

Where the heavyweights of ice carving indulge in fantasy

By Kari Bodnarchuk

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LAKE LOUISE, Alberta — Curiously, Craig McConnell’s oversized checked luggage raises no alarm among airport security personnel, even though it contains chainsaws, chisels, angle grinders, blow torches, household irons, and die grinders with all sorts of bits and burrs. Maybe the handwritten note inside helps: “These are my tools for ice carving. Please be careful — some of them are sharp. I am traveling to Lake Louise, Alberta, for an ice-carving competition.”

Every January, The Fairmont Chateau Lake Louise, one of Canada’s grand old railway hotels, hosts the Ice Magic International Ice Carving Competition, where a dozen two-person teams gather on the frozen shores of Lake Louise to create fantastic sculptures. Each team has 34 hours to shape 15 massive blocks of ice into a soaring sculpture related to a specific theme. Last year’s “Magical Madness” theme inspired artists to produce fanciful renderings of sorcerers, dragons, and mythical gods. This year’s more conceptual theme, “Word-Play: Where language comes out to play,” will bring storytelling alive in the form of pirates, a fairy, and other elaborately carved structures. The competition runs Jan. 20-22 as part of the Ice Magic Festival.

“It’s really a wonderful medium to express yourself and be creative,” says Norm Flann, a carver from the Canadian team Crushed Ice. “Ice is soft and the tools you use let you carve it so easily, unlike stone.”

Each giant “ice cube” weighs 300 pounds, meaning the work can be physically grueling.

“We’ll help each other lift blocks and everyone will work together,” says McConnell, a former chef at the Ritz-Carlton, Boston Common, and now owner of Images in Ice, a Brockton-based ice-carving business. McConnell and his partner, Gene Shea, met five years ago at a Faneuil Hall competition, and they have been doing the Lake Louise event together ever since. “Last year, we helped one of the teams lift a mushroom cap that was made out of a full block of ice. We showed them a trick for lifting it using tie-down straps that we wrapped around the ice.”

Ice carving at Lake Louise dates to 1994, when the Fairmont’s chef and culinary friends pulled blocks of ice from the lake and carved them into sculptures



PHOTOS BY KARI BODNARCHUK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Rusty Cox works on “Big Bunny Surprise” at last year’s Ice Magic competition. Below, visitors board a sleigh headed around the frozen lake.

for fun, according to Micaela Zagowski, event manager for the Ice Magic Festival. “The event has grown ever since.”

Now, more than 7,000 people attend each year. Visitors can watch some of the world’s top ice carvers at work, and ask them questions throughout the competition. This year’s participants will have traveled from the Netherlands, Britain, Russia, the United States, and Canada.

The carvers also come from remarkably different backgrounds: One used to work as executive chef at The Fairmont Empress, a renowned high-end hotel in Victoria, British Columbia. Another works as a mail carrier in rural Washington State, and has competed in ice-carving events at the Winter Olympics in Turin, Nagano, and Salt Lake City. And another, Ben Rand of Casco, Maine, helps run an ice-carving business in West Palm Beach, Fla., of all places, producing upward of 1,000 sculptures a year for local restaurants and businesses. Rand trained as a five-star classic chef and then became a full-time ice carver. He and his carving partner, Scott Harrison, won first place in last year’s Ice Magic event for their Harry Potter entry.

Two of the 24 entrants are women, one of whom is Stephanie Quayle from the United Kingdom.

“In terms of male-female ratios, there’s definitely a big hairy



man bias,” says Quayle, who teams up with her fiance, Darren Jackson. “I suppose it’s only natural, due to the nature of the work and the temperatures we have to endure, but I like to think we girls can do it just as well — we just need a lot more hot chocolate to keep us going.”

Competitors cannot use gas chain saws or lathes, and they may only work from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, and from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Sunday.

“I’ve never competed when I didn’t carve until the last second,” says Jeff Bleier, a former carver who now runs a restaurant in Rochester, and helps judge the Lake Louise competition. “I’ve been 6 feet up on a ladder putting on the last piece with three seconds to go.”

