

TRAVEL

WINTER
WONDERLAND
SPECIAL

Sled bells ring... are you listening?

Canada is the perfect winter getaway... where else will you be taken home by a dog convoy?



Canada, eh?
A warming
lodge in
which to relax



THE dogs are singing – well to be precise they are howling and yelping – the canine version of “let’s go, let’s go” attempting to leapfrog over each other, straining on their harnesses, excited puffs of all that breath a rising cloud of steam in the crisp sub-zero air.

BY ISABEL CONWAY

Welcome to Winterdance Dog sledding adventures, deep in the forests of Haliburton Ontario where we have come to try our hand at dogsledding, on the fringes of remote Algonquin Park, roamed by wolves and elk, among its abundant wildlife.

I visualise myself as a female Jack London, wrapped in furs racing into the

snowy wilderness behind my team of handsome huskies.

And here’s a confession. I’ve wanted to learn dog mushing (the official description of the adventurous sport of sledging) since enjoying movies like Disney’s Eight Below and Call of the Wild back in the mists of time.

So my own excitement nearly matches that of the skittish dogs unloaded from

TURN TO NEXT PAGE

INSIDE: HIT THE HEIGHTS IN ASPEN ● GSTAAD FOR THE CELEBS



In a hurry: The dogs will get you to where you want

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

their individual kennels off a transporter, all different in colour, markings and temperament. Some of these purebred Siberian Huskies have starred on Canadian Geographic TV and are veterans of the 1000 mile Yukon Quest.

Their owner Hank de Bruin, a renowned musher, once returned home after competing in the world's toughest and longest dogsled race minus all his toenails. Five handsome dogs Miss Jane described as 'an awful flirt' and Mia whom I help harness to the front, Governor an experienced steady force in the middle and a pair of strong young wheel dogs Neptune and Demon are deemed the perfect dog team for nervous starter drivers.

'Get to know your dogs and build their trust' our teacher Ashleigh Frederick (26) stresses 'above all never let go of the sled rail because the dogs will keep running; sled dogs are known to travel up to 100km without a lengthy rest stop.'

Excitement turns to trepidation during our basic driving lesson. Looking around I am not the only nervous face among our group of trainee mushers about to be dragged off into the wilds by a team of super-fast canines.

'Remember to have your foot well depressed on the brake going downhill and you must jump off and push to help the dogs going uphill, once they know you're on their side they will be more patient and co-operative and importantly make sure also to keep the red gang line (connected to the brake) straight. Please don't let them chew on the blue tug line.'

SHOWN how to balance our feet on top of the narrow runners, when not braking, we are led outside to meet and make friends with our teams, harness them up and 'allow them to take you on the wild side.'

Hep, hep, hep and away... within about six strides the dog teams are running at speeds that soon reach 30 to 40km per hour while a bitter wind lashes our faces.

My much younger and fitter mushing partner agrees to drive the sled for the first bitterly cold 10km while I settle myself on the stretcher (called a basket) under a coarse rug and hold on for dear life to its sides while we race towards a huge frozen lake hibernating beneath a thick blanket of blindingly white snow.

Reaching the halfway mark we change driver and rest the dogs briefly. By now, humans are craving something a bit stronger than the lukewarm hot chocolate poured from the flasks by the guides.

The huskies amuse themselves chewing on sticks and burying their muzzles in the snow, yipping and howling when the front guide-musher doles out reward dog treats.

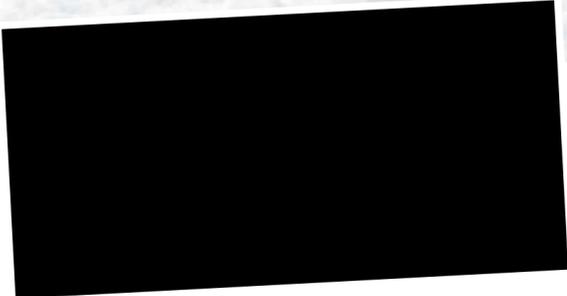
My co-driver Chris - beyond speech, except to wail 'this is the worst day of my life' through chattering teeth as we tore along the sub-zero snowy forested trails had looked forward to warming his freezing hands under the blanket in the stretcher, taking photos of our dog team on the homeward journey.

Instead he had to do most of the uphill pushing and free the sled after it jammed against a tree while the dogs pulled furiously to be off again.

