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Winter Exploring Along Lake Michigan

By **MOLLY AMES BAKER** on March 5, 2015

Tagged Beaches, Emmet County, Everyday Fun, Harbor Springs, Kids, Live Here, Outdoors, Paddle

In this essay Molly Ames Baker reflects on the “everyday awesomeness” of living in Northern Michigan. The original piece was featured in the [March 2015 issue of *Traverse, Northern Michigan's Magazine*](http://shopmynorth.com/march-2015-traverse-northern-michigan-s-magazine.html) (<http://shopmynorth.com/march-2015-traverse-northern-michigan-s-magazine.html>) ... I resist the notion that adventure need be tied to peak-bagging or the “sketch factor.”



Photo by Molly Ames Baker

“Dad, Daaad, DAD! You have to see it. You HAVE to!” our 6-year old hollered with redheaded insistency.

“Not today,” came the universal, Sunday afternoon, parental reply, “We need to get stuff done.”

“But, Daaaaaad!” I could almost hear my husband’s thoughts domino as I watched him cave: “Well, we could drag out the kayak, and the crampons aren’t that rusty, and ...”

It was March in Northern Michigan. Adventure was calling. We had to go.

Thirty-seven minutes later we were headed north on M-119 out of Harbor Springs, filled with antsy anticipation. Passing the Good Hart General Store, my husband, Josh, asked

from behind the wheel, “Charlie, why do I HAVE to see this thing?” “Just because, it’s ... just because.” Charlie’s voice trailed off as he racked his brain for the right words. Because, really, there were no words to describe it, except for maybe “Woooooaaa!”

With a U-turn down the bluff, we pulled up to my childhood cottage, piled out and headed lakeside, just as we had days before to explore the ice caves with my mom. But this time, we were on a mission, with kayak in tow.

Rounding the corner, we all stopped, jaws agape. There “it” was—a humongous, jumbled-up, bluish-white, absolutely incredible pile of ice, floating a mere 30 yards offshore—drifting in the March melt along the Lake Michigan coast. We stood in awe of this 50-foot-long, 10-foot-wide, 18-foot-high, freshwater iceberg. Adventure was definitely calling.

I pulled out the camera to capture the moment, wondering how we, the relatively small (and somewhat nutty) populace living on the biggest lake in America, come up with the harebrained, springtime adventures that we do: skiing across the bay, fat-tire biking to islands afar, the cold water challenge, and on and on. Were we really going to add “scaling a free-floating iceberg” to the list? I found myself questioning both the reliability of dry suits (Josh wore one) and the sanity of our plan. Did Josh really need to climb it? I knew the answer. Of course he did. But, why?

As Sir Edmund Hillary, for many, the patriarch of modern mountaineering, once said, “Because it is there.” For thousands of years, our society has defined adventure by three essentials: 1) heading off to far-away places, 2) undertaking risky situations with uncertain outcomes, 3) claiming something whether it be uncharted territory, knowledge or treasure. And upon return, always, always a bold story must be told. Since the start of civilization, and more recently with social media, we have been reminded of this shared definition: adventure is extreme, necessitates awesome gear, and must be posted. Immediately. Preferably, while it’s happening.

Age-old definitions and pop culture aside, I resist the notion that adventure need be tied to peak bagging or the “sketch factor.” Is it not possible, even maybe essential for our spirits, to find adventure on a smaller scale?

My heart quickened as I watched Josh launch, the bow of the open-kayak breaking a layer of skim ice. And when he reached the iceberg, I fixated on each stage of his climb, and marked his progress with increasing relief. And then it was over. As he down-

climbed, I noticed the kids had lost interest and now turned their attention to the otherworldly playground of winter's-end ice and snow. Off they went in all directions: one unfurling a kite ready to run the shoreline, the other exploring every inch of ice underfoot. The third heading out to find the "bestest" ice cave of all.

Camera still in hand, I became aware not only of my lowered heart rate, but also my "Mom" intuition: we need this. Just messin' around. It always unfolds naturally, and with limitless possibilities.

And then we heard it, each of us instinctively jerking our heads up to locate the source of this eerie slosh-clink sound. Out of nowhere, or so it seemed, what had been glassy smooth water stretching for miles was now an undulating surface of ice, backed by a westerly wind. All staring in awe at this endless sea of motion, we watched in utter silence, and I thought to myself: "Now, this is adventure."

Sure, it's easy to venture off in search of the floating iceberg or the higher peak. That's "Adventure" with a capital A. But how do we cultivate a sense of adventure that is less extreme? Especially in our kids, in a day and age when most everything in our world is pushing for faster, bigger, better? Perhaps the key lies in developing our sense of "everyday adventure."

The same adage that Roderick Nash used in *Wilderness and the American Mind* can be applied here: Adventure is a feeling, a state of mind that varies from person to person. There can be many kinds or intensities of adventure. By giving up our cultural fascination with big-scale extremes, we can instead seek out small-scale wonder. Scaling down expectations and letting go of agendas can actually be more satisfying. As we open our minds and senses, we are better able to experience what's around us.

As the sun began to cast that early-spring, end-of-day light, we hauled the kayak back up the dunes and piled into the car. Heading out, I turned and asked the kids point blank: "What is adventure?" My 8-year-old answered instantly: "Adventure is when you get up and go out the door. And it's awesomeness. And it's something to remember."

Settling back into my seat, I had never been so glad we bailed on our Sunday chores, knowing this was a day we would never, ever forget.

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(<http://mynorth.com/2015/03/video-northern-michigan-ice-caves-return-in-2015-to-leelanau/>)

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