Teams must use all the ice they are allotted, and cannot sup-

plement with natural snow or other materials — no props, decorations, or coloring of ice — though they may use water. The entries must be carved on all sides.

The first day, carvers organize and stack their hefty ice blocks. Many attach enlarged templates, much like a seamstress’s pattern, onto the blocks to ensure that they use all the ice and don’t waste anything, and so they can labor away without having to stop and calculate measurements. Then they fire up chainsaws and start carving.

“The most important thing about ice sculpture is that you have to create a piece with a strong silhouette or outline,” says Rand. “It’s difficult to see things that overlap each other in ice, so instead of folded arms, you want to have arms that are spread

If you go . . .

Getting there

Brewster Travel Canada

866-606-6700

www.brewster.ca

Runs seven shuttles daily between Calgary International Airport and the Village of Lake Louise. Adults \$68, children ages 6-15 \$34, plus taxes; 5 and under free.

What to do

Ice Magic Festival

403-762-0284

www.banfflakelouise.com/icemagic

The festival is part of a monthlong Snow Days event that runs Jan. 14-Feb. 12 and includes a Mountain Adventure Festival, a hockey tournament, and ice climbing, outdoor skating, geocaching, curling, skiing, and snow sculpture activities.

apart. This also helps the sculpture appear more fluid and dynamic.”

The creations must measure at least 7 feet tall, but no more than 13½ feet, in order to create a challenge for artists while keeping the competition zone safe. Small chisels and drills create more intricate patterns that resemble fish scales, hieroglyphics, or razor-sharp claws.

On day two, each team sends someone down the hill to the Village of Lake Louise to participate in the One Carver, One Hour, One Block event. Each artist can create anything he or she wants from one 300-pound block of ice during this speed-carving competition.

“One is like a marathon, the other is like a sprint,” says Rand. “They’re just two different ways to approach the ice.”

The festival also includes ice-carving demonstrations by lead judge Dan Rebholtz, a judges’ “carve-off” at the Lake Louise Ski Area, horse-drawn wagon rides around the lake, and ice skating with a fabulous view (weather permitting) of the Victoria Glacier.

As the hourglass empties up at Lake Louise, carvers put on the final touches: They use hair-dryers and blow torches to put a polished shine on certain areas of their sculptures, and they clean up their work stations.

Works are judged on their lev-

el of complexity and overall creative intent, and how well carvers used the ice and their tools. Carvers get points for hiding seams, and for creating sculptures that appear more three dimensional and that stretch the boundaries of what ice can do, such as creating something that looks like it may fall over but is so masterfully engineered that it won’t.

“We’ll often put supports [made of ice] underneath the pieces that hang out, so the vibration from carving the rest of the sculpture doesn’t destroy them,” Rand explains. “With the Harry Potter sculpture we did last year, we had at least 1,000 to 1,500 pounds supported on a 7-inch circle, which was the dog’s right paw. The whole thing had a temporary support. In the last 15 minutes, you start cutting those supports out and the sculpture either survives or it crashes. It can be pretty nerve-racking.”

Judges award third, second, and first prize, with a \$1,000 to \$3,000 purse. And sculptures can win the People’s Choice, Carver’s Choice, and Children’s Choice awards, with \$500 or \$1,000 in cash prizes.

This year, Ice Magic extends to the following weekend, Jan. 28-29, with family-oriented events. You can take a look at the finished creations from the previous weekend, and then attend the Little Chippers Festival, where children of any age can try their hands at ice carving. A new ice playground features ice miniature golf, an ice tunnel, and an ice slide. You can also watch a professional 10-block ice-carving event, or go skating on Lake Louise with the ice queen — all free events.

McConnell and Shea plan to fly their oversized bags up north and compete again this year. Just look for the intricately carved arch, the pirates, and the daring and creative twist on Pandora’s box.

“Sometimes carvers stop where it’s safe, when they could have taken their work further and created a more dynamic and lifelike piece,” says McConnell. “You can’t do that in competition. It’s like when you’re skiing and your tips go over the edge and you’re looking down some crazy slope. The more you think, the more you’re going to get into trouble. I always say to myself: Forget it. Just do it.”

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