



RIGHT ON THE BUTTON

Two obsessions—curling and an old-school board game—create Winnipeg’s hottest winter craze. **CHRISTINE H. O’TOOLE**



A crokicurl rink at The Forks in Winnipeg.

I TAKE AIM. Kneeling on the ice in a fur-trimmed parka, snow pants and padded gloves, I grab the handle of a curling rock—a teakettle-sized missile—and shove it across a circular rink at The Forks, downtown Winnipeg’s winter hangout. The rock wobbles obediently to center ice, where it settles into a scooped-out hole called the button. Score!

Crokicurl, Winnipeg’s favorite faux sport, is a mashup of curling and a beloved Canadian board game, crokinole. “It’s the kind of thing your family plays on

Christmas Eve after a lot of drinking,” explains Kristin Pauls, event manager at The Forks. Crokicurl debuted here last winter, emerging from a public contest to create new interactive art. It was, to mix metaphors, a slam dunk: Canadians love curling the way Bostonians love baseball.

I had pictured The Peg as Fargo North, in part because of film director Guy Maddin’s *My Winnipeg*, a hilarious 2007 depiction of his hometown as a desolate realm of leaden skies, lumpy ice and sleepwalkers. Lately, Peggers have awakened to the cold, reveling in games, art, ice climbing and even pop-up dining on fur seats. “Winter—we own it. We love it,” says Pauls proudly. Now it was up to me—a heat-seeking, beach-loving wimp—to zip up to my eyes in insulated gear and keep pace.

The Forks, the park at the confluence of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, is the center of the scene. Dave Pancoe meets me there, cheerfully hoisting me atop his Zamboni for an overview of the action. “Don’t worry,” he shouts. “Our ice is 3 feet thick.” It’s 6 degrees and painfully bright. Pancoe guns the engine. We swing into the north wind, and the well-groomed ice turns into Central Park: Dog walkers, bikers and hockey players crowd the 8-kilometer path. Couples pull babies in sleds. Fat-tire bikers navigate a shoreline trail.

It’s breathtaking. Literally. My

cheeks feel Botoxed, and I realize why the locals stay in perpetual motion: It’s move or die. Waving farewell to Pancoe, I clump toward the crokicurl rink and choose a partner. We shove our rocks across the octagonal space and cheer loudly at each attempt. Ten minutes later, I score the winning goal. I’m more than warm—I’m a hot shot.

Local landscape architect Liz Wreford, the genius behind the game, has a theory on why crokicurl has won the city’s heart. “It combines two games that are deeply embedded in our culture. But at the same time, this game is new to everyone,” she explains. “Anyone can play.”

I leave the plaza for an art tour with an appropriately chill international vibe. Nine years ago, The Forks asked people to reimagine its warming huts, the wooden icons of Manitoba winters, as artworks for the downtown riverbanks. Whimsical geodesic domes and nylon tubes appeared, and now the competition includes an invited celebrity design. I step inside *Stackhouse*, a tall layer cake of ice by Anish Kapoor. *The Cloud Gate* sculptor has contributed a hut that’s a transparent cathedral—silent, luminous and sheltering.

Later, back at the crokicurl rink, the sunset turns redder than my nose. The wind dies. It’s time to seek some winter warmth, and the solution’s right in front of me. I head toward the crowd on the river. ▼

EDITORS’ PICK

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