

PROVING GROUND

ONTARIO'S NORTHERN CORRIDOR
MAKES BETTER RIDERS



Story and Photos by:
Craig Nicholson



As the National Tour Editor for Snow Goer Canada, I log plenty of kilometres each winter riding for the articles I later write. Often, my wife, Marsha, accompanies me with up to four other guys. Last winter, after a short tour of Ontario's Northern Corridor (green area on sketch map), we got into a discussion about who my audience is and what kind of tours we do. Marsha noted that many snowmobilers may only do one tour a winter and may not ride the distances we do. She also wondered how many women actually go on tour? That begged the question: Is what I'm writing about relevant to most readers?

My first goal is to write a tour article that can be a template for your own ride. That's why each story includes the most detailed itinerary available in any snowmobiling magazine (my itineraries are also available at [snowgoercanada.com/Plan Your Tours](http://snowgoercanada.com/Plan%20Your%20Tours)). So if you want to replicate our Northern Corridor tour, just turn to the end of this article. You can cut it out of the magazine or download it from the website and do the same tour we did.

My second goal is to provide you with enough handy information, first hand observations and contacts so you can customize a tour suitable for your own group. Although we may ride more (or fewer) kilometres on any one tour than you, you can easily adapt our tour to your own specifications, time frame, group composition, abilities and whatever weather conditions you may encounter. For example, the Northern Corridor offers many options for alternative and more direct routes, or fewer and shorter days.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Later in our discussion, I observed to Marsha that most women riders do not ride as hard or as long a she does. Usually, there are "guys" rides, "couples" rides and sometimes, "girls" rides. In couples, the

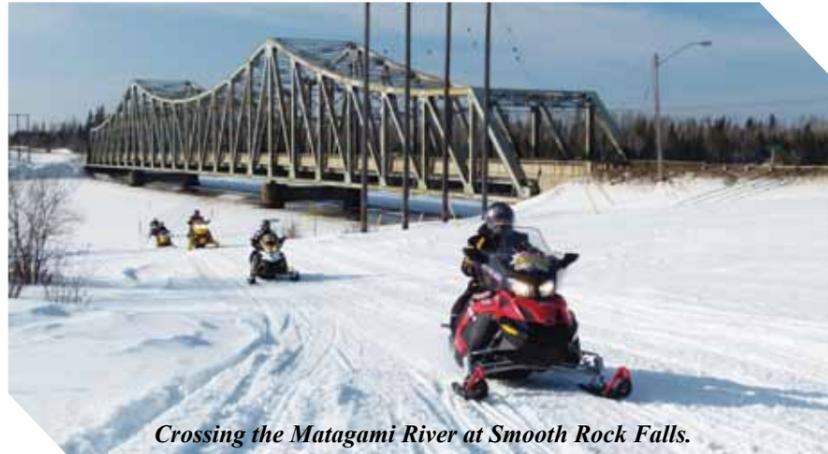
guys are sometimes frustrated at not being able to ride like they do on their own; the gals often feel pushed to ride outside their comfort zone to keep up or that they are holding everyone up. So I asked Marsha what made her situation different.

She answered: equipment, experience and confidence. Marsha rides her own ski-doo snowmobile that's as new and as technically advanced as mine. She rides with Woody's studs and Snow Tracker carbides. She rides warm: her snowmobile suit is a top quality FXR, same as mine, and underneath she has merino wool layers by Woolpower and a TekVest. Marsha has snowmobiled with me for over 20 years and knows how to ride. She has the confidence to ride with care and control, and even more important, to know when to say, "No, I'm not comfortable doing that."

FINDING THE PLACE

As indicated earlier, we had just completed a four-day, 1,377-kilometre tour of Ontario's Northern Corridor along with Dan Carty, Craig Irwin, Brent Murphy and Don Webb. That's an average of 344 clicks a day, a distance that would intimidate many women (and some guys too). But here's the secret: the trails throughout the Northern Corridor are generally the widest, flattest, straightest and most well groomed to be found anywhere in Ontario. These primarily land-based trails have comparatively little traffic and fewer roads crossings than other areas. So they're an ideal proving ground for riders to hone their riding skills and get more comfortable with their sleds, with sledding longer days, and with doing more kilometres. Even if your daily comfort zone is normally 200 kilometres or less, I bet you will up that riding distance by at least 25% in the Northern Corridor.

