

CRAIG'S TOUR

NORTHERN DELIGHTS

HIGHTAILING ACROSS NORTHEASTERN ONTARIO



A MATTICE
A HEARST



STORY AND PHOTOS BY
CRAIG NICHOLSON

the
intrepid
Snowmobiler

Some of my most amazing sledding has occurred on snowmobile trails on various logging roads, abandoned rail lines, utility corridors and forest access corridors. So just imagine if these routes were connected to each other in one seamless trail network. Well, dream no more because this is exactly what happens within the 4,700 kilometres of snowmobile trails in Ontario's Wilderness Region, comprising Districts 14 and 15 of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC).

We found kilometre after kilometre of the widest-open, most horizon-stretching, adrenalin-pumping and eye-popping sledding anywhere. Thanks to this unrivalled network, anyone can put

on serious miles in Northeastern Ontario. Three hundred kilometer days are a breeze and with March's longer daylight hours, upwards to 400 clicks is easy for avid riders. Snowmobiling simply doesn't get any better than this!

Great Lodgings, Great Trails

Our Snow Goer Canada touring crew, consisting of Dan Carty, Glenn King, Jim Reavell, Don Webb, Marsha and I, trailered to New Liskeard's popular Quality Inn to start our journey. Seven days of glorious riding and 2,188 kilometres later, we returned to the Quality Inn, a completely satiated and contented group (see Green area on sketch map). Along the way, we stayed at various snowmobile-friendly

lodgings like the aforementioned Quality Inn, (Temiskaming Shores), as well as the North Adventure Inn (Cochrane), the Companion Hotel (Hearst), Comfort Inn, (Kapusking), Cedar Meadows Resort (Timmins) and the Elk Lake Eco Lodge. I highly recommend these trail accessible accommodations, which really enhanced our touring experience (*For more on these lodgings, see Our Tour Itinerary.*)

As usual, we took the long or indirect way on most days, allowing us to cover greater distances. For instance, the direct trail distance between Hearst and Kapuskasing on TOP (Trans Ontario Provincial) Trail A is about 120 kilometres. We made it a 376-click journey by riding Hearst's remarkable network of local trails in the morning, then

CRAIG'S TOUR

more of the same around Kap later in the day. By choosing various less traveled routes on this tour, we not only added about 600 kilometres to our final tally, but we also explored great local trails that many touring riders never see. One major benefit is that most of these routes are in excellent shape, even when the nearby TOP trails may show some traffic wear. Another advantage is not having to ride all the same trails on the return ride (*For trail details, see Our Tour Itinerary.*)

My only disappointment on this tour was finding the Butler Lake Truck Stop, previously located 38 kilometres north of Kirkland Lake on TOP A, closed and for sale due to a fire. Not only did this eliminate a convenient gas stop, it also left my sweet tooth craving their delicious Chelsea buns unfulfilled. But the good news is that these bakers-extraordinaire have opened a new place called the Kenogami Kitchen and Gas Bar accessible from the A trail at Kenogami Lake, so I'll get my fix next time!

Abitibi Canyon

On Day Two and Three, we stayed overnight at the North Adventure Inn, Cochrane. As well as being an outstanding overnight stopover, the North Adventure is also a good staging hotel

TOP F Open for 2011

Good news for riders who wish to complete the Big Loop Tour that includes the Northern Corridor plus circling south through Hornepayne, Chapleau, Foleyet and Timmins – the TOP F trail between Missanabie and Chapleau is open this winter!



Stake line goes under the highway bridge to cross the Mattagami River at Smooth Rock Falls.

