

DISCOVERING YOOPER PARADISE

DAY RIDING MICHIGAN'S UPPER PENINSULA

STORY & PHOTOS BY
CRAIG NICHOLSON,
THE INTREPID SNOWMOBILER

Most lists of North America's best trail riding destinations include Michigan's Upper Peninsula (the UP). To check it out, our Supertrax crew trailered there last winter. But figuring out where to go for our three days of riding wasn't that easy because the UP is made up of many popular snowmobiling areas. No wonder local residents, colloquially known as "Yoopers" are such happy sledders!

Deciding Where To Go

The UP stretches from Drummond Island in the east for 320 miles west to Ironwood at the Wisconsin boundary. Within this area, it's a jigsaw puzzle of 15 counties, each of which promotes its own sledding opportunities and has its own trail map. To my knowledge, there is no single trail map for the entire UP that includes all counties and gives an overview of where everything is, how the trails interconnect and approximate distances from place to place.

For first-timers like us who are unfamiliar with the UP and had a limited amount of time to ride there, this made selecting a destination and planning a tour a bit of a challenge. But we're experienced at figuring things out, so we put our finely honed snowmobilers' intuitions to work...

Lake Effect Snow & Higher Ground

The main reason that the UP is a favourite riding destination is reliable, long-lasting snow. As any map atlas shows, the UP is almost surrounded by Great Lakes – Superior, Michigan and Huron. With prevailing winter weather patterns moving primarily from west to east, the result is lots of lake effect snow for the UP, with the more westerly counties often getting the brunt of it. So given that our busy tour schedule allowed only one shot at this ride, it made sense for us to stage more to the west of the UP than the east.

But terrain also plays a major role in good trail riding. So we checked



out the geography and discovered that one of the primary features of the Western UP is the Superior Uplands. This topography results in steeper, more rugged terrain and culminates in the highest point in the state just east of L'Anse where the 1,979 ft. Mount Arvon is in the heart of the Huron Mountains. In our trail riding experience, higher is always better for snow, so score another reason to head more west in the UP.

Ishpeming Here We Come

For our midweek visit in early February, we wanted to do day rides staging from the same location, just as many weekend riders would do. This meant

finding a destination where we could ride three different loops with minimal trail repetition from day to day. Given that we were already driving a fair distance to get to the UP in the first place, we also wanted to limit our UP trailering time as much as possible. So after reviewing and comparing various county trail maps, we settled on staging from the central west UP town of Ishpeming, located in Marquette County in the heart of the Marquette Iron Range.

Based on trail locations and intersections on the Marquette County trail map, we narrowed our staging hotel choice to the Magnuson Country Inn & Suites. Although on-site truck & trailer parking was tight, this hotel is located near a gas station and restaurants. It also provides direct access to the two main east-west corridors, Trails 8 & 82 that run along part of the Iron Ore Heritage Trail, a rail-trail celebrating the region's mining history.

From the Magnuson, we rode a 135-mile northern loop to Big Bay for lunch, a 182-mile southern loop through Gwinn and Chatham in Alger County, and a 175-mile northwestern loop into Baraga County for lunch in L'Anse. One advantage of these loops is that each returns to Ishpeming on Trails 8 or 82, both of which provide easy, quick end of day riding for the weary homeward bound.

The UP Delivers Primo Riding

So is the UP really one of North America's best trail riding destinations? Yes is certainly the answer if the exceptional trail riding we experienced in Marquette County is any indication. Overall, the midweek trail traffic was light, unlike weekends, which we've heard can be very busy. The trails were a decent width and regularly groomed. They were also well signed, although the old style signage wasn't as modern as other best destinations. The terrain was varied, interesting to see and enjoyable to ride. If we'd had



the time, we could have done some good saddlebag overnighting through neighbouring Baraga and Houghton Counties into the Keweenaw Peninsula.

Along the way, we encountered many memorable sights. The aforementioned Mount Arvon on Trail 14 was one. The one pound sweet rolls at the Hilltop Restaurant in L'Anse were equally impressive to see and absolutely scrumptious to eat. Don't miss the amazing creations at the one of a kind Lakenenland Sculpture Park on Trail M417 just east of the town of Marquette. Admission is free and there's even a snowmobile trail running through it. Farther west, Trail M417 runs beside Lake Superior with some remarkable views of shoreline ice formations, plus there's a great lookout over Marquette itself. On various trails, we also spotted ice cliffs, towering trees in old growth forests, old mine sites and several other scenic lookouts. Our routes didn't include any ice crossings.

There's no doubt that the UP caters to snowmobilers. Plenty of services are trail accessible and welcoming. But of course, what really makes a top snowmobiling destination is abundant snow. That's what attracts riders early, keeps them coming all winter and makes them return at season's end when many other locations have already lost theirs. And with so many choices of places to ride, it's no wonder that many snowmobilers from Michigan, surrounding states and even Ontario list the Upper Peninsula as their winter home away from home.

Special thanks to local snowmobiling legend Don Britton for making our UP visit a Pure Michigan treat!

PLANNING WEBSITES

UPPER MICHIGAN // upsnowmobiling.com
EXPLORE THE NORTH // exploringthenorth.com/snowmo/trails.html
PURE MICHIGAN // uptravel.com/snowmobiling-53/
NORTHERN MICHIGAN SNOWMOBILE // michigansnowmobile.com
MICHIGAN SNOWMOBILE ASSOCIATION // msasnow.org
TRAVEL MARQUETTE // travelmarquettemichigan.com

MAPS NEEDED

MARQUETTE COUNTY

WHERE WE STAYED

MAGNUSON COUNTRY INN & SUITES // magnusonhotels.com/hotel/magnuson-hotel-country-inn

WHERE WE LUNCHEd

HUNGRY HOLLOW CAFÉ, BIG BAY // cramsgeneralstore.com/hungryhollow.html
HILLTOP RESTAURANT, L'ANSE // sweetroll.com
UP NORTH LODGE, GWINN // theupnorthlodge.com