

WEEKEND
SLEDDING DESTINATION

MAGICAL MUSKOKA

STORY & PHOTOS CRAIG
NICHOLSON, THE INTREPID
SNOWMOBILER

SUPER SLEDDING IN ONTARIO'S COTTAGE COUNTRY

The sight took my breath away. Ahead, the trail seemed to reach the far horizon. First down a huge hill, then up a steep incline, then rolling across several dips and rises to where it finally met the sky. I hit the throttle to surge my machine forward along that exhilarating white ribbon, feeling like the king of the snow. In my snowmobiling adventures, I've come across other primo trails like this in many faraway places, but this Muskoka trail was in my own backyard.

Thousands of vacationers flock to Muskoka every summer. Consequently, this region has become iconic as Ontario's ultimate cottage country playground. No wonder then, that this notoriety has also made Muskoka a magnet for winter lovers in search of memorable snowmobiling. So last season, our Supertrax crew set out to discover what makes Muskoka special among Ontario snowmobiling destinations.

Muskoka Snowmobiling Overview

Of course, no sledding destination can be credible without good snow and trails – and Muskoka can deliver both. Positioned just east of Georgian Bay, the region is in a lake effect snowbelt that dumps an average 336 centimetres every winter, and often much more. This regular snowfall enables Muskoka's 11 snowmobile clubs to deliver about 1,600 kilometres (almost 1,000 miles) of well-maintained snowmobile trails, including Trans Ontario Provincial (TOP) and local club trails. For day visitors, they also provide seven Park 'n' Ride locations, clearly marked on their printed trail guide.

RIGHT: Top Trail D crosses the Muskoka River on the seasonally installed Bracebridge floating bridge.

Our recent visit confirmed that their trail network is seamlessly connected and well signed, both on-trail and at intersections. What's somewhat surprising is that, despite Muskoka's approximately 1,600 lakes, most snowmobile trails are on land. But where traversing a lake is necessary as part of the trail, Muskoka clubs have done an excellent job of marking official ice crossings with stake lines to follow. Their land trails run through Muskoka's rugged

ABOVE: Favourite Muskoka trails on this ride included TOP Trails D, D101B and D102B, plus local trails 37, 45, 51, 76, 77 & 95.

terrain, rocky courtesy of the Canadian Shield, and from lower elevations near the shores of Georgian Bay to high ground in the east beside Algonquin Park. This varied topography makes for an interesting mix of trails, from some tight and twisties to many wide open logging roads,



Photos by Martin Lortz for Destination Ontario



Staging from Deerhurst Resort to Local Trail 78 in northeastern Muskoka.

and everything in between. Muskoka trails also connect to other cottage country destinations like Haliburton in the east, and to both the Almaguin Highlands and Parry Sound District to the north, so there's a lot of great riding to be had staging from Muskoka, including the famous RAP (Round Algonquin Park) Tour.

Our Staging Location

That's one reason we decided to base out of one Muskoka location and ride three day loops in various directions. Another reason is that one of Muskoka's special attributes is its robust tourism infrastructure – many of the same hospitality providers that service the summer crowd are also trail accessible to snowmobilers. These vary from lodgings suitable for overnighting on your saddlebag tour to full service accommodations for your stay 'n' play day rides. Among these establishments are several of Ontario's foremost resorts that cater to snowmobilers all winter,

comparable to anything on offer in Quebec.

We chose to stage out of Deerhurst Resort near Huntsville. This classy, 400-room resort is only a couple of hours drive north of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) on four lane highway all the way. Positioned on-trail near the intersection of Local Trail 88, 78 and TOP Trail D102B, Deerhurst Resort provides on-site restaurants and fuel, plenty of parking, a myriad of outdoor and indoor family activities including pool & hot tub, plus sled rentals and guided tours. There's also downhill skiing nearby.

Riding Choices

By my observation, Muskoka includes three distinct snowmobiling areas. The western area includes trails near Highway 400 that are somewhat separated by geography. They run south to north from Port Severn and Honey Harbour along Georgian Bay to the top of Lake Joseph. Two TOP Trails, C101D and C02D, run eastward to connect this area to trails surrounding the Highway 11 corridor.

Along Highway 11, the largest Muskoka towns of Gravenhurst, Bracebridge and Huntsville anchor another cluster of trails in the central area that also includes Port Sydney. They increase in number the farther north you go, all the way to Emsdale. These trails tend to see the most traffic, being closest to both the major towns and the most popular access highway to the region.

