



VISIONARY DRONE

MAGNIFICENT KITES
grace the skies over the
University of Okoboji
Winter Games in Iowa.

LET THE **GAMES** BEGIN!

When the temps drop to freezing, Iowa's Great Lakes reveal a wacky, wintry wild side. **BY TRACY BEARD**

Iowa wasn't on my top 10 list of places to see, but I went to visit last winter because my son's in-laws live in—and love—the state.

After flying into Sioux City, I headed toward Okoboji, a lovely little town in Iowa's Great Lakes region.

The drive north was quiet and peaceful, through wide-open flatlands that stretched for miles, with only the occasional farmhouse breaking up the landscape.



OKOBOJI CHEERLEADERS (left) are chosen from the community to cheer during the games at various events, such as the polar plunge (below).



POLAR PLUNGE: VISIONARY DRONE; CHEERLEADERS: DAVE PETRICK AND THE IOWA GREAT LAKES AREA CHAMBER

Iowa's Great Lakes, a chain of natural glacial lakes in the northwest part of the Hawkeye State, are a lush, green summer playground where residents and visitors boat, fish and lounge in the sun. Most of the action takes place on Big Spirit, East Okoboji and West Okoboji lakes. But in the frigid months, only locals and a few outsiders know the secrets surrounding Okoboji's winter "wild side."

LOCAL TRADITION

Once the Okoboji area receives its annual average of 39 inches of snow, the winter playground is open and the University of Okoboji Winter Games are on! It's a tradition going back 41 years. The games take place over a four-day period at the end of January, with most activities

***ONLY LOCALS AND A FEW OUTSIDERS
KNOW THE SECRETS SURROUNDING
OKOBOJI'S WINTER "WILD SIDE."***

happening on West and East Okoboji lakes. Descriptions of the event conjure up images of a state or county fair with games, food, music and huge crowds.

While fairs are usually held in the summer, when people are dressed in shorts and drinking cold beverages, the Winter Games occur during the freezing months. Participants bundle up in layer upon layer of warm clothing and heat up with hot drinks. Instead of rides usually found at a fair, competitors slide around on the frozen lake playing in broomball tournaments, challenging one another in human foosball and joining in snow softball games.

Others participate in ice carving competitions, the polar plunge and the “drill or die” ice auger races. These activities sounded like fun to watch, but I kept imagining myself as a player slipping and landing smack on the ice. Not a pretty sight. If I were a competitor, I would secure a pillow to my backside or ask for some Bubble Wrap.

Food and music also add to the festive nature of the games. Food trucks serving barbecue, melty grilled cheese sandwiches and other munchies are typically stationed at Arnolds Park Amusement Park along the water. These trucks are great places to grab a snack and warm up.

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A BROOMBALL TOURNAMENT is credited with starting the games 41 years ago.

DAVE PETRICK AND THE IOWA GREAT LAKES AREA CHAMBER

CENTER OF THE ACTION

The games are just one part of the winter fun. When I arrived in Okoboji, a fresh layer of fall snow blanketed the town. I drove to the marina and stopped at the Fish House, a favorite community hangout. Believed to be the world’s largest fish shack, it’s actually a large boat. In the summer, the walls are removed, life jackets are hung along the roofline and the “house” is set out on the water.

In winter, the Fish House becomes the Fish Shack (a nod to the villages that pop up on the ice). The walls are back up and a 4-by-6-foot rectangular hole is opened in the floor. The ice underneath is cut with



SWEET TREATS WARM the spirit during the games. Continuing clockwise: Children get in on the winter fun while grown-ups relax in triangle pose during Snowga, which is hosted by Yoga Okoboji.

an auger and a railing is built around the hole. People fish from inside the shack because the fishing season is never really over in Okoboji.

