

Ride Around Superior

PIONEERING THE CAN-AM LOOP
AROUND THE BIG WATER.

"Is it on or not?" That's the question my snowmobiling friends kept asking before the start of our ambitious 3,500-kilometre circle tour around Lake Superior. It's a ride that few other Canadians have attempted. Thanks to purported trail and connection improvements, it's now possible, at least on paper. But the true test is always snowmobilers putting rubber to snow. So eight seasoned snowmobiling buddies gathered in Sudbury, Ontario to pioneer this new route, like the voyageurs of yesteryear.

"It's a go," I'd reply confidently, as if I had a personal weather satellite. "We'll snowmobile wherever we can." Meanwhile, I was anxiously calling weather stations, tourism offices and snowmobile clubs across Northern Ontario, Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan — looking for snow updates; hoping for good news; weighing the chances of trail conditions being good enough everywhere en route.

Our goal was to circumnavigate the largest of the Great Lakes – Superior – by riding some of the world’s most renowned snowmobile trails on both sides of the international border.

We had ten days for our voyage of discovery. Little did I know that before our trek was over, I’d ride on many strange surfaces, be transported in surprising ways, rent my own house, snowmobile Lake Huron for heart-stopping hours, arrive after dark each day and test the limits of my endurance, too.

We spent the night before departure in preparation. Snowmobiles have minimal storage space – stowed gear has a nasty habit of shaking loose along the trail. So each of us devised ingenious ways to packrat and secure a dozen litres of oil,

emergency parts, tools and personal luggage on board, using as many bungee cords as money could buy. No one carried spare gas, but I had a small jerry can of oil, which would serve when emptied. By departure, my sled resembled a junk wagon more than a sleek engine of conquest.

Sudbury to Timmins – 8:30 am to 7:30 pm, 355 km: The first two days were promising enough – excellent snow and great northbound trails through Timmins and Cochrane.

Timmins to Hearst – 8:30 am to 9:30 pm, 370 km: Then it was across the “Northern Corridor”, as TOP Trail A from Cochrane to Hearst is known. The Corridor was among the best in the

province – old logging roads 24 feet wide, well groomed and with good destination and directional signage. It compared favourably with main trails in Québec and New Brunswick in more ways than one. The predominantly Francophone population was friendly and hospitable – especially at the numerous trailside clubhouses that headquartered local snowmobiling. Since the TOP Trail paralleled the main highway, gas, food and accommodation were always close by.

Hearst to Geraldton – 8:30 am to 8 pm, 340 km: Trail quality and consistency deteriorated somewhat west of Hearst, on what is now TOP A107A, probably due to the long distance covered by grooming equipment between Hearst



tain sled broke trail all day, while the rest of us tried to follow in its track, but frequently slide off sideways to bog down in deep powder where brute force rescue was required. Then we came to that huge hill...

Stopped on one crest, we looked across three thousand yards to the next large hilltop. Between, a deep valley ran, with sides so steep that we couldn’t see the slope at our feet. Undaunted, the long-tracker rode it down for a look-see. After long moments, he reappeared – as a speck climbing the far incline.

Not a chance. He got stuck in the virgin snow less than a third of the way up. So there we were: eight of us on one crest, our buddy buried across the way. And neither slope re-climbable from the valley floor. The solution? An old roadbed wound through the valley bottom, so we slid down our respective slopes and turned north to Highway 11, riding bare pavement westwards until we cut the groomed trail again. The new carbide runners on the bottom of my skis got an abrasive workout that day!

From Beardmore we turned south, heading towards the Lake Superior community of Nipigon and onwards to Thunder Bay (*Update: this trail has been closed for recent seasons so double check its status before you start.*), where we arrived about 9 PM, weary but excited about crossing into Minnesota on Tuesday.

Thunder Bay to Grand Marais, Minnesota – 8:30 am to 10 pm, 375 km: Getting to the border wasn’t easy, even

and Longlac. The trail mostly followed a pipeline corridor westbound right through to Geraldton, our overnight destination, so getting lost wasn’t a concern.

However, signage wasn’t always great, especially at some blind corners and hills. We commented on this danger to four Longlac riders we met on the trail. They warned us about more unmarked turns ahead. But no one said anything about the one just over the next hill! We crested that brow into a sharp, surprise right that five of us didn’t make, burying our sleds in four-foot powder only feet from a steep drop-off! After hot and sweaty excavation work, we were on our way again.

An hour later we came upon an open creek with no bridge in sight. The water looked to be a couple of feet deep and 10 to 12 feet across. Or as one of our group, Ski-Doo rider Don Lumley, declared: “A

Mach and a half wide!” He took this precise measurement while he and I shared a half hour perched on our half-submerged sleds after our crossing attempts left us stranded in the middle of the drink. Gleeful companions rescued us with ropes only after capturing the moment on every available camera. Arrival at a Geraldton motel that night was welcome: my soaker wasn’t getting any warmer!

