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Go with the Snow

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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Full Text (1878 words)

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[Headnote]

The world's longest cross-country ski event is a glorious trek through the Ottawa Valley - or a two-day slog into an icy hell BY CRAIC SAUNDERS

Shortly after 6:30 on a frosty February morning outside Lachute, Que., I am learning an important lesson. Skiing 80 kilometres in a day means starting in the dark. As I approach the edge of a small ravine and lose sight of the track, I realize my equipment list should have included a headlamp.

So begins my adventure with the Canadian Ski Marathon (CSM), an annual two-day trek of up to 160 kilometres along the Ottawa Valley from Lichute to the Catineau community of Buckingham (alternating directions each year). The event attracts more than 2,200 skiers ranging in age from 15 to 85, most of them from Ontario and Quebec. It got its start in 1967, when national ski team member Don MacLeod celebrated Canada's centennial by leading a group of 400 skiers from Montréal to Ottawa. Some 40 years later, the marathon remains the world's longest cross-country ski event.

For nearly 800 of the participants, the course is also something of a rite of passage. Like me, they've entered the Coureur des Bois category, which means we'll try to complete the course's 10 sections under progressively more grueling conditions. I'm entered in the "bronze" class, and I must pass through five checkpoints both days. But to complete each day's final section, I must check in before 3 p.m. After that, my race is effectively over. "Silver" competitors face the same time restrictions. They have completed the course once before and are now attempting it with a backpack so that they can enter as "gold" next year. "Gold" competitors must meet the same deadline and carry the gear they'll need to sleep in the woods. The rest of us have the choice of coughing up the cash to settle into a cozy bed at the tony Château Montebello for the night or roughing it in a sweaty auditorium in a secondary school in Papineauville. Like many of my plebeian race companions, I opt for the latter.

Pointing my skis down the hill, I blindly begin my descent - and finish it two seconds later. The ravine, it turns out, has a

hair-raising depth of about a metre. From the bottom, I begin a quick uphill climb, jockeying for position and trying to find a suitable pace for the day while keeping someone with a good headlamp in front of me.

The terrain shifts from wooded hills to open golf courses and frozen lakes, the conditions from dark and cold to mild and snowy to clear and sunny. After the first two sections, my pace isn't bad, and I think I just might be able to make it to the final checkpoint by 3 p.m. But ahead is the infamous section 3. The course guide cautions: "Seemingly endless tips and downs, waxing problems and equipment damage have left every participant with a story to tell."

Glancing at the map, I'm expecting the trail from Lac Carling, followed by a steep 180-metre climb, to be the worst. In fact, herringboning up the road is surprisingly easy and provides a good view into a quarry. It's the other side that proves difficult.

At the top of the hill, a dozen skiers are gathered, quietly contemplating whether to tempt fate. Ahead is the descent into the Rivière Rouge valley. The next checkpoint is, at most, a couple of kilometres away, but it's also about 230 metres down. And getting there means skiing narrow, winding logging trails that have been scraped clean of snow by the thousand-or-so faster skiers who have already decided whether to swallow their pride or risk swallowing some of Quebec's finest ground cover.

I take the plunge. It's a rollicking ride, and it's not long before I'm hailing out into the thick snow at the side of the trail. This, it seems, is a better option than flying off the steep edge of a sharp, icy curve. The tranquility is frequently broken by the shouts - and bumps - of skiers with less alpine proficiency. Toward the bottom, I let a skier with a broken pole struggle by while I stop to do some math. Making it to the day's final checkpoint at section 5 would mean almost doubling my pace. Section 3 hasn't destroyed my gear, but it has dashed my hopes of earning the *Coureur des Bois* title. Now, with the pressure of completing the marathon off, I am free to just enjoy the scenery.

The course follows the Ottawa River valley and cuts through Quebec history. From Lachute, about 15 kilometres west of Montreal-Mirabel International Airport, skiers climb onto the rugged, hilly terrain of the Canadian Shield. One clearly senses why nobody tried settling here until 1805, despite easy access along the Ottawa River.

We cross hikes dammed by beavers, once so important to the country's economy that the government prohibited settlement in the area. The route takes us through dense hardwood forests that supported generations of French and Irish settlers.

My decision to take it easy comes at the right time. Section 4 undulates for 20 kilometres through maple forests, heading roughly west from the community of Avoca. A good stretch of the track traces the edge of Rivière Kinongé. It's spectacular and peaceful. There's a stillness in the forest around me. This is what makes cross-country skiing such an excellent sport - the Zenlike calm that envelops you through the mix of snowy silence, mind-numbing fatigue and, in my case, the ibuprofen I popped before starting the section.

At this point, I understand why so many people - more than 1,200 annually - enter merely as Tourers. They're not out to complete a gruelling adventure. They're here for a nice glide through the Quebec countryside. They choose the sections they want to ski and can, for instance, pick only this beautiful fourth section.

