

TRAVEL

Dogsledding in the north woods renews the spirit

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY BRYAN MITCHELL

"Many paddlers know the secrets of Northern Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness with its many lakes and rivers to travel for wonderful summer canoe trips.

However, more and more visitors are planning their journeys after Old Man Winter freezes the waters and blankets the north woods with snow — not to glide along on skis, but to traverse the wilderness on doglegs.

Dogsledding offers the opportunity to quickly move deep into the woods where the spirit is renewed. The trip brochure states, "there is nothing that compares to the thrill and excitement of driving a dog team."

And from the moment you jump on a sled floating across the crusty snow, you know this is true.

The journey begins

This was my second mushing trip into the Boundary Waters wilderness to answer the call of these dogs and after a brief refresher on how to harness and drive a team of four sled dogs, a sense of anticipation was building in me and the dogs.

These are Alaskan Huskies, a breed known for its strength,

speed and stamina; they would rather run than do anything else. And that's a good thing because we had five sleds full of gear and four days to trek across this wilderness.

Now is when the novice musher learns about pandemonium and silence.

We were almost ready to shove off and our 27 excited dogs knew it. At this point their chorus of barks and howls are almost deafening.

"The dogs are ready," yells Kurt Lothe, one of our guides. "They love to run."

Hopping onto the sled runners, I untie the safety rope holding the dogs back. Slowly I step off the brake and command them, "All right."

Like a slingshot, my four new friends, Pat, Champ, Fletcher and Bonnie shoot onto Fall Lake. The silence piercing barks give way to only the soft hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh of the sled runners gliding along the snow and the rush of a crisp wind in your face.

Anyone with some basic instruction and a sense of adventure can drive a team of sled dogs.

Peter McClelland, our lead guide and part owner of White Wilderness Sled Dog Adventure,

told the story of a blind man driving his own team on a recent trip. "We just told him left, right, brake a little, duck. It was great," Peter said.

But we didn't really drive the team. Basically the dogs follow the team in front of them, single file with the guide and his team leading the way. Our job was to steer the sleds away from trees, push the sleds to help the dogs — particularly on steep uphill — and braking the sled on quick downhill to avoid running into the dogs. It can be hard work. But helping these Huskies and becoming a part of the team is extremely rewarding.

Fueling up

After each daily mushing adventure we would stop to make camp for the night. And after camp was established our first priority was to fuel our transportation.

The barking chorus explodes back to life the minute the dogs spot the feed bucket. A mushy mixture of warm water and high-protein dog food is a canine delight which each one devours almost before their bowls hit the ground. It is important to keep the dogs fueled and well-hydrated. This ensures the energy they need to pull the 200- to 300-pound sleds as well as keeping warm at night.

Humans need some potent and tasty fuel also, and we were not disappointed. Foods can be brought in winter that would normally spoil in the summer heat. Furthermore, you can eat as much fatty foods as you want because your body burns much of it off keeping warm. The four-day menu consisted of such delicacies as steak and potatoes, biscuits and gravy, and lots of chocolate.

"The fat will keep you warm," Peter told us. So we fill our selves full before jumping into our toasty sleeping bags for the



Well-earned: After a day of mushing, Burn, one of the Alaskan Husky sled-dogs gets some rest as the group sets up one of the tents and established camp.

Whatever the weather

The trip started with El Niño-inspired mild temperatures and even some rain. However, midway through our trek temperatures fell below freezing overnight bringing inches of new fluffy snow. Winter had returned with all its beauty offering up a perfect day for mushing.

At one point on that day some distance developed between myself and the sleds in front and behind. I imagined traversing a great uncharted wilderness, just me and the dogs. A peaceful, tranquil feeling fell over me lasting throughout the day. And I crawled back into my sleeping bag that night reflecting on how life doesn't get any better. Yet just as I was drifting off to sleep a lone dog started a mournful howl. Soon the others joined in serenading us to sleep. Now the day was perfect.

Our last day on the trail



Mush-mush: Lester, left, and Ivory, lead the rest of the sled-dog team down a trail in Minnesota pulling Fred Mitchell, standing, and guide Kurt Lothe.

arrived much too quickly. I sometimes forget to soak up the experience before it's gone. And as we arrive back to the trailhead I called out, "whoa," and praised, "good dogs," for the last time. It's moving how hard they work for you, leaving every minute of the journey. I hugged

and patted each dog saying my good-byes with a bit of sadness, after becoming quite attached to my new canine companions.

But, I will be back to answer their call once more joining them in this white wilderness where they roam.

