



## SENSE OF PLACE

# A Day on the Ice

Alaska merriment close to home

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

Author Michael Engelhard pauses for a photo on Lake Sheridan.



Cordova

**T**HE SCENE RESEMBLES THE DUTCHMAN Hendrick Avercamp's 17th-century paintings: Couples on skates hold hands out of affection or to prop each other up. A pack of feral teenagers chased by two Labs dodges slowpokes. A father picks up his fallen toddler for another go. Hockey players hustle the puck while a grandma pushing her kick sled tries to sneak past them, afraid of getting body-checked. All that's missing from this frost fair are meat pie vendors or a hot grog stand.

This is no Amsterdam canal, however—no frozen-lowlands river meander. In place of

church steeples and oaks, 4,000-foot peaks frame the giddy milling-about. The sky is too deep, too blue to be anywhere but in Alaska. Rather than winter carnival, the surroundings suggest a rink for ice giants or yetis.

Sheridan Lake marks the eponymous glacier's meltdown 14 road miles, plus 10 minutes by trail, from Cordova. Lacing my skating boots tight while sitting on an outcrop, I can see the blinding, cracked ice tongue descend to woods in the distance. I take a few tentative steps before I find my legs, remembering to push and glide, not to walk. It's like riding a bike: You just never forget.

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On this crisp, sunny day, the danger is wipeout, not whiteout. Breathless already, I wait for my wife, Melissa. Smarter, more cautious, she's witnessed many a train wreck before handing me dry clothes or the first aid kit.

The first serious cold snap sealed off the lake a few days ago. A consecutive snow flurry merely added an inch of frosting. The surface below is mirror-smooth—except for the odd “sandpaper” spot or fracture line, which could stop and launch you from your boots like Wile E. Coyote. Cabin-sized bergs lie grounded near shore, exhibits in a Dadaist ice-carving competition, though, as with the sky, the color is off. Instead of being transparent, the scalloped blocks glow like curacao in a cocktail glass. Sapphire light suffuses glazed hollows and caves deepening to aquamarine farther in. Around the bergs' edges lake ice thins and water is showing.

The culvert-style clamor of the lake's outlet reminds me that there is open water somewhere close by.

I dart through berg-flanked narrows, my blades now hissing, now crunching like broken glass underfoot. The ice chirps with tension once in a while as it does when it's young. On wide, open stretches I get into the zone. I extend the glide phase on one leg before pushing off with the other. It's the closest to flying that earthbound, non-drugged creatures can come. Thin ice and old injuries have long been forgotten. Crossover-stepping like a speed skater with my center of gravity low and leaning into the turns, I use my arms as pendulums to build momentum. The calligraphy of our sequined tracks spells pure joy. By now traffic has thinned; so have our shadows, growing into the afternoon. In the past hour, we've only passed one other couple.


Taking a break with our skates on, we bank sunbeams and warmth and much-needed vitamin D against the months to come. By turns we sip hot chai from the thermos. Quiet reigns absolute. There's no sign of life besides us. Still, a high-pitched ringing fills my head, barely audible. It's the aural counterpart to the fugue of cobalt and white that unfolds like a Ming Dynasty

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porcelain landscape around us. The sun's oblique rays now etch each snow crystal into relief; grooves from our skates cast their own shadows. The glacier's terminus beckons from afar. Toes have gone numb and the hour is late, so we turn around.

Back at the outcrop, unlacing my boots where we left our town shoes, I am reminded that there is always a price to pay. Feeling returns to my imprisoned digits and with it the pains of dungeon torture. I limp back to the truck as if broken on the wheel, a geezer, already

dreading tomorrow's soreness from seldom-used muscles. I console myself thinking that Sheridan is a topnotch destination, on par with St. Moritz or Aspen—but even better, because we can arrive here after breakfast and be back home before dinner. 

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*Michael Engelhard is the author of the essay collection American Wild: Explorations from the Grand Canyon to the Arctic Circle, and of Ice Bear: The Cultural History of an Arctic Icon. He lives in Fairbanks and works as a wilderness guide in the Arctic.*



The author's wife, Melissa, skates down Sheridan Lake.