



MINNESOTA'S BANADAD TRAIL

Forty-one kilometers of Wilderness travel

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DRAGGING SOME serious ass after a full day of classic skiing 41km in pristine boreal wilderness, Waylon Munch, Lucas Kramer and I lazily double poled into a trailhead parking lot to find a smiling local sitting astride an idling snow machine with a Tidd Tech groomer strapped to the back.

His eyes twinkled as he asked us what kind of wine we would like. Surprised, as there was no building in sight and no bottle in his hands, we said, "Sure what kind do you have?" "Both kinds," he said, "red and white!" Then he pointed down a ski trail that leads to a bed and breakfast hidden in the woods, revealed only by the wood smoke trailing over a tall stand of white pines. It was then that we concluded we had completed our ski through the BWCA.

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA) is one of a very few opportunities to see what the natural environment in northern Minnesota would look like if left untouched by humankind.

While most people venture into the BWCA Wilderness's 1,090,000 acres during the short-but-sweet Minnesota summer, others love to hit it in all four seasons.

Winter, in fact, is perhaps one of the best times to experience the remoteness of the BWCA. While off-track backcountry ski touring or dog sledding into the BWCA and winter camping are very popular ways to access the wilderness in winter, there is another option for those who just don't want to have to lug all their camping stuff, commiserate with sled dogs or deal with digging snow pits and using pee holes.

That option is the Banadad Ski Trail, and it offers a unique way to glide across the BWCA's fairy tale-like winter landscape and overnight in the rustic comfort of a yurt on the trail or a cozy B&B at the end of it.

At times, the trail almost feels like a tunnel as it's cut straight through extremely thick tamarack stands and then, just as you start to feel a bit claustrophobic, you pop out near a pristine wilderness lake with wide views and sun on your face. While the Banadad Trail is relatively contoured and flat, there are some exciting hills that get you up to some high speeds; a feeling that is exacerbated by having a close-cut corridor and few ditch points if things get dicey.



Emerging from the shadows. Kick, glide, kick, glide until you reach the B&B.

The Banadad is a unique thing in that it's one of two United State Forest Service (USFS) approved groomed ski trails in the BWCA Wilderness, and at 41km in length, it's also the longest.

Twenty-seven of those kilometers are within the BWCA itself, with 17km outside that tie the system together. The Banadad trail is meticulously maintained by the volunteers of the Banadad Ski Trail Association, both in the summer and the winter. While mechanized grooming equipment is allowed to groom the single-track ski trail, volunteers use hand tools to cut and maintain the trail during the summer,

as the BWCA Wilderness designation prohibits using mechanized equipment.

A driving force behind the Banadad ski trail is Poplar Creek Guest House and the yurts associated with Poplar Creek called Boundary Country Trekking, run by Ted and Barbara Young. Both Ted and Barbara have been advocates for the creation of the Banadad Trail as well as stewards of it since its establishment in 1982.

The Youngs provide skiers accommodation either at their B&B, which has all the modern amenities anybody would need, or their cabins, which are located on ski trails near the B&B.

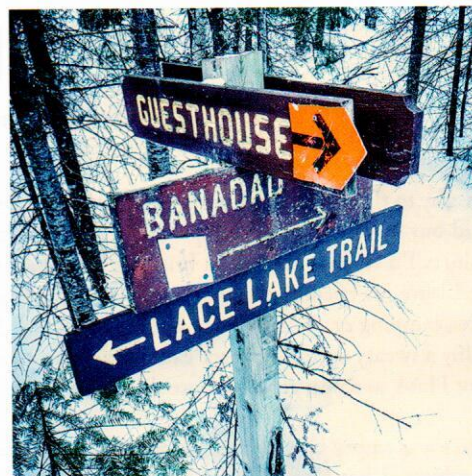


The Poplar Lake Resort will haul your stuff to its spacious wood-heated yurt in the middle of the trail system, so you can chill out mid ski for a night. It's a pretty remote spot, where the stars are insanely bright and the wolves howl from the depths of the wilderness while you snore away in a warm dry space, after cooking a big meal in its outfitted kitchen. But, for Waylon Munch, Lucas Kramer and myself, the yurt was just a lunch stop on our one-day journey.

The Banadad Ski Trail is part of a larger 200km Nordic ski system that rings the Gunflint Region and interlinks multiple resorts that groom and maintain their own ski trails. While the lion's share of the skiing on the Gunflint offers amazing and modern Nordic skiing, only the Banadad allows a skier to enjoy some well-groomed kicking in the BWCA.

Our little group was blessed with a perfect northern Minnesota day; blue sky, bright sun and cold temps meant easy hard wax conditions with rock solid kick and easy gliding. A slight bit of new snow covered the recently groomed trail, making our strides silent and silky.

Our all-day tour finished, we stumbled into the Poplar Creek B&B to meet with owner Barbara Young, who handed us each a glass of wine the size of a small fish bowl. Soon we were melting into the couches and telling stories of our fun adventure of flying through a Minnesota wilderness at the speed of ski and planning our return. *



[Top] Even the trees bow to the beauty of the BWCA.

[Above] To the guesthouse? Or to continue on? Let's choose onward.