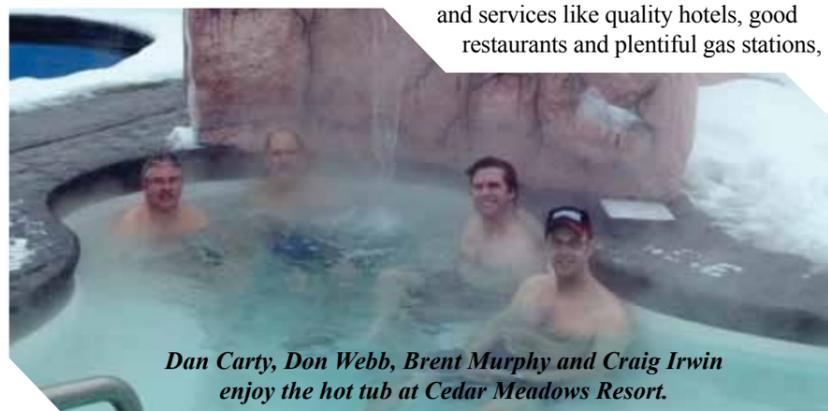
As Marsha says, the Northern Corridor offers easy kilometres – their trails are confidence inspiring, forgiving and don't



Crossing the Matagami River at Smooth Rock Falls.

require as much steering work or body English as many others do. What Marsha loves about the Northern Corridor is being able to relax and enjoy the ride, plus the personal satisfaction of being able to do more kilometres than usual. Best of all, she's not sore or beat up or worn out at the end of the day; that means she's looking forward to snowmobiling again the next day and the day after that.

Many provinces have their equivalent of Ontario's Northern Corridor where you can hone your riding skills: New Brunswick's northern interior, Quebec's Abitibi-Témiscamingue region and Alberta's Iron Horse Trail to name a few. But all too often, the guys go and the gals stay home. This is a big mistake, because riding places like the Northern Corridor can make a better rider out of anyone — a perfect outcome for the many guys who wish their spouses or other buddies would be inspired join them on tour.



Dan Carty, Don Webb, Brent Murphy and Craig Irwin enjoy the hot tub at Cedar Meadows Resort.

OVERCOMING FEARS

The key is to take it easy at first and not push the envelope too hard. So for instance, expecting a less experienced snowmobiler to ride along and keep up with a more experienced group is asking for trouble. The first time Marsha joined me in the Northern Corridor, we cruised along easily most of the time. She found her own comfort level on the straightaways and developed the feel of riding more assertively. Soon she was less tentative, more assured and her technique had improved. Now she rides with the guys and corners like a pro, no problem.

One of Marsha's initial hesitations about going on tour was fear of the unknown. Would she be able to keep up? Would she like it or have to suffer it out? Would she have to stay in some rustic hunt camp with no running water? What if something went wrong so far from home? These are more good reasons why the Northern Corridor is a great proving ground. It offers many big city amenities and services like quality hotels, good restaurants and plentiful gas stations,

all in numerous towns connected by snowmobile trails. There's no roughing it in the Northern Corridor!

OTHER KEY BENEFITS

Other benefits of the Northern Corridor typically include a long, snowy season that starts before anywhere else in Ontario and can extend into April. This means that trail grooming starts early and lays down a base that lasts. With frequent and plentiful snow, the result is very smooth trails. On our tour, I can only recall two instances of chatter where shorts section of trail were less than table top, but certainly nowhere near mogulled out, even in the corners.

This consistent surface quality is a major advantage for less experienced riders who love every minute of the smooth riding. First, as Marsha says, she doesn't wear herself out fighting any bumps, and second, she can concentrate on improving her ride. How many places can you snowmobile for over 1,300 consecutive kilometres without encountering rough trails?

Another confidence-builder is being able to see a long ways ahead on most Northern Corridor trails. Excellent sightlines allow plenty of time to see and prepare to meet oncoming sleds or upcoming corners. Again, this is a significant stress reducer for any rider, and it's enhanced in a major way by good signage and superb trail brushing. Here, you can actually keep far right without being zapped in the face by branches, and on corners, the visibility throughout the turn is usually clear and tangle-free. The Northern Corridor folks even have their own trail mower, a neat rig towed behind a sled to cut down any tag alders that may be sticking up through the trail base.

Riders also appreciate that the Northern Corridor produces a good trail map and Marsha keeps one in her pocket for peace of mind. She likes to go over each day's proposed route in the morning to get a mind picture of where we are headed, will stop for fuel, for lunch, and to stay over night. On the trail, she is able to visualize each progression in her head map thanks to excellent signage that indicates both trail numbers and upcoming towns. This allows her to pace herself better, take full advantage



These trails are a great training ground!

FIRST TIMER REACTION

Brent Murphy, a married father of two young boys, who owns and operates Murphy Insurance & Financial Services in Barrie, Ontario. Brent has been snowmobiling for about 20 years, mostly day rides on local trails in his region. Brent's my insurance broker and when I heard he had never done any saddlebag touring, I saw an interesting opportunity to get some first impressions and invited him on our Northern Corridor tour. Here's a summary of a post-tour interview he did with Snow Goer Canada (SGC):

SGC: Did you enjoy the tour and if so, what did you like best?

BM: I loved the tour. I truly enjoyed the riding companions and the width and quality of the trails. I've never snowmobiled on trails as consistently good as this. It gave me a whole new appreciation of what snowmobiling can offer.

SGC: Was the tour what you expected?

BM: It was more and much better than I expected. Going to a different riding destination really expanded my horizons as a rider and gave me new ways to use my riding skills.