But worse was to come when I accidentally committed the ultimate sin. I lost control letting go of the sled after veering off a steep path almost losing dogs, sled and my passenger to the Yukon!

Back at our comfortable lodgings Deerhurst Resort, sipping pre-

Show aggression to this boy and he'll be aggressive right back



TRAVEL FACTS

ACCOMMODATION

Isabel was a guest of Ontario Tourism (www.ontariotravel.net) Deerhurst Resort (www.deerhurstresort.com) Winterdance Dogsled Tours (www.winterdance.com) Ottawa has been the centre of Canada's 150th anniversary year long celebrations See www.ottawaturism.ca and www.ottawa2017.

FLIGHTS

Aer Lingus, daily Dublin direct to Toronto (from €179 each way) aerlingus.com or Canada Rouge (www.aircanada.com) from €439.74 return with frequent domestic one-hour flights Toronto-Ottawa. You'll need Electronic Travel Authorisation (eTA) €4.80, approval in minutes. www.visacanada.gov.com.

dinner drinks before a crackling log fire we reminisced about this exhausting, tricky and exhilarating introduction to mushing, voting it a proper thrill.

SNOWMOBILING is also as quintessentially Canadian as dog sledding, ice skating, snow shoeing and ice hockey come winter when people in the world's second largest country that has been celebrating its 150th anniversary of confederation throughout this year warmly embrace their Great Outdoors.

'Show aggression to this boy and he will act aggressively back' warns instructor Bob Island who sounds like he is referring to dog sledding rather than snowmobiling, another adrenaline-fuelled pursuit.

Past experience of riding a moped does not exactly prepare one for handling the Yamaha 'beast', a state-of-the-art snowmobile with a top speed of 150kph that looks oh so 007ish skimming across the

snowy landscape. There are thousands of kilometres of specially marked snowmobile highways with convenient maps showing fuel station stops and other handy amenities.

Canadians love their snowmobiles, touring endlessly on them during the long winters into remote terrain inaccessible to other forms of transport.

Here among the pristine snowfields - it becomes a golf course again in spring - two-and-a-half hours north of Toronto in Eastern Ontario luxury beautifully situated Deerhurst Resort on Muskoka's Peninsula Lake has an extensive menu of wintery experiences on offer for its guests.

After a lot of jerky stop-starts we progressed to an obstacle course trying to get the hang of smooth steering, acceleration and braking action.

The skis beneath us attacked rock hard icy hillocks and we were told to shift our weight to keep it balanced. Building up a bit of confidence some of us were ready to

zoom off to explore the rugged beauty of terrain beyond our snowmobile 'kinder garden'.

Ice skating and snow shoeing are on the same side by comparison with dog sledding and snowmobiling.

But the setting for these more leisurely pastimes Arrowhead Park some distance north is magical.

Snow shoeing which basically involves a shuffle movement on deserted trails, silence only broken by the dripping icicles on the pine-trees, searching for a hidden waterfall, is an excellent appetite and thirst enhancer and a local Muskoka beer afterwards tastes heavenly.

IN THESE parts they tell you a hearty breakfast is essential to combat the sub-zero Canadian outdoors. With a day's dog mushing ahead one of Deerhurst's more unusual breakfast offerings beckons. Confit of duck leg, Yukon potato mash mixed with various root vegetables topped with two soft poached eggs, hollandaise sauce and a mountain of toast keeps the arctic chill at bay for a while.

A companion is making short work of five buttermilk country pancakes lurking under a mountain of chocolate chips, banana and blueberries with a jug of maple syrup on the side to up the sweet sensation.

Maple syrup is also a Canadian obsession, keenly contested in several provinces who vie with one another to produce the finest quality syrup.

One of the best such producers is at Fulton's 'Sugar Bush' in sleepy Pakenham, less than an hour's

drive from Ottawa. Here the Fulton family have been tapping the sap from their 3,500 maple trees that grow among 1,000 acres of forest reaching back five generations.

'We discovered this liquid gold - maple syrup from the native peoples - and it changed the lives of my ancestors and other pioneers who were able to turn it into a very valuable crop they could trade and sell for food and tools' said matriarch Shirley Fulton.

As well as producing high-grade maple syrup Fultons have come up with new uses for it such as maple tea, sugar, candles, candies and bath and bodyline products on sale in their Maple shop.