The third distinct area is in the northeast of Muskoka, where we did most of our riding. It includes Baysville, Dorset and Dwight, and extends north to Kearney (although not officially in the Muskoka Tourism Region, Kearney is as far north Muskoka snowmobile clubs groom). Benefitting from the highest elevation in Muskoka and many old resource roads, this area typically tends to get started earlier, have more snow, and go later than the others.

Bradford

EDGE

PERFORMANCE CENTRE
8880 HWY 11, BRADFORD, ON L7R 4T2

Visit the rising stars of POLARIS. Extra touch service and helpful sales from York Region's favourite POLARIS dealer.

MSD trained and race tested technicians. Driveway located on the North West corner of Hwy #11 and Bathurst St., between Newmarket and Bradford. POLARIS THE WAY OUT!!

905.775.1717 www.edgeperformance.ca

WHERE WE STAYED

Deerhurst Resort - deerhurstresort.com

GET MORE INFO

Ontario Tourism – ontariotravel.net/en/play/powersports-touring/snowmobiles

Muskoka Tourism - discovermuskoka.ca

Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC) - ofsc.on.ca

OFSC District 7 (Muskoka) - ofscdistrict7.com

To access available OFSC trails this winter, buy a 2021 Snowmobile Trail Permit online at www.ofsc.on.ca



Lake effect snow helps snowmobiling generate almost \$95M of economic activity annually for Muskoka (2019 OFSC Economic Impact Study).

We rode three day loops out of Deerpark, two of them in the northeast. One was an official snow tour called the Lake of Bays Watch, which as its name suggests, circles that large water body, taking in Dorset and Baysville, both of which have gas stations. Another day, we rode a loop north to Kearney, fuelling at Dwight, and the other, headed south to Bracebridge, where we also topped up out tanks.

Planning Considerations

As with any destination, there are many factors

to take into account while planning your visit. For Muskoka, one is that typically, some trails take longer to open early in the season because groomers require a lot of snow to get the rugged terrain ride-ready. So don't plan to go until trails show as Yellow or Green on the Interactive Trail Guide found on the website of the Ontario Federation of Snowmobile Clubs (OFSC).

Second, Muskoka weekends can be very busy, especially Family Day, Valentine's and March break, so either book well in advance, include some weekdays in your itinerary, or plan

to go other weekends. Fortunately, Muskoka clubs usually groom on weekend nights to keep trails as smooth as possible, so consider starting earlier than usual on Saturday and Sunday mornings for the best possible ride.

A third factor, as in many other places, is road running. As hard as Muskoka clubs work to deliver great trails, there are some locations where private land use permission isn't possible or has been revoked due to trespass by snowmobilers or ATV riders. Detours by land or ice trail may not be possible, so the only way to get to where the trail continues is by running



Sportsman's
LODGE
KUKAGAMI LAKE, ONTARIO

Toll Free: **1-877-708-8882**
or **705-853-4434**

240 Kukagami Lake Road, Wahnapiatae, ON POM 3C0
www.sportsmanslodge.net
info@sportsmanslodge.net

Located on TOP C105 & C206D Trails, Ontario's most visited Snowmobile & ATV destination.

We invite you to come and experience our rustic log resort with all the amenities. Great food, great lodging and fuel on-site. The Ultimate 4-Season Northern Ontario Resort where adventure is yours for the taking!





4-SEASON FUN FULL LINE BRP DEALERSHIP

299 Elm Street, Powassan, ON P0H 1Z0
705-724-2100 • www.gieslermarine.com



*THAT
ski-doo
FEELING*

**SERVING SNOWMOBILERS
FOR 41 YEARS!**

ski-doo 

a section of road. Generally during the heart of the winter, most of these are hard packed and snow covered at least on the shoulders. But in thaws, they can become bare, so pick your time to go and choose where to ride.

My fourth consideration is that given its many special attributes, Muskoka is an ideal location for couples and families looking for snowmobiling getaways that also include other social, cultural and winter activities. What's more, Muskoka has more places to rent a sled and gear, book a guided snowmobile ride, or for novices to try snowmobiling for the first time than anywhere else in Ontario. And if you need repairs or parts, Muskoka has dealers from all four manufacturers nearby, some of whom also rents sleds.

Put it all together, and there's no doubt that Muskoka delivers the full package for snowmobile enthusiasts. As experienced snowmobilers who've visited most bucket list destinations, we were impressed by Muskoka riding and agreed that its trails were right up there with the best anywhere. And more than any other destination, Muskoka also may be Ontario's best choice for casual riders, couples, families, newbies and other winter lovers to share a very special, easy-going and stress-free snowmobiling adventure. GSOM



The Dorset Lookout Tower off TOP Trail D101B offers a scenic view of Lake of Bays.