

Cool world

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Ice diving opens up a whole new universe beneath the water



It should be easy enough to get someone to cut a hole in the ice to throw a line to catch fish, but how does one convince a person to go through for a dive?

"Well, if someone was really leery about it, I probably wouldn't convince them, because if they have a phobia, it's probably just gonna turn out bad," says John McCuaig, an ice-diving instructor at the Dive Outfitters.

For Ken Pon, who teaches an ice-diving course at Calgary's AquaSport Scuba Centre, the fears that accompany an ice dive are not only obvious but typical. "Number one, there's no direct access to the surface anymore, and number two, the waters are just barely above freezing temperatures."

Although ice dives are only about 15 to 20 minutes long, water underneath ice can be anywhere between freezing point and minus four degrees Celsius. McCuaig notes that the water around February and March is at the same temperature as water at the bottom of the lakes during the summer.

So why would anyone in their right mind want to take up ice diving?

"My reason when I first took the course—I was asked the same question by my instructor and I sort of said, 'I'm here to test my sanity because I think I've lost it,'" answers Pon with a laugh.

Joking aside, Pon says the first reason he took up ice diving was to have access to dive sites all year round instead of being restricted by the weather.

"I live in a country where the water is solid half the year, and if I don't take up ice diving I'm really not gonna be able to maintain my skills as a diver."

The other reason? Ice diving was a chance to gain skills that few people have.

"It's not a huge number of divers who do this because of the hazards involved in it," Pon says, pointing out that skills of observation and awareness of both self, environment and the person attached to the other end of the rope are "all enhanced by the whole ice diving experience."

Although some first-time ice divers may be confident, Pon believes that acknowledging one's fears is important when taking part in extreme sports. "I think everybody has a bit of a bravado thing. The reality is, there's always a little bit of fear in people when you do this," Pon admits, adding that even if people don't say they're scared, he can tell when they are. "I could see people for the first time getting in the environment, dealing with something that they've literally not dealt with before.

"All your gear reacts slowly when you're under ice and in the cold environment. It really isn't a matter of if your gear will fail, it's a matter of when something will fail on you and how you handle it."

Angie Garred, who took an ice dive course last year, openly shares the fears that she had.

"I'm actually claustrophobic, so going under the ice [and] not having a direct route to surface was definitely scary for me, personally," Garred chuckles before adding that all the safety measures, including having a line tied to a tender, tying one's rope to an ice screw by the hole in the ice and knowing that she was with qualified instructors helped to ease her fears.

Besides coming to the realization that ice diving isn't as scary as it seems, Garred had another insight after taking the course.

"Because it's not warm in the winter, there's no algae growing in the lake, so the visibility that you could see underwater was like a hundred times better than in the summertime," Garred shares, adding that she could see as far as a hundred feet away. "It was a lake that we've dove hundreds of times that we've never been able to see really well, and all of a sudden, you could see everything underwater."

While Garred had fears of claustrophobia, Charlene Barker admits to the fear of being cold before her first ice dive. These fears were mitigated by the heated tent that was placed on top of the ice hole to keep divers warm.

"Going under the water is kind of like a zen feeling where you're relaxed and you don't really have any more fears 'cause you're under the water and everything opens up," Barker describes. "It's really quite bright under the ice—like you wouldn't have expected it to be: to have so much light coming through."

Ice diving is not an activity one can simply jump into. Both ice-diving courses offered at the Dive Outfitters and AquaSport Scuba Centre have prerequisites of previous cold-water diving.

"Cold-water diving' means diving around here anytime of year ... and experience in a dry suit," McCuaig clarifies. "What happens if [students] don't have that kind of experience is that they get too excited or they get kind of freaked out."

While ice diving isn't for everyone, it's bound to give those who try it a more positive view of winter as it did for Garred.

"Our summers are so short that we have to find stuff in the winter to amuse ourselves and this is just another way to appreciate the weather that we do have. Like, yeah, it sucks and it's cold, but it's something that we can do here in Canada that you can't do in the Caribbean."