





After several lifetimes of sharing a family cottage in Muskoka, we recently made the leap to our own place on tiny Tangamong Lake on the edge of the Canadian Shield where it dips down into eastern Ontario farmland. Our 16 acres of rock, virgin forest, and sand beach, accessible by a short boat ride, is pristine in a way that Muskoka, for all its splendour, can no longer be. Our board-and-batten cabin sits atop a rough promontory of black rock surrounded by a mix of huge cedars and pines facing north up a lake where, for the time being, no other cabins look back at us.

Which is a good thing – because, as newbies to the more remote world of boat-access cottages, we would prefer to go unobserved.

The first weekend of December 2005 will stand out in our minds as not only the weekend that we took possession of our new paradise but of our baptism by ice. We arrived at our small private landing with the mini-van loaded with bedding, warm clothes, dry food staples – the essentials we'd need for our winter visits. The previous owners had left us some furniture and beds so we didn't need to move any big stuff. The plan was to load up our new-to-us pontoon boat, tie our old canoe on behind, cruise over to the cottage, unload, and then take the pontoon boat around to a sheltered beach where we'd winch it on shore for the winter. Then the next day, after a relaxing evening in front of the

Off to a smashing start

Two cottage newbies learn the hard way why boats should come out of the water *before* it freezes

By CHRISTINE LANGLOIS Illustration by MONIKA AICHELE

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woodstove, we'd paddle the canoe back to the landing and head home, not to return until the lake was frozen and safe to walk across.

Yes, we knew that the first weekend of December was leaving the business of getting the boat out of the water a little late. But locals had told us that freeze-up on this lake *usually* happened mid-month and, besides, even though we could have taken the boat over earlier (the previous owners were completely accommodating), we just hadn't found the time. So here we were on a clear, cold December morning, ready to go.

The first hint of trouble came with the sound of Christopher, my husband, repeatedly yanking on the pull cord to get the engine going, as I hauled plastic containers from the van to the deck of the boat. Pull, pull, pull. Nothing. Pull, pull. Absolutely nothing. From the end of the dock I looked down at the ominous fringe of glittering ice forming along the shore in the -5°C temperatures. The water was that heavy smoked-glass colour it gets when it is very cold. The nearest mechanic was half an hour away (and probably busy tuning up snowmobiles). It could be several days

before we could get the engine fixed and by then the boat could be frozen in and we'd be in real trouble.

We'll have to paddle it across behind the canoe, I said. My husband looked at me as if I'd suggested we try black magic. But in the absence of a viable alternative, he agreed. On went the lifejackets and in we settled to our red fibreglass canoe, with a rope tied from canoe to 18-foot pontoon boat, loaded with boxes. We dug in hard with the paddles. The pontoon boat refused to budge. Try it again, Christopher said. On the fourth or fifth stroke, the canoe slid forward a few inches. And so we went, paddling furiously but moving ever so slowly, past the mercifully boarded-up cottages of the little bay, through the narrows, and into the main lake, dragging the *Queen Mary* behind us. (When I recounted this part of the story to our 23-year-old oh-so-cool son, his first question was "Did anybody see you?" He gave a small *phew* of relief when I said that I didn't think so.)

We arrived in the main lake and had only a short distance to go. But the water in the sheltered, shallow bay where we were headed looked oddly calm, even motionless. To our dismay, it was covered in a thin layer

of ice. So close – but there was no way we could paddle through the ice and tow the pontoon boat. And the ice seemed to be getting thicker as we watched. Who knew freeze-up happened so fast?

Which is how we decided to turn ourselves into human icebreakers. First, we ditched the canoe on a piece of shore where there was still open water. Then I stood on the bow of the pontoon boat attacking the ice with a shovel, while Christopher, in hip waders, pulled the vessel along the shore to the bay. He swears he was working so hard, he didn't feel the cold. Besides being hot work, being a human icebreaker was also strangely satisfying. Like some crazed Swede gone berserk in a Kosta Boda crystal factory, I took ridiculous pleasure in attacking the ice with the edge of the shovel and watching the chunks of it fly, some disappearing into the brackish water, others skittering wildly across the clear thin frozen sheet.

When the boat was safely onshore, we crawled back to the cottage and promptly fell asleep in front of the fire, too exhausted to even make dinner. We probably should have headed home right then, but it was getting dark and surely the open areas we'd just come through couldn't freeze solid overnight.

And they didn't. When we headed home in the canoe the next day, the skim of ice was a cinch to smack away with the paddle. The day was sunny, the thickening

water was the consistency of maple syrup, and the air tingled with the smell of cedar. Smack, smack, paddle, smack, smack, paddle was how we progressed until we headed through the narrows. Oops, the smaller bay *had* frozen solid overnight. By now, we were ready for anything. We changed direction, pulled up the canoe on a spot of shoreline that didn't have much ice, stowed it safely above the high-water mark, and walked the rest of the way back to the van.

Yes, the whole weekend had been a fiasco but, dammit, we'd managed. Our shoulders ached and our backs were sore, but our boat was safe and we'd survived our baptism by ice. (And until this moment, nobody was the wiser.)

What's a cottage, after all, if not a place to witness nature in all its permutations up close and personal? I can clearly remember the first time I watched April breakup at the old place – the gray mottled ice surface seeming impenetrable in the morning, then thinning and disappearing so quickly in the sunshine that shimmering blue ripples replaced it after lunch. And now I'd experienced the crisp beauty of freeze-up. But yes, this year, we will pull the boat out of the water in November. 🐾

Christine Langlois is a Toronto-based freelance writer whose screensaver is always a recent photo of the lake.