Getting ready: Joel Schriever unloads one of the huskies to harness for the mushing trip as one of the other excited dogs watches.



GREAT ESCAPES

Great Escapes features various travel news items. Send news leads to Hugh Gallagher, assistant managing editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, or fax them to (313) 591-7279. Or e-mail at hgallagher@oc.homedomain.net

WHITE WATER RAFTING

The EdgeRunner Ski Club presents its annual "White Water Rafting" trip to West Virginia on May 29-31. The trip includes Saturday rafting on the "New River," three meals, two nights camping and an after-rafting party. Members pay \$95, non-members pay \$110 and a down payment of \$50 is due April 9. For more information, contact

Schoolcraft College Student Activities Office at (734) 462-4422.

BAB CONTEST

A Bad Axe bed and breakfast is offering prospective inn-keepers a chance to win the b&b in an essay contest.

Bob and Jo Vanschoepen are going back to Virginia and offering their Graystone Manor in the contest.

The Manor is a three story, 3,900-square-foot home with six bedrooms, six full and on 1/2 bathroom, oak woodwork, hardwood floors, three natural fireplaces, leaded glass windows, a wraparound columned veranda and a story and a half carriage

house.

A \$100 entry fee is required. The winning essay should tell why you want to live in a small town and own your business and will be judged on content and originality. The essay must be typed or legibly printed. Essays must be 500 words or less. Do not put your name on the essay. The contest has been approved by the state Attorney General's office.

Entry deadline is May 15.

For an entry form and more information on the contest and the Graystone Manor, send a

self-addressed, stamped envelope to Bed & Breakfast Contest, PO Box 36, Bad Axe, MI 48413-1418.

NAGANO SLIDE SHOW

Photographer Jack Gruber, who photographed the Winter Olympics for USA Today, will host a slide show of his photographs 7 p.m. Wednesday, March 25, at REI, 17569 Haggerty Road, Northville at Six Mile and Haggerty.

The Olympians slide presentation is free and open to the public. For more information, call (248) 347-2100.

If you decide to go dogsledding

Outfitters — I recommend the folks at White Wilderness Sled Dog Adventures, 1-800-701-6238. Or you may get a list of other outfitters as well as other information from the Ely, Minn., Chamber of Commerce, 1-800-777-7281. Prices range from \$50 for an hour-long ride and \$150 for a day trip to roughly \$400 to \$1000 for a wilderness trek, depending on the number of days.

Drive Time — Ely, Minn., is about a two-hour drive north of Duluth Minnesota (about 930 miles from Observerland). Take highway 53 north from Duluth then highway 169 west until you hit Ely. You can also fly into Duluth International Airport from Detroit Metro.

When To Go — Trips are run from December through March with March being the warmest with some of the best trail conditions. Late January, early February tend to be the coldest. Snow is generally three to four feet deep although

snow is down and temperatures are mild this year, so call for conditions.

Other Things To Do — There are miles of trails for snowmobiling, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. And with thousands of lakes in the area are full of trout. Northern Pike, Walleye and perch the fishing is a delight. If visiting over a weekend the International Wolf Center is a must see, 1-800-ELY-WOLF. Swing by international award winning photographer Jim Brandenburg gallery above Piranga North Woods Co. on Central Avenue in town, 1-800-223-6565. You can stay at a warm cozy lodge for some rest and relaxation at Smitty's on Snowbank twenty miles east of town, 1-800-950-8310. And around the second week of February ELY holds its annual Voyageur Winter Festival, call 1-800-777-7281 for more information.

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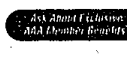
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Package prices shown are per person, based on double occupancy and round-trip coach-class air transportation via connection, direct, and nonstop service between Detroit, Grand Rapids, Lansing and Tri City airports on Northwest Airlines. Subject to the conditions of the fare, charges may be made. However, certain restrictions and an administrative service fee may apply. Prices are not restrictive and are subject to change and availability. Standard Vacation/Travel Terms and Conditions apply; other restrictions may apply.

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HEY KIDS

The Somerset Collection Invites You To Meet Nestor Fairweather

Come visit Nestor Fairweather, the gentleman rabbit, in the Somerset Garden Village this spring. Nestor will be in his beautiful garden gazebo in the North Grand Court of the Somerset Collection from March 28th to April 11th. It will be a whole lot of fun for everyone. Plus, all the boys and girls who come to see Nestor will receive a special surprise!

To remember this wonderful occasion with Nestor you can have your picture taken with him! The two of you can remember how much fun you had this spring with a Polaroid picture for only \$10.

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