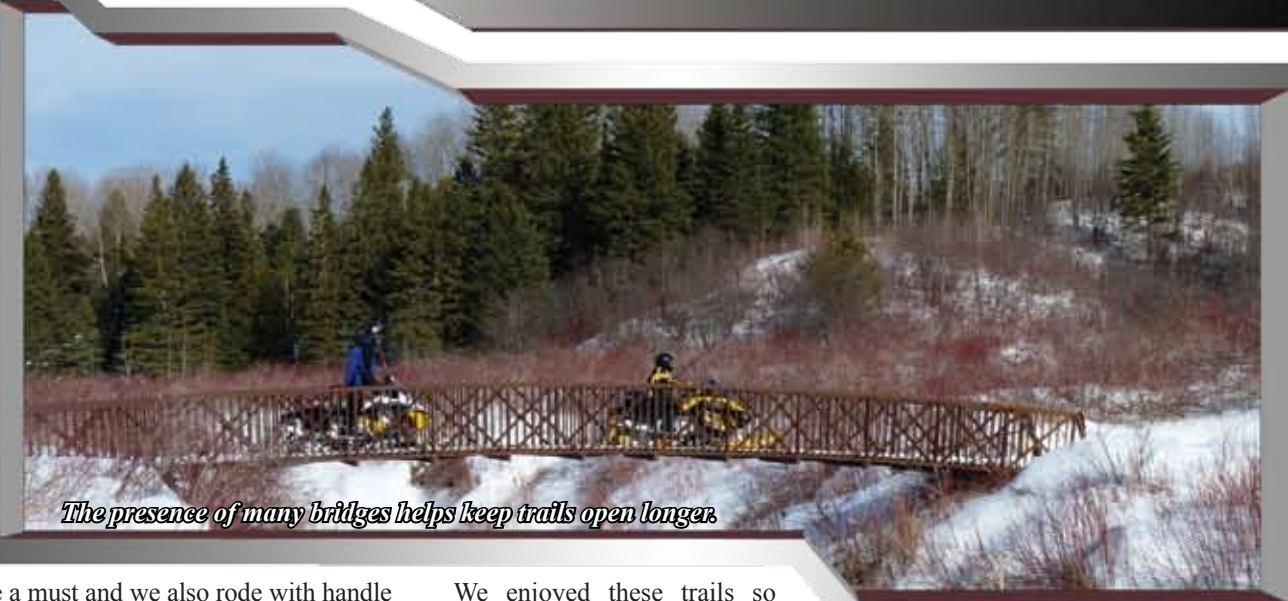
for late spring riding, for your trip to Moosonee (extremetoursofcochrane.net), or for exploring the Abitibi Canyon. TOP A103 north from Cochrane is mostly logging roads for the 145 kilometres to the Extreme Tours Base Camp at Fraserdale. It's an easy 2.5 to 3 hour ride, where you'll want to fuel up and grab a bite before hitting Abitibi Canyon. There, only three kilometres from the base camp, 11 kilometres of ravines and canyons, challenging hills, steep climbs and deep powder are as close to mountain riding as can be found in Ontario. You may want to leave Cochrane early to allow a couple of hours of playtime in the canyon.

Afterwards, we followed A103 south along a "piston alley" hydro line for 80 clicks to Smooth Rock Falls before taking a roundabout route back to Cochrane. TOP A103 from start to finish is an incredible length of trail: over 200 kilometres with only a handful of Stop signs — perhaps the

longest virtually uninterrupted stretch of trail you'll ever ride!

Prepare for Cold

One consideration for touring these northern trails is the distinct possibility of confronting colder temperatures than you may be used to. Prior to our tour, the mercury predictions were for a comfortable -5° Celsius daytime high, with -12° overnight lows. But on at least two days, the thermometer actually read -24° Celsius in the morning, with wind chills down to -35 — and this before factoring in any extra chill from our moving sleds, ouch! Remember, many of these trails are wide open, with few corners and twisties to warm you up. So be sure to take more layers than usual, and have space to store them, because like us, you may want to strip off some when the temperature climbs to -5 in the afternoon. Good hand & thumb warmers



The presence of many bridges helps keep trails open longer.

are a must and we also rode with handle bar muffs. Marsha also really appreciated her Ski-Doo's heated seat!

Remote Trails

From Timmins, we chose to ride TOP C south. L143 is another good alternative that's about 50 clicks shorter, but we do love the whoop-dee-doo's and sweeping hills of that TOP C power line! Unlike TOP A from Temiskaming Shores to Hearst, which basically parallels Highway 11 and accesses its many communities and services, TOP C and TOP C106A are remote wilderness trails, albeit as well groomed as any others. With only Mattagami and Matachewan directly en route, there are about 100 kilometres between each fuel stop — very makeable distances for most sleds. But be aware that cell service may not be available and carry a good towrope, just in case.

We enjoyed these trails so much that on our last day, we rode 280 kilometres between Elk Lake and Temiskaming Shores (87 km direct by TOP A) by snowmobiling west to Gowganda on TOP A107C before looping north back through Matachewan and then riding local trails as much as possible to return to the Quality Inn.

Simply The Best

Throughout this tour, we heard locals complain about how little snow they had. Certainly, all of Eastern Canada suffered less coverage for the winter of 2010 than normal. But it's all relative, isn't it? Yes, Northeastern Ontario may have had less depth than usual, but that's still more than many other places get at any time. Beside, more or less didn't seem to matter to the snowmobile clubs of Districts 14 and 15; they soldiered on, doing their customary job of making great trails for visiting

