

On a River's Frozen Falls And Twists

By STEPHEN REGENOLD



Steve Burmeister for The New York Times

SLIDE SHOW On the Manitou River in Minnesota, Maxwell Frost glides by open water.

tooth Mountains and drop through forested valleys and white-water ravines to Lake Superior, the Manitou is all but impassable for most of the year. Its canyon depths — moist basalt catacombs, cascades and tannin-tinted pools — are a guarded environment. But the deep winter freeze provides passage and a peek at life in the sequestered gorge, at least if you know what you're doing.

Snow poured off the edge of the frozen

falls as Mr. Frost set an ice-screw anchor, a threaded steel spike, in the Manitou's solid surface ice. He clipped a carabiner to the screw's metal eyelet.

"We're set to go," Mr. Frost said, tossing a length of blue climbing rope off the icefall. "Who's first?"

Perched on the edge of the icefall, Tim Bates, a 40-year-old director of the Recre-

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INSIDE

HAVENS

Charleston, S.C.

Distinctive architecture, charm and a sense of history.

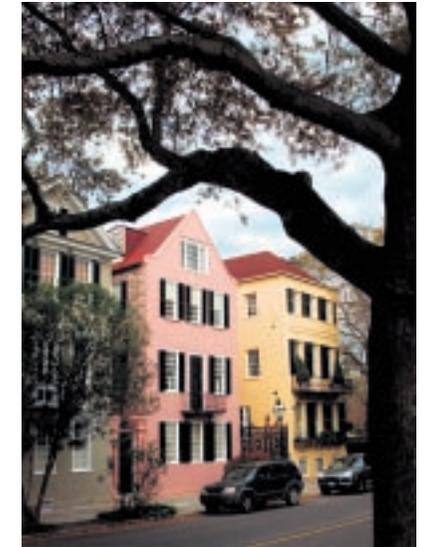
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DAY TRIP

The Hamptons

The things you don't like aren't there in the off-season.

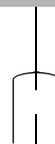
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Stephen Morton for The New York Times



Gordon M. Grant for The New York Times



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ational Sports Outdoor Program of the University of Minnesota, leaned back on the climbing rope. His bare face was red and puckered against the cold. Looped butterfly knots, tied every four feet along the rope, served as handles; footholds on the face provided icy ladder steps for the descent.

"Looks like I'm the one testing this out," Mr. Bates said as he stepped first over the edge. His gloved hand gripped tight to a ledge on an adjacent wall of red basalt. Ski boots skated on icy footholds.

THE exploration of frozen rivers and streams on the North Shore, which lace Lake Superior's steep coastal hills for 150 miles between Duluth and the Canadian border, is an obscure local pursuit. The sport — alternatively called stream or river skiing, rivering and rive-reering by its unorganized participants — is practiced in an ever-changing environment, with snow falling in thick layers through the winter and freeze-and-thaw cycles manipulating surface ice.

Hollow shelves of ice, extending hundreds of feet along the riverbed, are common. Crevasses open without warning. On the trip down the Manitou in mid-February, Mr. Frost and his group encountered open swaths of white-water rapids and still pools of dark, deep water despite minus-10-degree temperatures during the day.

Backcountry Nordic skis or snowshoes are used to travel on the 50 or so navigable North Shore rivers, which freeze solid most years from January to late March. Gentle, rolling streams, like the Split Rock River or Big Sucker Creek, both near the town of Two Harbors, are pleasant nature outings. Deeper canyons and faster water make rivers like the Devil Track, Cascade, Baptism and Manitou serious adventures.

Stout boots and wide backcountry skis with metal edges are preferred in the steeper canyons, where thin Nordic skis are prone to snap in two. Ice axes, climbing ropes, carabiners, helmets, seat harnesses, white-water rescue throw bags, climbing skins for skis and waterproof bags are mandatory for some North Shore streams. On the Manitou, Mr. Frost wore a climbing harness jangling with carabiners, cord and an ice-screw anchor; others had survival gear in their bulging backpacks.

