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Column: Southern-born reporter goes ice fishing for the first time

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As a southern girl and a Minnesota transplant, winter activities have always been fascinating to me. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine I would move from the Land of Enchantment to the Land of 10,000 Lakes, yet alone go ice fishing — but here I am. I can now say I have crossed ice fishing off my bucket list.

When I would think about the Midwest, one of the first things to pop into my mind was ice fishing. Seeing the winter hobby in TV and in movies, it always seemed like an elusive activity from a history book. After all, ice fishing has been around for over 2,000 years when Native peoples used it as a way of survival when ice covered the water, according to many historians.

Now that I've experienced my first ever ice fishing expedition, I feel as though I've been initiated as an official Minnesotan.

On Saturday, my neighbors over in Buffalo — Alex and Gina Christian and their adorable son, Emmett, along with their black lab, King — invited me to tag along with them for the day to go ice fishing on Sullivan Lake located in Wright County.

So, you can only imagine my anticipation when I said yes. I was nervous, scared and dare I say it — excited. I've been surrounded by desert my whole life to all of a sudden being thrust out on a frozen lake covered in snow.

First steps



Alex Christian heads inside his Ice Castle on Sullivan Lake on Saturday, Jan. 29.

Photo by Jacqueline Devine

But before I headed out on my peak Midwestern adventure, I dressed for the occasion the best I knew how. I layered up and covered up with my favorite winter coat with a pair of snow boots I bought a few years ago from a thrift store in El Paso, Texas, of all places. Why on Earth would someone need snow boots in El Paso? I'm pretty sure I bought them to go snow tubing in Cloudcroft, New Mexico, at one point.

As I walked out onto the ice I could slowly feel my heart racing. I was paranoid that the ice beneath me was going crack or I would step into a hole and twist my ankle as ridiculous as that might sound. I finally reached my neighbors' Ice Castle fish house and Alex greeted me with the biggest smile.

Going ice fishing in an Ice Castle is not what I envisioned when I thought about going ice fishing for the first time. As a native Texan, I pictured ice fishing as sitting outside on a bucket freezing your butt off and being miserable. I could get used to this though, I said to myself as I took off my winter coat inside the warm, spacious RV.

Generational pastime

Alex, like many Minnesotans, has been ice fishing his whole life. It's just a part of who he is, he said. He grew up five miles south of Maple Lake and is now passing down the tradition to his son Emmett.

As we were chatting, Alex said when he was a kid, he fell through the ice and his dad had to rescue him. That story didn't help calm my fears, but luckily it had a happy ending.

"I don't really remember it, just vaguely," said Alex. "My dad tells the story, he had to come and save me because I had fell right by the dock, so, that was kind of fun."

Prior to Alex telling his near-death experience, he assured me that the ice was thick enough — 16 inches to be exact (he measured it with a yard stick) — even though he did hear the ice cracking as he drove his truck out to his Ice Castle. Oh great, I thought.

But after a few drinks, my nerves calmed down and I really started to have some fun. I even caught my first fish ever! It was just a little sunny, but it was a big deal to me.



Alex Christian stands with his 1 year-old son, Emmett, inside his Ice Castle on Saturday, Jan. 29.

Photo by Jacqueline Devine

Learning from an expert

Sitting inside the nice furnished Ice Castle, I thought about how ice anglers from the past had to catch fish out in freezing cold temperatures. We've really come a long way. If only our ancestors could see us now.

To backtrack a little though, I prepared for my first ice fishing trip by speaking to Ron "Boston" Doughty, an avid and passionate ice angler from Shakopee. Doughty originally hails from, you guessed it, Boston.

Like Alex, Doughty has ice fishing in his blood. He said his dad first took him ice fishing when he was just two years old.

"It kind of resonated with me over the years," he said.

Today, Doughty owns The Ice Zone — a unique ice fishing service that provides rental shacks for children and families to ice fish comfortably and learn at the same time — located at Thole Lake in Shakopee. He set up shop there in 2018.

"The idea stemmed from sitting in my car from fishing four days a week. I'm a home inspector in the spring and summer time. In the winter time I do this," said Doughty. "Since I fish four days a week I thought to myself, 'Why don't I just build a business and give kids something to do other than be on their tablets?'"

Doughty said his rentals are based on lighthouse themes beginning with Duluth's Split Rock, to northern New England's Portland Headlight in Portland, Maine.

While speaking to Doughty about his ice fishing endeavors, he provided some useful tips to bring along with me. First off, he recommended I go with a shiner on a hook if I wanted to catch a big fish. For smaller fish, he recommended crappie minnows or waxies for bait.

Sure enough, Alex had waxies on hand and he had a bucket full of sunnies. These guys really know what they're doing.

I asked Doughty how ice anglers knew the ice was safe to walk and drive on. He said anglers travel light with minimal gear. As they walk, they check the ice along the way — manually driving a metal chisel to create a small hole. If the chisel won't break through, the ice is likely

safe for walking. If the chisel does break through, they assess the thickness with a tape measure.



Alex Christian measures how thick the ice is with a yard stick inside his Ice Castle. The thickness of the ice measured 16 inches.

Photo by Jacqueline Devine

I read that a good rule of thumb is to wait until the ice is four inches thick, which usually occurs after a week's worth of nights where the temperature is below freezing. Also check with your state agency or local bait and tackle shop on ice conditions before heading out to ice fish. Once out near the lake or pond, always check the ice thickness before venturing out.

At the end of the day, I have to say my first time ice fishing was nothing at all of what I expected. But would I do it again? Absolutely. I guess you can say I'm "hooked."

Jacqueline Devine is a Southwest News Media reporter who covers the Prior Lake community.