By the end of Section 4, I'm skiing across the former Petite-Nation seigneurie. This 635-square-kilometre tract of land was acquired by Louis-Joseph Papineau in 1817, two decades before he became one of Canada's best-known rebels. Following the uprising of the Patriotes in 1837-38 and his subsequent exile and return to politics, Papineau retired to Montebello and built a mansion. There, he settled down and devoted himself more fully to his family. I settle in too, packing it in for the day and loading my gear onto a shuttle bus destined for town and a slice of beer at Polyvalente Louis-Joseph Papineau.

Day two is icy cold and clear, offering an amazing view of the valley, purple with the sunrise. Soon I'm heading down a gentle slope through an evergreen forest, where my skis catch a rut and send me diving into a snowbank. This is the first of many excuses on section 6 to stop and take some photos. To my right is a frozen lake, with a high dill on the far side. The trees block the wind, and the sun twinkles on the crystals of snow.

Much of the morning is spent crossing fields sparsely dotted by farms and climbing over hummocky ridges. Coming out of the trees at one point, I enter a scrubby, wide open field. The rising sun creates a halo around the steeple of a church on the horizon. Were I still pressing on to finish the marathon, I likely would never have paused to take it all in. I complete only three sections this day, a reasonable distance of some 40 kilometres.

Setting a course in this semi-wild terrain is a lot of work, but the lack of development keeps most of the trail off the roads. The route changes every year, though, as land ownership and access trade hands and gentrification brings new cottages where only a year before people were skiing. Many people do allow the course to cut across their land, and at one point, I ski right between a cottage and a shed. The owners sit around a bonfire drinking beer and, frankly, looking as if they've got a great day ahead of them.

So do I. The trail rises up into more rugged country, hugging the edge of lakes and crossing eskers and frozen beaver ponds. This, to me, is quintessentially Canadian terrain.

When I finish, I've completed 110 kilometres. A shower, a good meal and a glass of Scotch later, I'm already beginning to think about next time.

[Sidebar]

Participants race through the Ottawa Valley during the first Canadian Ski Marathon in 1967 (RIGHT), more recently (PREVIOUS PAGE) and during the Keskinada Loppet in Gatineau Park (BELOW).

[Sidebar]

Land of the loppet

February brings some 2,000 alpine adventurers to western Quebec for the Canadian Ski Marathon, but even more flock to the region the following weekend for the Keskinada Loppet. A series of nine shorter races, ranging from a 53-kilometre classic race (a forward stride in which the skis must stay in parallel tracks) to a 10-kilometre freestyle family race (a side-to-side stride reminiscent of skating) to a 2-kilometre Mini Keski interspersed with entertainment and hot chocolate, the annual three-day event in Gatineau Park attracts about 3,000 people. So while the Canadian Ski Marathon is the world's longest cross-country ski race, the Keskinada Loppet bills itself as Canada's largest.

The Keskinada is the Canadian leg of the Worldloppet Ski Federation, a circuit of 14 races in 14 countries known for their ski trails, including Italy, Japan and Sweden. (Loppet is a Scandinavian word meaning "large gathering," and Keskinada comes from a phonetic combination of Quebec, Skiing and Canada.) To gain the title of Worldloppet Master, a skier must complete 10 Worldloppet races. Registration is open to all ages and skill levels, so beginners may find themselves gliding alongside top athletes.

Soon I'm heading down a gentle slope through an evergreen forest, where my skis catch a rut and send me into a snowbank.

[Sidebar]

The CSM spans up to 160 kilometres between Lachute and Buckingham, Que. (MAP), while the Keskinada Loppet offers nine shorter races, including a 29- and 53-kilometre classic (BELOW).

[Sidebar]

Monde Montebello

Nestled between Ottawa and Montréal in the historic Papineau region, Montebello, Que., offers nature lovers a rural setting with an abundance of outdoor activities. Visitors can stay in wilderness or luxury while enjoying sights in every season.

The Papineau family bought the seigneurie of La Petite-Nation in the early 1800s, and in 1850, Louis-Joseph constructed a manor he called Monte-Bello. Manoir-Papineau is now a National Historic Site commemorating the famed rebel. The grounds also house the renowned luxury hotel Fairmont Le Château Montebello (ABOVE) and its trails for snowshoeing, snowmobiling and sleigh rides. Adjacent to the Château is the Fairmont Kenauk, a 26,000-hectare private fish and game reserve, with more than 70 lakes, a trout hatchery, staff biologists and wilderness cabin accommodations.

Also within the grounds of the former seigneurie, visitors can drive along 10 kilometres of roads winding through the 600-hectare Parc Oméga to view free-roaming animals, including bison, wild boars, black bears and moose. Pedestrians can amble among red deer along special forest paths.

[Sidebar]

For more information, please visit www.canadiangeographic.ca/web/nd06

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