

Alberta BOUND

ALBERTA'S BEST TRAIL RIDING
IS JUST NORTH OF EDMONTON.



It didn't become clear to me until the final day. I knew something was different about the headspace of Alberta snowmobilers, but I hadn't figured it out. Then I rode back to the Town of Westlock after participating in a poker run. My riding buddy, Don Webb, and I expected the trail to be bumpy. After all, a couple of hundred sleds had used it already that day.

Miraculously, the groomed trail was still smooth — even untracked in many places! And that's when I twigged to it: all those Alberta riders had only stayed on the groomed trail when it was absolutely necessary. Otherwise, as soon as they saw any wide-open, snow-covered field beside

the trail, they had fanned out across it like pellets from a shotgun.

In my mind's eye, I replayed the previous days of riding. One day, we'd left a perfectly good rail-trail behind to ride 40 clicks along a powder-covered river. On another, the trail led from field to field, but as soon as our group emerged on trail through any fence opening, those Alberta boys would be off into the deep stuff as if their sleds were allergic to grooming. And whenever we'd come upon a forest clearing blanketed by unbroken snow, those sleds would scatter again to make their marks.

So then I knew. Alberta riders love their groomed trails — as long as they

lead to powder playing. Like the province itself, which straddles the geographic transition from plains to mountains, Alberta riders are hybrids, equally adept at cross-country, mountain and trail riding. And they have it all, as Don and I soon discovered...

We flew into Edmonton on a mission to check out Central Alberta's new showcase corridor — the Iron Horse Trail. We also wanted to ride the Golden Triangle's 350 kilometres of groomed trails (running between Whitecourt, Swan Hills, Fox Creek), then attend the Alberta Snowmobile Association (ASA) Jamboree in Westlock. If time permitted,



we also intended to explore the foothills around Edson.

We hit it exactly right. Just before our arrival, Central Alberta was blanketed by several feet of new snow — with enough time for the groomers to work their magic for us. When we finished riding six days later, we'd racked up 1,250 kilometres of Alberta's very best and met some very hospitable folks.

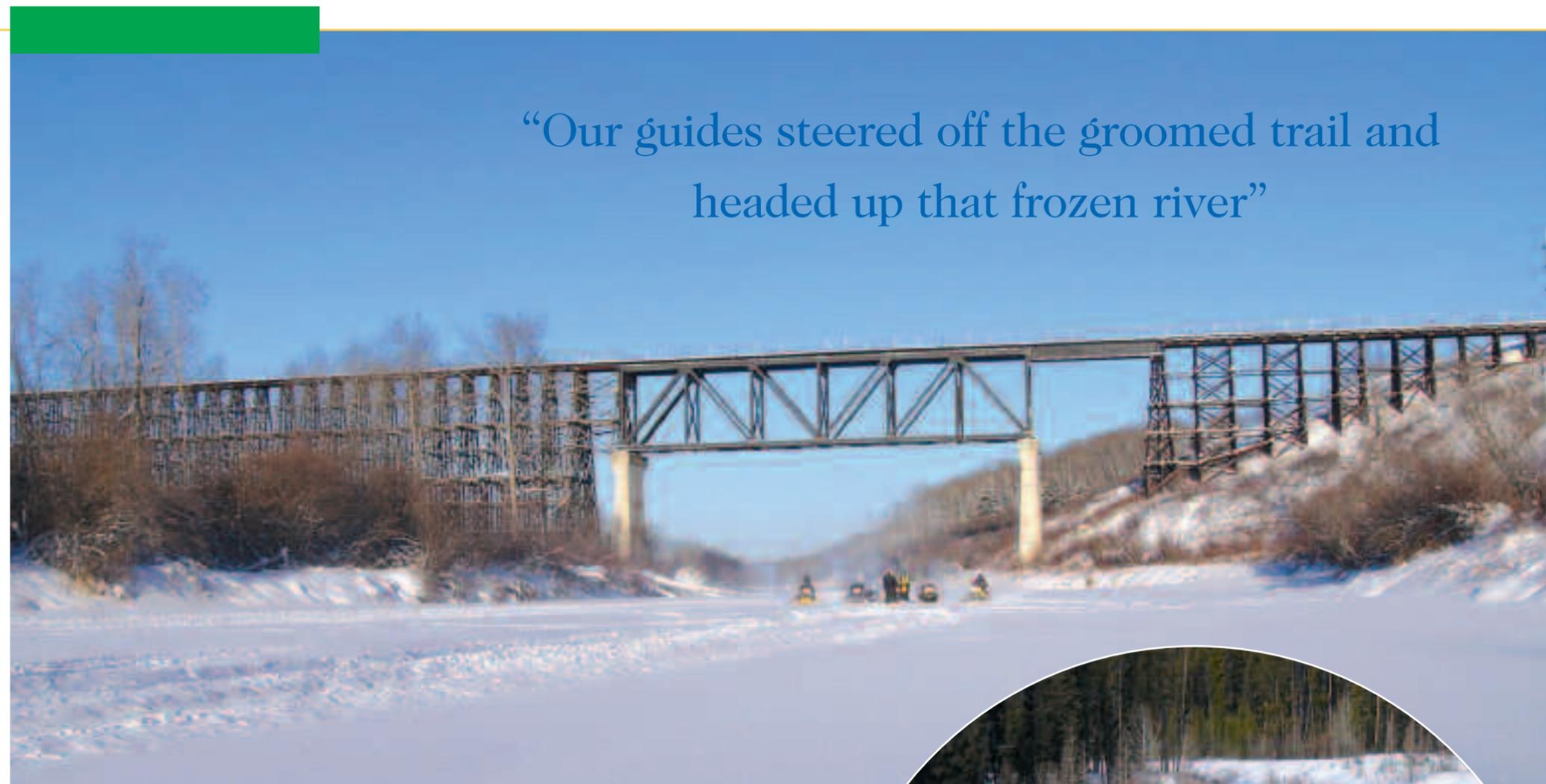
I should note that this trip was different than most trail riding tours I undertake. Mostly, we arrive and ride our Snow Goer tours under the radar, coming and going on our own. We don't normally have guides or local companions for trail riding, and visit without much fanfare or hoopla. From the outset, our Alberta tour was just the opposite.