Geraldton to Thunder Bay – 8:30 am to 8:45 pm, 380 km: A local friend joined us on his long-track mountain sled for the leg west to Beardmore, near Lake Nipigon. Some of us wondered: “Why does he have this sled designed for deep powder and hill-climbing?” But not for long – fresh snow, three to five feet deep, soon obliterated our route. That moun-





with an OFSC District 17 trail map. West of Thunder Bay we visited a frozen but still spectacular Kakabeka Falls – second highest in Ontario after Niagara – then rode southwest towards the U.S. There were no signs or warnings, so it wasn't until arriving at a remote lodge on our side of the 49th parallel that we were warned to cross at a regular port of entry on penalty of sled confiscation. No problem, except the nearest point – Pigeon River – was 50 miles back.

Never say die, just say cross-country. Instead of backtracking, we discovered a backwoods shortcut that kitty-cornered to Pigeon River on old logging roads and trappers' trails. With only our compasses, sketchy directions and Lady Luck to guide us, we arrived safely after cutting our way through many deadfalls on narrow, squiggly, overgrown cow paths that

hadn't seen recent traffic. (*Update: trails have been rerouted since this tour, so check a current OFSC District 17 trail map for how to access the proper border crossing.*)

The U.S. border was anticlimactic: their officials didn't seem to care about the checking-in that we'd gone so far out of our way to accomplish. By way of entry, we snowmobiled down the bare asphalt centre of the main highway like any other car or truck — except for the sparks from our carbides!

Just across the border, we found a good-looking casino hotel in Grand Portage. I'm thinking: "Five PM – this looks like a good place to overnight!" but the group voted to push on to Grand Marais, about 40 miles distant by highway. Unfortunately, we were going by trail.

As dusk settled, we headed off into the bush again, more sketch maps in hand,

to find the connecting trails to Grand Marais. There were trails alright, but with too many unmarked intersections and turnabouts for certain navigation by strangers like us. Then just as darkness fell, disaster struck our resident Francophone, Jean Leroux.

His left ski slipped off the edge of a logging road. The deep snow sucked his sled down a ten-foot incline. Hoping to ride it out, Jean accelerated and was actually leaning into the slope when that errant left ski sliced through a dead poplar tree. That force flipped his sled onto its side and propelled it head long into a six-inch birch. Unhurt, Jean did a seat plant ten feet away. The tree wedged between skis and belly pan, suspending the front of his sled about six feet above the ground. With towropes and sleds, we pried it loose and pulled it back onto the

trail. Luckily, aside from suspension damage, it proved rideable.

After four hours more of groping about in the dark without spotting civilization, we finally stumbled across a highway. A sign read: "Grand Marais, 19 Miles". Not bad. Halfway there, and averaging an impressive 5 mph! In silent agreement, we drove the road shoulder for those last cold, bare miles, arriving at a motel about 11 PM. There were no carbides left to spark.

Grand Marais to Duluth – 12:30 pm to 8 pm, 280 km: After repairs and recuperations, we didn't leave until noon the next day, rounding the western end of Lake Superior southwest to Duluth. Minnesota Northwoods trails were decently marked and groomed, on par

with many TOP Trails. As we paralleled the southern Superior shoreline, snow depth decreased to a foot or so. Darkness fell at the outskirts of Duluth.

Apparently there was a 100-mile circle trail around the city – a happy thought at that time of night. Or one can call Mrs. Mac. No, not Ronald's mother, but a tow truck operator with a sideline of transporting snowmobiles on tilt bed trucks. Our eight sleds and riders were quickly loaded up for a half hour drive across Duluth to an eastside motel – all for \$20 a head. I would have paid a hundred!

Duluth to Three Lakes, Michigan. – 8:30 am to 11:15 pm, 450 km: Riding east from Duluth along the underbelly of Superior, we crossed into Wisconsin. By noon we ran out of snow. For two hours,

we mobiled on dirt, mud, grass, bush, wood chips, gravel, pavement, sawdust and water – following a well-marked but barren trail. We discovered later that we were too close to the Superior shore: farther south, lake effect storms had dumped enough snow for decent riding. But since when have Canadians ever headed south for snow, eh?

On entering northern Michigan late that day, we were disappointed to discover that trails in the renowned Upper Peninsula (U.P.) didn't live up to their reputation. But around the western Michigan town of Ironwood, they had laid out the red carpet...