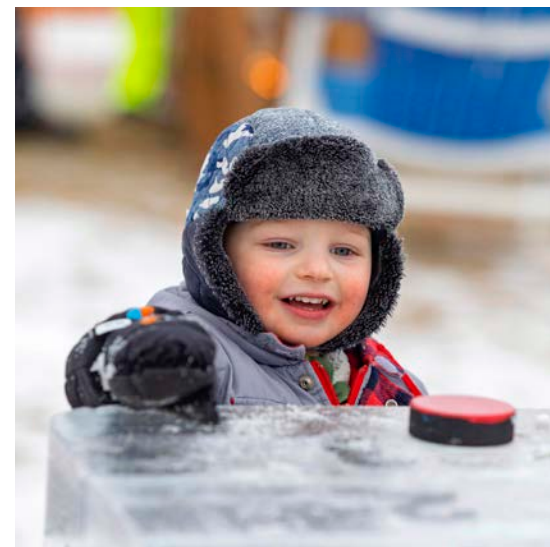
When I entered, heat emanated from flames blazing in the corner fireplace. Lively music filled the room, TV monitors displayed sporting events, and customers dined on burgers and beverages at bar-style tables.

WINTER PLAYGROUND

No frigid season is complete without ice skating and ice fishing. Parents can sit inside the Fish Shack and watch from the windows as their kids slide and glide on the large rink nearby.

While skating is something a novice could attempt, ice fishing is best with a guide. Darrin Jones, from Big Fin Guide Service, provides gear, a warm hut and comprehensive instructions.

Darrin and other guides drill the holes, locate the fish using the latest tech, and





HISTORY

Discover the hardships and joys of everyday life on the water in Okoboji at the **Iowa Great Lakes Maritime Museum**. Begin in the side room with the short informative video and then meander the main room filled with boats, tools and exhibits depicting how boats were built and how techniques changed over the years. okobojimuseum.org



CARS: APRIL D. TORRENCE; MUSEUM AND BARN SWALLOW: VACATION OKOBOJI; OAKWOOD: THE OAKWOOD INN

STAY

Sleep in luxurious comfort any time of year at **The Oakwood Inn**. Each morning Bill and Bridget Johnson create delectable breakfasts for guests. Rooms are well appointed, and my room boasted a huge jet bubble tub, a fireplace and a lovely balcony overlooking the inn's 2-acre oasis of gardens. theoakwoodinnokoboji.com



SHOP

Discover clothes and household furnishings at **Allure & Co**. An eclectic array of furnishings, paintings and knick-knacks are at **Timeless Consignment**. The **Barn Swallow** houses puzzles, games, T-shirts and more, and **Goodies Handmade Candies** sells chocolates, candies and ice cream sure to satisfy any sweet tooth. goodiescandies.com

MARVEL

Built as an elaborate man cave, **Okoboji Classic Cars** is a fascinating and remarkable place for visitors of all ages. The walls are covered with colorful murals, creating a setting that takes guests back in time to the 1960s with soda shops and drive-ins. More than 80 cars that span 100 years are on display here. okobojicc.com



ensure that the experience is safe and successful no matter your skill level.

"People think of the cold weather and freak out, but once you're in that shack with the heat on, it's like being in your own living room waiting for the fish to come to you," Darrin says.

Snowmobiling is another local passion and a favorite way to travel in Okoboji during the winter months. Bike trails and areas along the lakes are groomed for the sport. Plus, the Dickinson County Snowhawks Snowmobile Club grooms hundreds of miles of trails throughout the county, many of which run in ditches alongside the roads (riding on actual roads can be dangerous).

The roadside snowmobile trails connect with other local counties all the way into Minnesota, creating hundreds of miles for

avid winter warriors to explore. In mid-January, pro snowmobile racers suit up for the Okoboji 100. The 10-mile track runs along narrow East Okoboji Lake, past homes along the shore. Residents sit around their cozy fire pits as racers zip by. Riders lap the frozen track, traveling up to 100 miles or more per hour.

For those who pursue quieter sports, the Dickinson County Nature Center and the Kettleson Hogsback Wildlife Management Area both offer perfect terrain for hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing and bird-watching. Kettleson Hogsback is also well known as an ideal hunting spot.

When the calendar turns to January, Okoboji residents are all in. They truly value their winter resources, get a little crazy and have tons of fun. This wintry hidden gem is worth the visit. ●

SOFTBALL GETS a snowy makeover for the games. Though slow pitch softball rules apply, players use a large rubber ball and play on the ice.

SNOWBALL: DAVE PETRICK AND THE IOWA GREAT LAKES AREA CHAMBER