Kim Berg, a 23-year-old outdoor-education student from Duluth, brought two pair of boots down the Manitou, keeping a backup pair of felt-lined mukluks in her backpack in case her feet froze. "They're what Will Steger uses," she said.

Wet feet and cold toes are common. Feet easily punch holes through thin ice. Skis crack through hollow shelves. Deep water, and the possibility of taking a rare polar plunge, are serious and constant concerns.

Like trekkers on a mountain glacier, skiers rope together for safety on dangerous



MITTEN WEATHER Tim Bates, above center, points the way on the Onion River. Below, Kim Berg changes boots by the Manitou.

Photographs by Steve Burmeister for The New York Times

THE BIG CHILL

No Paddles Needed, But Ice Axes Help

EXPLORING the deep, frozen canyons on Minnesota's North Shore involves skiing or snowshoeing upstream through tight gorges, over frozen waterfalls and then back downhill to a river's mouth at Lake Superior. More than 50 streams and rivers pour from the Sawtooth Mountains in a steep watershed that abuts Lake Superior. Some rivers are experts-only adventures that require ice axes and ropes; others are mellow cross-country ski outings.

The region's sole continuous road, Minnesota State Highway 61 (of Bob Dylan fame), tracks the lake's shore for 150 miles between Duluth and the Canadian border, passing over every North Shore river along the way. Rivers are accessi-

ble via the many highway pull-offs and roadside parking lots.

First-time river skiers must use extreme caution. Inclement weather, unexpected icy drop-offs, thin ice and open pools of frigid water are common hazards. Proper equipment — including backcountry skis, winter clothing, waterproof bags stocked with dry clothes, emergency fire-starters and other survival gear — is mandatory. Professional river guides are recommended.

From January to late March, the University of Minnesota Duluth Recreational Sports Outdoor Program offers guided trips down several North Shore rivers, ranging from the gentle Split Rock River to the precipitous Manitou. Tours are led by environmental-education faculty members and students, and lessons on area history, geology and biology are included along with transportation from Duluth and a midday hot-cocoa break. Prices start at about \$200 a day for privately guided group trips with up to five skiers (218-726-7128, www.umdrsop.org).



Photograph by Steve Burmeister for The New York Times

river. Canyoneering skills are necessary in 100-foot-deep gorges that may pinch down to just 10 feet wide. Some streams require rappels off waterfalls and cliffs. Steep ice climbs, vertical and impassable without the right equipment, are found on the Manitou, Cascade, Caribou and Kadunce. Streams like the Onion River, which the University of Minnesota group skied after a morning on the Manitou, plunges hundreds of vertical feet in its last gasp before Lake Superior, a bobsled track of ice and snow that drops off from under your skis.

On the Manitou River, amid the rumble of open water, the group slowly descended the rope ladder to the base of the icefall, one careful explorer at a time. Mr. Frost was the last one down. The ladder was left in place for the return trip.

The mouth of the Manitou, at Lake Superior, was less than a quarter-mile downstream. The group's goal was to descend the waterfall, ski across the snowy shelf of river ice and shimmy into the final slot canyon. A ski pole dipped in the lake, like a flag planted on a mountaintop, would signify success.

But the Manitou had a different idea. Having descended the icefall without problems, the explorers skied along the edge of the river. It was partly open and flowing strongly for the season. Cliffs overhead were crumbling red walls decorated with lichen and ice. The river dipped in its path one final time, and the roar of open-water rapids reverberated upstream.

A rushing cascade, pinched in a 20-foot-wide bottleneck and flanked with disintegrating ice shelves, stopped the skiers in their tracks.

"Definitely end of the road," Mr. Bates said, pointing a ski pole at the jet of rushing water.

Sunlight poked into the gorge, and the group turned to retreat. It was noon in the bottom of an immense, dark crack in the earth. Skis shuffled on soft snow. Eight figures moved along in a line, rounding a bend to track upstream, quietly as they came, back into the shadows of a frozen white-water gorge.