

# Snow trek

## Cross country skiers head over the lakes and through the woods

Story and photos  
By SALLY GERAK

It sounded like fun when Harry Peterson invited me to join a group of local cross country ski enthusiasts for a far a moonlight cross country trek. The outing was to take place at Stokely Creek Ski Touring Center, which is 25 miles north of Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario. Since previous cross country skiing experiences had always been refreshing, I eagerly accepted.

"My brothers and I first ski toured in the Canadian Algoma district in 1954," explained Peterson. He added that they fell in love with the mountainous wilderness and bought property that is now operated as a non-profit ski touring club.

Fellow travelers on the quickie excursion included Charlie Blanchard, a fitness consultant and owner of the Total Runner store, and Ed Gallaudet, also of Birmingham, whose Cassia 210 provided our transportation to Sault Ste. Marie.

Peterson's and Blanchard's reputations for serious commitment to rigorous endeavors should have been ample warning to an out-of-condition, cigarette-addicted novice. But Gallaudet announced that he had never cross country skied before, so it seemed that I would at least have one comrade in incompetence.

UPON LANDING at the "Soo" airport, I was further intimidated by the appearance of Maxi Neugebauer, who, with her husband, Al, was also a Stokely Creek guest. Maxi is well-known locally for being a competitive tennis player, runner and skier of considerable skill. Her presence was a signal that the pending moonlight maneuver would probably be no leisurely jaunt.

During our trip from the airport, Maxi extolled the wonders of skiing at Stokely Creek, emphasizing not only its natural beauty but the importance of waxing skis properly.

"Waxless skis are terrible. They are



Stokely Creek manager Michael O'Connor leads visitors into the remote lodge with the help of a team of Siberian huskies, including one that weighs 80 pounds and likes to perch on O'Connor's shoulders.

so noisy and their drag slows you down," she advised. I mentally congratulated myself for leaving my own waxless skis behind.

After a short trip, we pulled into a nondescript parking area from which a path led into the wilderness beyond. While my companions slipped into their skis, Stokely Creek manager Michael O'Connor placed our luggage on a dog sled harnessed to a handsome team of five Siberian Huskies. Then he pointed to "Hop on."

AS I RODE the one-third mile through the woods to the lodge, I felt like a character straight out of "Call of the Wild." The transition from air travel to dog sled was a fitting introduction to the tranquility of Stokely Creek Ski Center, which is nestled in a forested canyon beside its namesake stream.

The main lodge, two smaller lodges, a day skiers' cabin and some service buildings form the nucleus of the cen-

ter's facilities. The contemporary lodges, designed by Dave Osier, have a combined capacity of 35, I learned. They are smartly furnished and contain the obligatory fireplaces, sauna and sun deck.

We arrived just in time for a hearty dinner served family style in the main lodge dining room. The room's major feature was a window wall that frames a view of King Mountain, which rises 1,880 feet to the east of the center. Everyone ate ravenously in anticipation of the calories which would be burned up on the trails later that evening.

And what trails they are! Fifty miles of marked paths, groomed for two sets of ski tracks, wind through Algoma's hilly wilderness. Inside the lodge, club maps show routes of beginner, intermediate and expert levels.

But our plan called for skiing to one of five lakes, none of which is accessible from a beginner trail.

AS I HUFFED and puffed up the

first hill on properly waxed, rented skis, Peterson considerably advised, "Now Sally, don't think you have to keep up with everybody."

"Don't worry, Harry, I've absolutely no ego riding on this performance," I assured my host. "Ten years ago, I might have had. But, when I've had half as much as I can handle, I'll just turn around and go back. No need to worry about me."

Far ahead, I could hear Maxi coaching, "Kick. Glide. That's great! Aren't those skis terrific? You can hardly hear them tracking."

If any of the moose, lynx, cougars or wolves that O'Connor said live in the vicinity were observing us that night of the full moon, I would not have noticed. Keeping my skis in the tracks required my total attention. Peterson hung back to keep me company and point out the wonders of nature about which I was only able to "ooh" and "aah" between deep breaths.

After 2 1/2 miles of strenuous skiing, I knew that I had reached my halfway mark. Peterson graciously insisted on guiding me back to the lodge. However, before we could call it a day, near the bottom of a long run I fell and twisted my knee.

As I watched my knee begin to swell, I thought, almost with pleasure, "What a shame. Now I'll have to laze around on the sun deck tomorrow while all the fitness freaks kick and glide through the wilderness."

IT DIDN'T even bother me when the others returned, describing with their exhilarating obfuscations of fog rising off their lakes and loons calling to their mates. Only Gallaudet confessed to being exhausted.



Harry Peterson, left, and Al and Maxi Neugebauer were all set following a hearty evening meal to take to the trails for a cross-country tour to one of five lakes that are within touring distance of the Algoma district club.

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