Our host, ASA Executive Director Louise Sherren, chose to build on the momentum of Jamboree week by profiling the importance of snowmobiling to the region. So with our willing acquiescence, this tour became a whirlwind of receptions, hospitality suites, community meals and speeches. Louise had laid impressive groundwork. The enthusiasm and support for snowmobiling we experienced at those functions prove that Alberta snowmobiling is alive and well.

Despite our white carpet treatment, we still managed to complete a tour well worth trying yourself (except you won't get to meet so many dignitaries!). The new Iron Horse Trail made destination riding easy through the Lakeland district. It was also a great way to access

off-trail play areas. In fact, we'd hardly left Cold Lake when our guides steered off the groomed trail and headed up that frozen river. Previously untracked, the powder riding was a real kick; cutting a swathe with snow dust swirling around reminded me of navigating my Sea-Doo watercraft.

Our tour traveled west on Trail 1, a leg of the Trans Canadian Snowmobile Trail. As we left the Iron Horse Trail behind, the country became progressively more wooded and less populated. After



“Our guides steered off the groomed trail and headed up that frozen river”

Our Tour Itinerary (1,250 km)

DAY ONE: Travel from Toronto.

Where We Stayed: Bonnyville Neighborhood Inn, Bonnyville; 1-800-229-5390, (780)-826-3300 or www.neighbourhoodinn.com

DAY TWO: Trailer to Cold Lake and snowmobile to St. Paul (234 km).

Where We Stayed: St. Paul Super 8, 1-800-800-8000, (780) 645-5581 or www.super8.com

DAY THREE: St. Paul to Athabaska (246 km).

Where We Stayed: Best Western Athabasca, 1-800-780-7234, (780) 675-2294 or www.bestwestern.com

DAY FOUR: Athabaska to Whitecourt (320 km).

Where We Stayed: Whitecourt Super 8, 1-800-800-8000, (780) 778-8908 or www.super8.com

DAY FIVE: Whitecourt to Fox Creek and back (240 km).

Where We Stayed: Whitecourt Super 8

DAY SIX: Trailer to Edson; ride to Ruby Falls and back (105 km). Trailer to Westlock for ASA Jamboree.

Where We Stayed: Westlock Inn, 1-888-768-9959, (780) 349-4483 or www.westlockinn.com

DAY SEVEN: Ride in ASA Jamboree Poker Run (105 km).

Where We Stayed: Westlock Inn.

DAY EIGHT: travel home

Athabaska, where we overnighted, we rode through dense coniferous forests. We were scheduled to arrive at the Swan Hills Municipal Offices for a reception lunch honouring the three “Way Out Women” (WOW) Polaris riders who were headed east through Alberta at the same time. We were late; so were they. Incredibly, with all those incoming miles under our belts, both groups arrived in the municipal parking lot at exactly the same time! Try planning that.

That evening, we arrived in Whitecourt for a two-night stay and a memorable day ride to Fox Creek and back. Some of those Golden Triangle trails reminded me of snowmobiling in Northern Ontario or Québec — long, wide, groomed straight-aways and winding logging roads through forests of snow-laden trees. It doesn't get much better than that!