It seems that grooming mixes their ubiquitous iron dust with snow, turning trails a deep rust colour. This unique welcome mat set the tone for Michigan,





Our Tour Itinerary

Circle loop from Sudbury, Ontario via Top C, Top A, TOP A/D (Note: this section of trail between Nipigon and Thunder Bay has been closed for several years), Top A, L902M to U.S. border to pick up Minnesota trails. Cross south of Lake Superior through Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula, leaving the U.S. from Drummond Island. Cross into Canada via TOP D107 (stake line across North Channel of Lake Huron) to St. Joseph Island, then another stake line to Bruce Mines. Pick up TOP D136 to Top D back to Sudbury (Note: we rode the ice on the North Channel to the stake line at the east end, then picked up TOP D110 & C108D into Sudbury; don't do this without a guide!)

where every town, village and store greeted snowmobilers with open arms as only exuberant Americans can do. They know on which side their winter bread is buttered!

Being naive Canucks, we didn't reserve rooms in this busiest of snowmobiling hot spots. Our first clue should have been that trails were very crowded. Groups passed us every five minutes or so. 20 to 30 snowmobiles at every rest area. Everybody going like blazes, smiling like they were having the time of their lives. Strange, because the trails were brutal: moguls, slushy snow and rutted corners. Could anyone think these trails were good? Get a life – come snowmobiling anywhere in Canada! We scrambled for late night lodgings near Three Lakes in the central U.P.

Three Lakes to Seney – 8:30 am to 6 pm, 365 km: Next morning, we angled southeast away from the two Sault Ste. Maries,

towards the popular border crossing at Drummond Island, Michigan. By dinnertime, "NO VACANCY" signs were aglow again. At a gas stop near Seney, the proprietor overheard me on the phone with another nearby hotel that was full. He whispered urgently: "Ask about the house!"

"I have eight tired and desperate snowmobilers here who will camp on your doorstep if they don't get a place to stay, so can we rent your house?" I pleaded with the hotelier at the other end of the line. It cost a hundred bucks — cheaper than a motel and more comfortable too. Now all we needed was a butler and maid!

Seney to Blind River, Ontario – 8:30 am to 6 pm, 340 km: Our final day Stateside took us east to land's end on the northern shore of Lake Michigan at De Tour Village, where we would catch the ferry to Drummond Island. Trails were excellent and uncrowded – the mobs had



overlooked this southeast corner of the U.P.! The ferry ride took ten minutes, breaking ice all the way. But the ferry's steel on-off ramps demolished another set of my carbides.

Drummond Island was thrice notable. One, for a spectacular race down a 300-foot wide groomed trail on an unopened expressway – I felt like a jet at take-off. Two, for an hour of being lost – on an island I could almost throw a rock across. And three, for access to the northbound tree line, maintained by local snowmobile clubs, that marks the crossing of Lake Huron's North Channel back to Canada.

We made the return to our home and native land official at Thessalon by phoning our arrival into customs. Then it was back onto the North Channel following an eastbound tree line to Blind River for our final overnight and a celebratory steak dinner.

Blind River to Sudbury – 9 am to 3 pm, 285 km: Our riding choices back to Sudbury were to take inland TOP Trails or to continue easterly along the Lake

Huron shoreline to landfall at Whitefish Falls, and thence lake-hop via Lake Panache to town. The ice routes were shorter and besides, trail snow was spotty.

Our traverse of the frozen North Channel was like visiting an Arctic moon-scape. As far as the eye could see, snowdrifts and pressure cracks interspersed with black sheets of glare ice that looked frightfully like open water. Huge jumbles of ice stacked along the shore like slabs of broken concrete, bedecked with sun sparkles. At intervals, ice had frozen a stunning deep turquoise. We picked our way along the shoreline to inland waterways and arrived in Sudbury by mid-afternoon. Tired puppies!

Looking back on that arduous odyssey, I wouldn't rush right out and do it again. Certainly, I'd allow a full two weeks next time. All sleds would be new, capable of top gas mileage. But for experienced Canadian snowmobilers in search of those ultimate snowmobiling experiences, the ride around Superior is a big thrill and an exciting challenge. ●

Who To Contact

Snowmobile Paradise Ontario, 1-800-ONTARIO or www.snowmobileinontario.com

Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs, www.ofsc.on.ca

Minnesota Tourism, 1-888-TOURISM or www.exploreminnesota.com

Minnesota United Snowmobilers Association, (763)-577-0185 or mnsnowmobiler.org

Wisconsin Tourism, 1-800-432-8747, (608) 266-2161 or www.travelwisconsin.com

Association of Wisconsin Snowmobiling Clubs, (902) 734-5530 or www.awsc.org

Michigan Tourism, 1-888-784-7328 or www.michigan.org/travel

Michigan Snowmobile Association, 1-800-246-0260, (616) 361-2285 or www.msasnow.org