By now I almost feel as if I qualify for honorary Canadian citizenship. My last taste of the Maple Leaf is at Ottawa's Ice Hockey stadium watching the city's beloved Senators give the Big Apple a hiding.

I have not the faintest idea about the game's rules or what's going on. But we heartily cheer the home side's sweet victory over the New York Islanders.

Canadians are famous for being polite and low key. And indeed they are. It was fascinating to be among such civilised crowds devoid of cat-calls, taunts or any rowdiness.

Their win was celebrated in the most decorous fashion. Throughout the action people filed up and down the rows with their plastic glasses of beer, never spilling a drop, smiling and excusing themselves politely.

'It's like The vicarage tea party of sport' I say, turning to my neighbour and automatically he smiles back rather sweetly.

Holiday snaps BY JIM MURTY

The Ski Club of America... on a Barbados beach

MY Maldives tan is wearing off (though that cuts little ice with the indomitable Mrs M) and I'm already planning next year's trips. In all manner of ways this has been the year of The Donald and I've been fortunate enough to get out to the US to gauge the temperature.

It was frosty earlier this month in the Deep South, in Texas, and for the opening of the Two Museums, the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum and the Museum of Mississippi History in Jackson.

And not just because the President, who let's not forget failed to denounce the white supremacists immediately in the wake of the Virginia riots, was in town. The Mississippians didn't forget. It was frosty all right, it was actually snowing, for the first time in Mississippi in four years.

I'd got wind of the statues controversy earlier in the year when I met the Ski Club of America, of all people, at the The Club, Barbados. Most of them were from Virginia too.

And being an American History nut, I was keen to visit the first battlefield of the American Civil War, Manassas when I attended the American Travel Fair, IPW, in Washington DC and took a day out in Virginia. I also had my picture taken next to a couple of modern-day 'Confederate soldiers' and 'General Stonewall Jackson.'

All good prep for meeting the Governor of Virginia, Terry McAuliffe, who visited these shores, on a

whistlestop trade tour of Europe. It was particularly poignant to watch the Las Vegas atrocity on TV at home, just weeks after visiting and joining the party set (and Elvis). It was even more chilling as I had visited Machine Gun Vegas and held and fired a Glock and an MP43.

The US holds a special place in the hearts of people on this island, and it is reciprocal. And that fact is not lost on our national airline carrier which opened up a direct route to Miami this year... and Mail Weekend Travel visited that city too, not long before Hurricane Irma.

Aer Lingus is, of course, following up its Miami route with new destinations in Philadelphia and Seattle and there will a queue of people to fill those aeroplanes. Visit www.aerlingus.com for offers.

We all know the important Donald lives in Disney (www.disneyworld.com/www.disneyland.com).

Your diaist went looking for him in Florida and found him, kitted out in a poncho and sombrero at the Mariachi stand. God bless America!

IF you've been really, really good Santa may have a holiday gift in your stocking. Royal Caribbean has this festive offer. Book before March 5 and you'll get this deal on selected 2018 sailings for Buy One Get One Half Price cruise fares, plus 25% off third and fourth guests (all

inclusive). The first two guests receive the All Inclusive Deluxe Beverage package on eligible sailings. See www.royalcaribbean.ie. The promotion is also available on selected sailings for Symphony of the Seas, the world's largest cruise ship, to be launched in April.

NEVER overextend yourself in a foreign language. Showing off my grasp of Italian to my new fiancée on a day trip from Malta to Sicily I asked for lunch in Italian... a plate of cheese arrived. Topflight (www.topflight.ie) (01) 240 1700, the Italian specialists, has a January sale on. A Mount Etna, Syracuse & Catania Escorted tour on June 9, leaving Dublin and staying at the 3* Hotel Tysandros was €829 and is now €749pps. Watch out too for ski offers.

THAT Spain topped a 123.ie poll as our favourite foreign destination with two out of three of us choosing it is no surprise. That Galway is our favourite staycation may be... not for your diaist though for whom summers were Salthill. If you take two breaks a year and the

poll suggests we do, try Dublin-Costa Dorada at TUI Family Life Avenida Suites, 4*, 7 nights, dep. May 25. Half Board from €2429 (2+2) (Free child places available). Or the G Hotel, Galway's (www.thehotel.ie) short breaks, stay longer for less. Two nights save 10%, three nights save 15%.