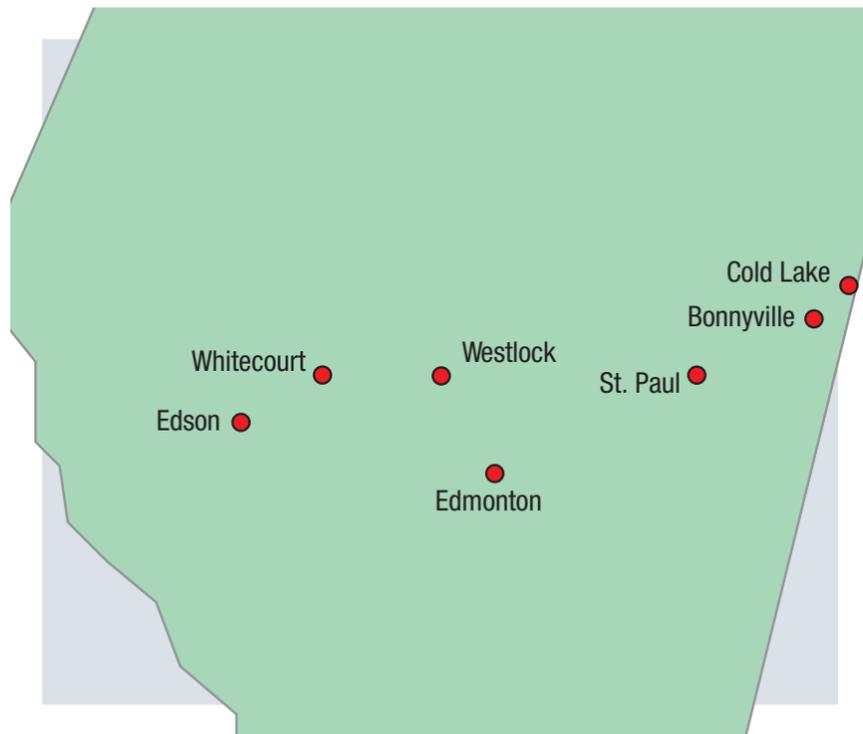
But Ruby Falls was tough competition. We had trailed to Edson for a ride in the foothills. Our destination was Ruby Falls,



a massive waterfall frozen into an ice cascade clinging to the side of a rocky crag. The backdrop was the Rocky Mountains. Similar to access for most mountain riding areas, we trucked in on bare roads as far as possible, then unloaded our sleds. The first half of the ride in was powder ecstasy: deep, untracked snow on top of super-wide logging roads. After that, we snowmobiled cross-country and quickly discovered that plenty of snow on flat surfaces didn't mean adequate cover over rugged foothill terrain. Especially when a wind regularly blasts down the valley.

To avoid too much bare rock bashing, we followed a frozen creek bed much of the way to Ruby Falls. (photo: P1010381) Regardless of the limited snow cover, the scenery was spectacular and we even spotted a herd of wild horses huddled for protection against a tree line.

The wind had swept all the snow off



some areas of the creek bed, leaving only a sheet of glare ice. With no traction whatsoever, it was slippery going. Several of us executed fancy, if unintentional, donuts. Then Louise got stuck. Her sled spun around on the ice surface like a top and finally came to a halt. But there was no grip to get started again and every time she pressed the throttle slightly, her sled would perform another pirouette. She only made it onto snow again because Don, slipping and sliding on his knees, helped pull her ahead. The Fast-Trac studs on my sled at home would have come in handy!

Ruby Falls was also the location of a GPS waypoint for GeoCaching, a worldwide scavenger hunt. Participants can sign in on the internet to download the waypoint coordinates and then physically find them by any mode of travel. At each, a can full of bric-a-brac is buried. The only rule is that if you take something out, you have to leave something else behind. I bet there aren't many other locations that are as much fun to reach!

After the return journey, we trailered

to Westlock for the Jamboree. This provincial event takes place annually, moving to a different location in Alberta each year. Riders come in from all over Alberta to participate. It's a great social occasion and a chance for snowmobilers and their families to renew acquaintances and do the poker rally together.

From talking to Alberta riders, my sense is that they haven't yet fully realized all that their province can offer snowmobilers. Those ditch-banging days when riders couldn't really go any significant distance are fading in memory. Even having to trailer from one isolated group of trails to the next is disappearing. New trails and connections are making destination touring more viable. Increasingly, Albertans won't need to go out of province for all their riding adventures.

The Trans Canadian Snowmobile Trail is fast becoming the anchor route for trail riding in Central Alberta. It's the best way for snowmobilers to get from one play area to another. It's also a great gateway to the trail connection to the

Saskatchewan trail system, just east of Cold Lake (see Saskatchewan section). Welcoming Alberta communities, like those who participated in this tour, provide all the service and amenities any snowmobiler needs. And the local clubs and their volunteers certainly know how to groom their trails.

It looks to me as if Alberta snowmobiling is about ready to go big time. If so, then Alberta could be the next bright light on the snowmobiling map of Canada. And maybe Alberta snowmobilers will spend more time riding their groomed trails too!

Who To Contact

Travel Alberta,
1-800-ALBERTA or
www1.travelalberta.com/Central
Alberta Snowmobile Association,
(780) 427-2695 or
www.altasnowmobile.ab.ca