



BETH PARKS PHOTO

At Minus 5° in Auckland, New Zealand, a customer waits patiently for the bartender to pour a cranberry-black current mixture into ice glasses.

# New Zealand bar made of ice draws cool customers

BY BETH PARKS  
SPECIAL TO THE NEWS

"I can't believe you didn't wait for me," Earl grouched as he crumpled into a flowered patio chair and fanned himself furiously with the cafe's menu. "You say the whole lounge is made of ice? How on earth did you find it?"

Neither of us, somehow, had expected to be on the verge of heat exhaustion in late January. It was only our second day in New Zealand and the fact that it was high summer in the South Pacific hadn't quite registered in our northern New England brains.

I confessed that heat had gotten the better of me while he was checking out yacht designs at Auckland's maritime museum. I had found a small outdoor cafe just a couple of blocks from the harbor and thought the slight breeze might cool me off. It didn't.

As I thumbed through a paperback visitor's guide to kill some time, an ad leaped out and snagged my imagination. "Get down to Minus 5°," its blue banner urged. Somewhere between the texts "surround yourself in 18 tonnes of hand sculpted ice" and "a unique experience that will chill your bones and delight your senses," I was hooked.

According to the ad's little map, "the coolest experience in Auckland" was just about a three-minute walk from the sweltering cafe where I was sitting. Women are supposed to "glow," not sweat, but I can tell you that the brief jaunt to Minus 5° sent rivulets of salty perspiration trickling down my face, neck and back.

Minus 5° didn't look like much from the outside. I tugged on the heavy door and found myself in a tiny room with no accoutrements, where a young man confirmed I was in the right place. He led me to what seemed to be a meat locker and let me peek in.

What I saw convinced me to go back to the entry and ante up the equivalent of about \$22.60 to don a long sheepskin-lined coat with fur-lined hood, thick gloves and insulated boots. Minus 5° refers to five degrees below zero Celsius, or about 23° F. Coming from a winter in Maine, I thought the arctic outfit might be overkill, but it wasn't. In fact, I almost bought a "Russkie" hat to supplement the sub-zero experience.

The interior of the Minus 5° bar was like something from another world. Everything, and I mean *everything*, was made of ice: the walls, bar, stools, shelves, tables, candleholders, and even glasses that held the alcohol-free or vodka-based specialty drinks.

Benches around the room's perimeter were also made of ice, but were covered with animal skins to protect the clients' derrieres. For those who chose to stand, pedestal tables of sheer ice provided handy surfaces on which to rest their frozen glasses.

It wasn't so much the bar paraphernalia that caught my eye as the whimsical ice carvings scattered throughout the room. A glistening seahorse rested next to a life-size witch topped off with a crooked pointed hat. A transparent clown beamed at an eagle with its wings spread and talons extended. A crystalline Japanese pagoda towered

over an icy angelfish that seemed to swim in midair.

Some ice sculptures were completely clear, enticing viewers to check them out from every possible angle. Others were subtly lit with blue or pink lights, which made their forms just slightly more tangible.

The cost of one drink was included in the cover price, so I treated myself to a green, apple-based concoction. It was frigid and delicious. The bartender cautioned me to set the frozen glass on a rubberized coaster so it wouldn't slip off of the bar's icy surface and shatter when it hit the floor.

A glass made of ice has some real advantages. For one thing, you never have to wash it. Instead, you just toss it in a warm place to melt while you grab a fresh one from the freezer. Drop one? Big deal. Just pour some water in a mold, plunk it in the deep freeze and you're good to go in a matter of minutes.

Even though the wonderful coolness of Minus 5° made it an exquisite treat on a hot day, the combination of cold, inactivity and alcohol can prove quite dangerous. Each customer's stay in the ice lounge was limited to a mere 30 minutes. Frankly, at the high price of drinks, that was a good thing.

My 30 minutes seemed to be up in a flash. I headed back to the cafe and waited for Earl, my traveling companion for New Zealand's North and South Islands. I was still feeling cool and collected when he collapsed into his chair, his face about the shade of the radishes I planned to grow in my Maine garden.

"Did you get pictures of the lounge?" he asked, nodding toward my digital camera. The images on the viewing screen were small and the ice sculptures hadn't photographed well, but he peered at them through the sweat that dribbled into his eyes. He broke out into a wide grin. "Wanna go back?"

An inveterate yachtsman, Earl had been looking forward to taking the helm of one of the grand prix 1995 America's Cup yachts that afternoon. For a moment, it looked as if he would chuck that anticipated event in favor of the frosty interior of Minus 5°.

But sail, we did. By the time we got back to the wharf, he had invited the crew and all the passengers to join us in the frozen lounge for an icy drink.

Earl is not a man you would expect to be easily impressed. A business executive and world traveler, he'd seen just about everything. Yet something about Minus 5° sparked his imagination and made it one of the high points of his New Zealand tour.

We discovered a second Minus 5° in Queensland and I later found a brand new one in Sydney, Australia. The company only has three branches, but management promises that more are on the way.

If summer heat is getting you down, check out [www.minus5experience.co.nz](http://www.minus5experience.co.nz) and let your eyes feast on the icy scenes.

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