainsaw incisions of the hole that is now your only way out, that fits only a single diver necklaced with tanks, that frames a sky now fractured into shards of light that are making their way down, running ahead of you. And so you follow. This place is alien and ponderous, sculpted into ridges and seams where algae, amphipods, and Arctic cod hide. Monumental slabs of pack ice several meters thick form a luminous ceiling overhead, diffusing and refracting light into milky glacial blues, transparent blues, pelagic blues, azure, beryl, cerulean, and cobalt.

To get here, you schlepped tools to cut ice and clear snow, safety gear, a shelter to suit up in and tangles of lines that must never become entangled. Sometimes you wear a harness and tether; you're fluent in a language of tugs, minding your rope. But usually there's no need to speak at all. And sometimes you don't even wear a tether. Things can go wrong, but you know how to hit the ice if your ascent is fast and hard, and how to switch to your second air supply if the first freezes up. You know frostbite and hypothermia. You are a compass.

As a child, you never slept with a nightlight. Darkness—natural, restful, and ruminative—elicited curiosity in you, not fear. But it's not really dark down here. Today, your visibility is 50 meters or more. Even with only one way out and that dynamic ceiling overhead—ice jostled and driven by winds, currents and fluctuating temperatures—you never feel trapped, never lost. Down here you are weightless and free and endlessly inquisitive. ::



# The solitary art of ICE FISHING and its long, raw waiting



**Y**ou're like a pack of lone wolves, ice fishing in  $-40^{\circ}\text{C}$  weather. Your hut is solitary, but it's within sight of a bunch of other solitary huts. It's so damn cold here and though some huts are no bigger than outhouses, most of them are beautiful and expressive in the most utilitarian of ways.

Your hut is a plain affair of scrap plywood, a crooked stove pipe, and reflective highway paint, but there are others as quirky as the souls sitting inside. There's one made of white clapboard atop a rusty sled runner. One guy cut the tops off two caravans and laid one right over the other (which was handy because it already had windows) and he could do that, make it so heavy, because he sits on a very solid half-meter of ice. There's a

narrow one that has skis on two of its corners so it can be tipped over and skied to a new location, and another with antlers over the door. (And you remember the deer that used to wear them.) One is decorated with its fishing license number scrawled across the front and rough wooden buoys hang like fish scales all over another one: pink and yellow, yellow and red, red and navy blue.

You borrowed a gas-powered auger to drill the fishing hole in your place. It's nothing fancy; it's a hole, but the fish bite good there. You've also got a kitchenette. Some young guys started setting up nearby a couple of years ago and there are more and more of them, along with concerts and ice sculptures, new-fangled gear, craft beer, and pizza delivery direct to the hole. One young

man, who set up in a shack painted in snow camouflage, gave you a Nespresso machine last Christmas and it turns out you use it every day, a few times a day.

You know all the (mostly) men around here by sight and most of them you count as good friends. Maybe it's true—the houses say something about each of you, but you don't know what that is. What's important is being here. And staying here. And waiting. You're a patient person. All your life, if you needed to wait, you waited. And you're still waiting. Waiting is peaceful. Waiting is full of quiet. You can hear yourself think while you're waiting. So, you fish for that peace. You fish for the friends around you. You fish for the fish—the salmon, the smelt, the char—and you can outwait the lot of them. ::