

# Traverse City Ice Fishing: A Zen-Like Experience

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By MIKE NORTON

In recent years Traverse City, Michigan, has acquired a reputation as an angler’s paradise -- whether that’s fly-fishing in the area’s storied trout streams, hooking into a big Pacific salmon on the deep waters of Lake Michigan or hitting the monster bass that inhabit Grand Traverse Bay.

But when the region’s lakes and bays are finally locked under a thick layer of ice, it’s time to try an entirely different kind of fishing. In fact, for those hardy souls who are willing to venture out on the ice, winter can be the most enticing season of the year.

“Ice fishing is incredibly popular,” says fishing guide Ben Wolfe. “There are fishermen who look forward to ice season all year. A lot of our customers are people who are fascinated by the whole idea and travel huge distances to experience it. Last season we had a group from Brazil who’d left 95-degree weather to come here and fish on the ice -- it was on their bucket list.”

To be sure, ice fishing lacks the glamour and style of casting for trout on the nearby Boardman River, or heading out to the deep blue Lake Michigan waters where those big lakers and salmon lurk. A properly

dressed ice fisherman (known hereabouts as a “cold-footer”) bears a closer resemblance to the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man than to Brad Pitt.

Nor is it a pastime that requires large amounts of skill, strength or cleverness. What it requires, more than anything else, is patience.

Mind you, that’s no small thing. In fact, there is something positively zen-like about the ice-fishing experience. There you are, sitting on a little folding stool in the middle of a frozen lake (a stark and minimalist landscape if ever there was one) staring down into a small dark hole in the ice. You know there are fish down there -- but you also know that nothing you do or say will persuade them to bite; the decision is entirely up to them. You can only wait.

Fortunately, there are lots of winter fish in these rich, clear waters. Big toothy pike, tasty walleye and perch, plenty of bluegills, and even the occasional foolhardy bass are active under the ice in Grand Traverse Bay, Boardman Lake and the dozens of other inland lakes that surround Traverse City. And somehow, a fish tastes even better when you’ve waited all day in the cold to make its acquaintance.

In years when Grand Tra-

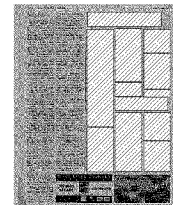
verse Bay freezes over, guides will take their clients out onto the wide ice that lies off the Old Mission Peninsula. Most winters, though, will find them on the long glacial lakes nearby,

where a solid freeze is more predictable. (The best times to fish are during “early ice” when the water has just frozen and “late ice” in the spring.)

Other anglers are enthusiastic about the small forest lakes in the hills above Traverse City, where bluegill and crappie are the predominant species.

Like fishermen everywhere, ice fishing enthusiasts conduct lively arguments about the best gear, lures, bait and technique for catching different fish. Some prefer deep water, while others contend that fish are livelier in shallow lakes. Some wait endlessly at places like Lake Dubonnet for a massive northern pike, while others gladly gather on nearby Green Lake to catch tiny smelt, one by one, just for the enjoyment of getting a strike every couple of seconds.

But there are several basic things every icefisherman needs: an auger, spud or drill for getting through the ice and a skimmer for keeping the hole ice-free; jigs and minnows for bait; a short, sturdy fishing rod (18 to 24 inches is best, preferably with a sensitive tip)



or a tip-up rig to warn when a fish is on the line, for anglers who prefer to fish more than one hole at a time. And, of course, plenty of refreshments, a comfortable seat and a sled to carry everything out onto the ice.

Some people prefer to fish in the comfort of their own portable shanties, and there are times when so many of these little structures cluster together over a particularly rich fishing spot that it looks like a small

village on the ice. In a shanty you're not only protected from the cold, but under the right conditions (on a bright sunlit day, with the crystal-clear water glowing gently up at you) you can watch the fish swimming back and forth far below your feet.

On the other hand, some purists would rather lug their worldly possessions out to a lonely spot in the middle of the ice where they can wage their cold and silent battle of

wills without the distraction of an audience.

Either way, you don't have to deal with mosquitoes.

For more information about ice-fishing, skiing, snowmobiling and other winter fun in the Traverse City area -- as well as a comprehensive listing of local dining and lodging options -- contact Traverse City Tourism at [www.traversecity.com](http://www.traversecity.com) or (800) 872-8377.