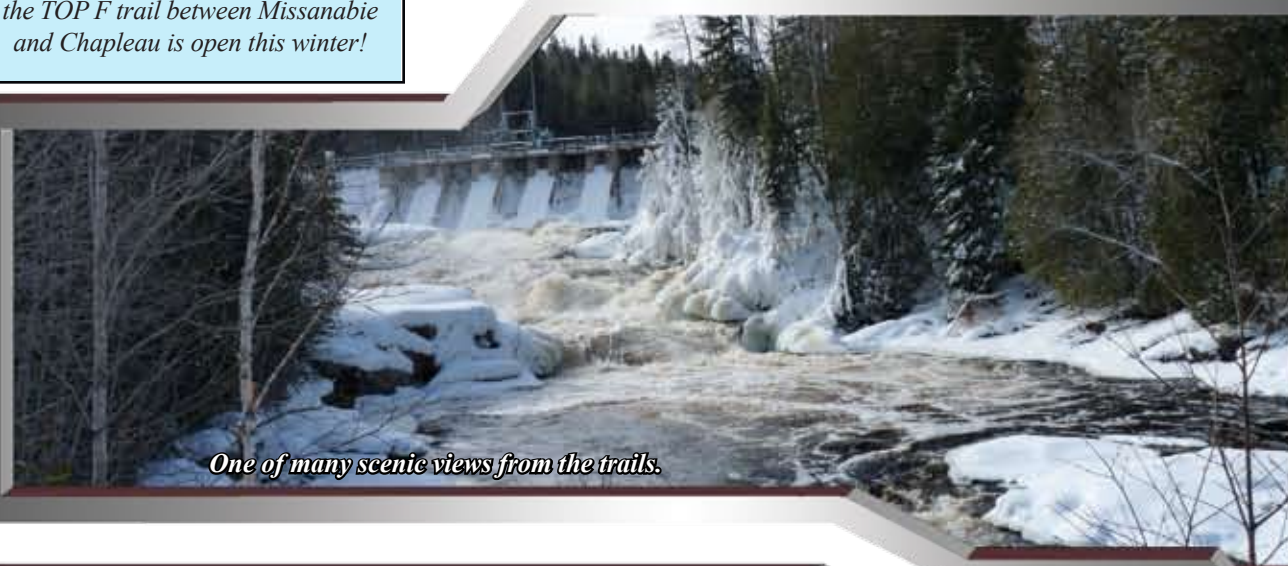
snowmobilers to ride. Some centimetres of fresh snow over several nights during our tour put the icing on the cake, which is another thing you can typically count on in Northeastern Ontario: unpredicted nocturnal dustings to make your next day's ride even more exceptional.

But don't just take my word for it. During this tour, we chanced to encounter Robert & Elaine, Quebec acquaintances who avidly tour La Belle Province each winter. This was their first visit to Ontario. Unsolicited, they gave Northeastern Ontario snowmobiling an enthusiastic two-thumbs-up while stating that: "This amazing trail network is better than anything we usually find at home!" Robert and Elaine will be spreading the word in Quebec about their new discovery and are already planning a trip to Northeastern Ontario next winter...and so should you!

Special thanks to Claude Aumont and Jamie Dallaire for assistance with this tour. Craig's tours are made possible by BRP (Ski-Doo), Dunford's of Havelock, FXR Racing, Murphy Insurance, Shell Advance Snow Ultra Oil, Triton Trailers, and Woody's.

Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling — Your Ultimate Ride Guide". His syndicated column "The Intrepid Snowmobiler" appears in newspapers throughout North America. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears regularly on Snowmobile Television. For more info, click

www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com



One of many scenic views from the trails.



Lookout on TOP C just north of Gogama.

PLAN YOUR TOUR

Who To Contact

- Ontario's Wilderness Region - www.OntariosWildernessRegion.com or 1-800-461-3766
- Ontario Tourism - www.gorideontario.com or 1-800-ONTARIO (1-800-668-2746)
- OFSC (for maps, permits and trail info) – www.ofsc.on.ca

Maps Needed

- OFSC District 14 Trail Guide
- OFSC District 15 Trail Guide
- Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs Provincial Trail Guide

Our Tour Itinerary

Notes

1. Toll free phone numbers are included only when they connect directly to the hotel (as opposed to an off site reservation system).
2. TOP = Trans Ontario Provincial; L = Club Trail

Tour Info

2,188 kilometres. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo GSX SE 1200 4TEC: 6.73 km/l. Average Fuel Economy for 2010 Ski-Doo 600 ETEC's (2010 models on this tour included 2 Renegades; 1 MXZ, 1 MXZ RS, 1 GSX LE): 7.52 km/l. Average oil consumption for ETEC sleds: 5.25 litres (416 km/l). Total cost per person per day: \$165 (includes lodgings, meals, sled & truck fuel, sled oil, pro-rated permits).

DAY ONE

Trailer to Temiskaming Shores (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: 6 - 7 hours.)

Where To Stay: Quality Inn 705-647-7357 or www.qualityinnnewliskeard.com. The region's most popular staging hotel is located on Highway 11 with direct trail access via A107Q. This full service hotel has massive parking for trucks and trailers, plus all the amenities for snowmobilers: on site restaurant/bar, indoor pool, sauna and (great) hot tub, games room, sled parking in front of rooms, and fuel/convenience store next door. The best place to start your tour!