SGC: How was the tour on you physically?



BM: We rode a lot farther each day than I normally do at home, so that took some getting used to, especially for multiple, consecutive days. Let's just say that I didn't suffer unduly, but was really glad for a hot tub at day's end. I went to bed each night with a smile on my face and slept like a baby.

SGC: How did you prepare for the tour?

BM: I read Craig's tour book (Canada's Best Snowmobiling), then took several days to prepare. I serviced my sled, bought the proper gear and packed as lightly as I could, but still carried too much stuff.

SGC: What sled did you ride on tour?

BM: I rode a 2010 ski-doo MX Z Renegade 600 E-TEC. It's a good, comfortable touring sled, with excellent fuel efficiency. With the kilometres we rode on this tour, the fuel and oil economy of this sled really shone!

SGC: What snowmobile gear did you wear and how did it work for you?

BM: I wore an FXR suit that performed great (also FXR gloves and mitts). In the milder weather, I removed the liner and when it got cold, I zipped it back in. Very functional suit and stylish too! I wore Ultimate boots...very light and warm/comfortable. Lastly, I splurged on a BV2S helmet by BRP. Best helmet I've ever owned. A must-have.

SGC: Would you go on another saddlebag tour?

BM: Absolutely. I've got the bug now. So many places to see by snowmobile and so many adventures to be had!

SGC: Any advice for other first-timers?

BM: My advice for first timers would be: always start each day with a full tank of gas. Don't pack too many clothes. Service your sled well before each tour, make sure you have the proper gear and do your first saddlebag tours with riders who are experienced with touring. I installed Woody's studs to make sure I had good traction regardless of the trail conditions.

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CRAIG'S ONTARIO TOUR

of anticipated rest breaks and know for certain what stage of the ride she's in and when the final destination will be reached. Unlike some riders who just ride until they're done, most of us like to have the reassurance of a good sense of ride context.

I've used our Northern Corridor ride to try to illustrate what makes a good destination to take riders to the next level of aptitude and skill. If you know someone who would benefit from such improvement, then I recommend

you find a proving ground as all encompassing as Ontario's Northern Corridor and go there soon!

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Craig Nicholson is the author of "Canada's Best Snowmobiling — Your Ultimate Ride Guide". His snowmobile writing also appears in many newspapers, magazines and websites. He also hosts "The Intrepid Snowmobiler on Radio" and appears on Snowmobile Television. For more info, visit www.intrepidsnowmobiler.com



PLAN YOUR TOUR

There's a mining boom on in parts of Northern Ontario. One result can be a shortage of available hotel rooms as many are rented to workers for weeks at a time. So snowmobilers should think about making advance reservations and checking out lodgings in the smaller towns or out of town to be sure of getting a place to stay.

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) or www.northernontario.travel/snowmobiling
- 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

1,500 kilometres in 4.3 days of riding

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

DAY ONE

Trailer to Timmins (drive time from Greater Toronto Area: approx. 8 hours)

Where To Stay: Cedar Meadows Resort & Spa 1-877-207-6123 or www.cedarmeadows.com. Quebec-style

inn with well-appointed rooms, new chalets, on site restaurant & bar, plus secure sled parking. Plus, fantastic new luxury spa facility with steam room, sauna and outdoor hot pool. Ample space for trucks & trailers. Be sure to leave time to visit their on site wildlife park! Direct trail access off TOP C just north of intersection with TOP A111C. Fuel south on TOP C about 3 km.

DAY TWO

Ride from Timmins to Kapuskasing. 395 km via TOP C south/L22/TOP A111C/TOP A/L103/TOP A106C south/TOP C north/TOP A west/L119 loop/TOP A/L127 loop/TOP A/L135 loop/TOP A.

Where To Stay: Apollo Motel (705) 335-6084. Located at the west end of town on TOP A, this roadside motel offers quality rooms, ample parking and a sled garage. Restaurants on either side of motel; fuel a minute down the trail in town. Ask for a ground floor room to park your sled in front of.

DAY THREE

Ride from Kapuskasing to Hearst. 295 km via TOP A/L155/TOP A (132 km to Hearst), then TOP A west/L163/L165/L159/TOP A west (163 km loop around Hearst).

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 past fuel/convenience stores and to the hotel at the end.)

DAY FOUR

Ride from Hearst to Cochrane. 297 km via TOP A/L123/TOP A

Where To Stay: Thriftlodge 705-272-4281. Good roadside motel with hot tub and sauna, sled parking in front of rooms, ample parking, on site restaurant/bar. Located on Highway 11 just south of town where TOP A crosses. Fuel across the road.

DAY FIVE

Ride Abitibi Canyon Loop from Cochrane and back. 390 km via TOP A, TOP A103/TOP A/TOP C/TOP A106C (330 km) + local loop: TOP A/TOP A105Q/L101/TOP A103/TOP A (60 km).

Where To Stay: Thriftlodge 705-272-4281.

DAY SIX

Ride 123 km via Top A106C and TOP C to Timmins and trailer home