

Getting to Drive a Zamboni

A number of months ago I moved from downtown Toronto to Lucky Lake, Saskatchewan (pop 295). I've never considered myself the adventurous type. But since coming to the prairies I've decided to embrace the chance to try new things for one simple reason. I don't have a choice.

The list of firsts for me here is long. There was the first time I got a stone chip on my windshield. I felt like a true Saskatchewanian. The second, third and fourth times it happened were slightly less thrilling.

There are the "first time I ate something" events. This includes crane, elk-burgers, steelhead trout jerky, snow goose, Canada goose and moose filet. This last was cooked up by Willard Ross in homemade sauce, served with veggies from his garden and wild blueberries to finish. The rule here seems to be, "if it runs, flies or swims, we'll eat it." So far, I have no problem with this.

I've experienced my first hunting season. Out-of-towners pour into our tiny community, parading the streets in neon jackets, lounging for hours in our local bar, complaining that they never see any moose. The locals, on the other hand, never seem to have any trouble finding them with their car.

In the post office I overheard two older men debating whether, if a moose wanders into the centre of town, it's OK to shoot it. After listening for several minutes I realized that the question wasn't whether or not this was safe but whether or not it was sporting.

One group of hunters turned up at Elaine Jones' house early one Sunday morning enquiring if she'd seen any antelope in the area. This is not hunting, it's "asking."

By far my most sensational first happened last week. Tim Clifford came by and said those words I'd been waiting my whole life to hear. "Say, would you like to drive the zamboni?"

It's the dream of every true Canadian to drive a zamboni. Well that, and that there will someday be a law that there has to be a Tim Horton's on every block. And that stores can't start showing winter clothing while it's still summer.

A zamboni is big. It's hockey-related. It has a fun name. It's hockey-related.

I called my friends. I'm getting to flood (this is zamboni-talk) the hockey arena! My pal Michael mused, "Well, just try not to get lost." I would like to call him unhelpful. Really, he just knows me.

I arrived at the rink breathless with excitement. Tim patiently explained the basic workings of the machine. I didn't understand a word. Except for the part that if you don't crank one

particular lever up and down fast and often bad things will happen. Tim hoisted me into the driver's seat and showed me how to fire up the engine. Several tons of vibrating steel rumbled beneath me.

Some teenage boys arrived to play hockey and stood watching patiently behind the boards.

Tim: OK, back it out.

I sat.

Tim: Anytime.

I tried to look as if I was savouring the moment. Really, I was reflecting on the fact that clearly Tim is insane. There's about a foot clearance on either side of the zamboni garage door. A pilot used to negotiating cruise ships through the Panama Canal couldn't get this thing out the door. The teenagers began getting restless.

Finally, I pulled the reverse lever and the zamboni shot backward out of the garage.

Tim: OK, next time try it faster. With less screaming.

Soon, I was rocketing around the ice at almost 4 mph. I learned to try to keep the front directional wheel close to the board. I learned what happens when it gets too close to the board. I learned that if you miss a patch those watching will helpfully call out "You missed a spot!" Every time. I learned that if you forget to crank the important lever Tim will catapult himself onto the zamboni, scaring the life out of me.

I ended up with a spectacularly well cleared rink. So long as your idea of perfection includes a few wide tiger stripes of snow. I managed to manoeuvre the machine back into the garage and Tim let me push the button that raises the hood and dumps the snow. It was very satisfying.

I'm told I'm the first female to drive the Lucky Lake zamboni. Likely a plaque will be placed in the arena. It may be hard to come up with something to top that first. Tim said I could operate the skate sharpening machine if he can find someone who doesn't use their skates. And I've heard that once the nearby Saskatchewan River freezes I can drive my SUV across an ice road. I certainly plan to try that.

I've been surprised to find that the more things I try here, the more I'm up for a fresh new adventure. And for me, that's a first.

(by Anne Hines)