DAY TWO

Ride from Temiskaming Shores to Cochrane (about 7 - 8 hrs.) Ride 314 km via TOP A107Q/TOP A north (turn right on Wabi River)/TOP A108 north/TOP A north. Fuel: Matheson (note: Butler Lake was

closed, so if you need gas before the 191 km to Matheson, stop at Kirkland Lake), Cochrane. Lunch: Ramore.

Where To Stay: North Adventure Inn 705-272-6683 or www.northadventureinn.ca. Built specially for sledders, this unique hotel even offers "igloos" along with a choice of various room configurations. With ample parking, a heated sled garage, and a deep outdoor hot tub, the North Adventure Inn also provides excellent meals in its on site restaurant and has a lively pub. Direct trail access via TOP A106C (just south of intersection of TOP A106C and TOP A), the hotel is located on Highway 11 just west of town (on north side). Fuel up at new Canadian Tire located 2 km east of hotel just off TOP A. Note: new owners have taken over since this tour.

DAY THREE

Ride from Cochrane to Abitibi Canyon and back (about 6 hrs. return via A103 to Smooth Rock Falls—plus, add play time in canyon). We rode over 8 hrs. and 334 km via TOP A/TOP A103/TOP A east/TOP C south/TOP A106C north. Fuel & Lunch: Extreme Tours Base Camp. Other fuel: Smooth Rock Falls, Cochrane.

Where To Stay: North Adventure Inn 705-272-6683 or www.northadventureinn.ca.

DAY FOUR

Ride from Cochrane to Hearst (about 7 hrs) Ride 278 km via TOP A west. Fuel: Kapuskasing, Hearst. Lunch: Kapuskasing.

Where To Stay: Companion Hotel Motel 1-888-468-9888 or www.companion-hotel-motel.ca. Two hot tubs, sauna, heated sled garage and on site restaurant and bar make this hotel a must-stay. Good on trail signage leads to direct trail access from TOP A (cross railway tracks near town and take 1st local trail on left, which leads to fuel/convenience store and to the hotel at the end.)

DAY FIVE

Ride from Hearst to Kapuskasing (about 9 hrs.) Ride 376 km via TOP A west/ L163east/L165 east/L159 east/TOP A west (back to Hearst)/ L155 east/TOP A east/L123east/TOP A west/L127west/TOP A west. Fuel & lunch: Hearst. Other fuel: Moonbeam.

Where To Stay: Comfort Inn 705-335-8583 or www.choicehotels.ca. Located on north side of Highway 11 across from TOP A.

DAY SIX

Ride from Kapuskasing to Timmins (about 8 hrs.) Ride 331 km via TOP A east/L125east/TOP A east/TOP A103north/ L101east/TOP A105Q west/TOP A south/ L103west/TOP A106C south/TOP C south. Fuel: Smooth Rock Falls, Timmins. Fuel & Lunch: Cochrane.

Where To Stay: Cedar Meadows Resort & Spa 1-877-207-6123 or www.cedarmeadows.com. Quebec-style inn with well-appointed rooms, on site restaurant & bar, plus secure sled parking. Be sure to leave time to visit on site zoo! Ample space for trucks & trailers. Direct trail access off TOP C just north of intersection with TOP A111C. Fuel south on TOP C about 3 km.

DAY SEVEN

Ride from Timmins to Elk Lake (about 7.5 hrs.) Ride 275 km via TOP C south/TOP C106A east/TOP A south. Fuel & lunch: Mattagami. Other fuel: Matachewan, Elk Lake.

Where To Stay: Elk Lake Eco Centre 1-877-678-2248 or www.elklakeeco.com. Main lodge with restaurant, giant fireplace and top-notch outdoor hot tub. Six modern chalets close by with individual bedrooms, two bathrooms, plus living room and kitchen area. Sled parking in secluded lot beside chalets (turn left from main parking lot and take 1st right). Okay to drive sleds to main lodge door for registration, despite "no motorized vehicles" sign, but not to park there for long. Located on the south/west bank of the Montreal River just south of Elk Lake with direct trail access from TOP A. Fuel in town: follow TOP A stake line on river to north side of bridge underpass, then exit up the west bank.

DAY EIGHT

Ride from Elk Lake to Temiskaming Shores (about 7.5 hrs.) Ride 280 km via TOP A north/TOP A107C west/L136 north/ TOP C106A east/TOP A north/ L162 east/ L161 south/TOP A south/TOP A108Q east/ L190 south/L189 south to Wabi River/TOP A south (right on Wabi River)/TOP A107Q east (left off Wabi River).

Where To Stay: Quality Inn 705-647-7357 or www.qualityinnnewliskeard.com (see Day One).

DAY NINE

Trailer Home.