The Gatineau beyond the Park

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By Paul Benoit and Gary Levy

PEACE, tranquility and spectacular natural beauty: these were the lures that first drew skiers to the area now known as Gatineau Park.

The trails are still there but on sunny winter weekends they are often congested with hundreds of fresh-air enthusiasts, marathon racers and other assorted escapees. To accommodate the onrush, park officials have had to widen trails, acquire track-setting skidoos and institute other changes which detract from the original pleasures of skiing this area.

But there is a Gatineau beyond the Park, where the escapee from the escapees can travel in glorious solitude and break his own trail over the age-old lakes and mountains of the Canadian wilderness.

If he chooses his route carefully and travels quickly, he can also experience some of civilization's more pleasant amenities by finishing the day with a sauna, a shower, a drink and dinner at Mont Ste. Marie's chalet, "Le Tournesol".

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THE KEY TO such an idyllic sortie is the Piste Gatineau, a proposed hiking and ski trail that one day will extend from Hull to Maniwaki — although at present the only marked section is from Mont Cascade to Edelweiss.

Last year we turned our longing eyes northward and, armed with compass and topographical survey maps, began the search for a route from Edelweiss to Mont Ste. Marie.

The result was that during most of January and February we found ourselves, after five or six hours of peace, tranquility, and spectacular scenery, standing on a lake of indeterminate shape and very puzzled as to our whereabouts.

But bit by bit the route fell into shape. Each outing added another five or 10-kilometers to our master-plan and we began to establish a possible timetable for the 50 kilometer trip.

Many friends expressed interest in the outing, but for one reason or another only four skiers (Barbara and Paul Benoit, Bob LeRiche, and Gary Levy) and one dog (a Golden Retriever named Red) actually showed up on Saturday March 3, the day designated for the trip.

Photo by Barbara Benoit

The explorers of the Piste Gatineau
Bob LeRiche, standing, Paul Benoit, Gary Levy and "Red"

Journal map by Dow

THE ACCOMPANYING map shows our trail starting on the Edelweiss trail network at the end of Pine Road.

We began at 8 a.m. and after a brisk 35-minute climb to a lookout, we enjoyed the run down to Lac Lecomte. We then turned east and headed for Club Lake, one of a chain of small lakes which used to belong to a private fishing club.

There are still some old "no trespassing signs", but since the Quebec government cancelled the leases of such clubs, the area is no longer closed to the public.

From Club Lake we turned north along a portage trail marked with red dots to Fauquier Lake. This area had been a stumbling block for us and it had taken several exploratory ventures before we found a path connecting the lake with a trail used by trappers.

Unfortunately Red, who is an experienced tripper, chose this day to stick his paw into one of their beaver traps. After some excitement and considerable delay, we decided he was not seriously injured, and we continued to Mullins Stream, a narrow pass between two steep hills.

Once through the pass we followed an old logging road for a couple of kilometers until we reached a clearing with the remains of a modest homestead.

We proceeded along an unplowed road to an isolated cottage where we turned right and followed the road to a stream which led to Lac du Barrage. A well travelled snowmobile route to Lac Claire is located half a kilometer north of this lake and we followed it east for a short way before turning north once again. The trail hugs the western shore of Petit Lac Clair passing behind a cluster of summer cottages at the end of Marble Lake.

At this point we had to decide whether to follow the trail as it headed up a very steep incline or take a detour along the lakes. We chose the lakes and spent the next 90 minutes skiing along Marble Lake, Lac St. Germain and finally along the western shore of Petit Lac St. Germain until we reached the Low-Poltimore highway.

The distance from Edelweiss to the road is just under 30 kilometers but in the warm spring weather it took more than five hours to cover the distance.

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AFTER A SHORT REST we picked up the trail by walking about 100 meters east along the road. From there we began a long, gradual climb of three or four kilometers.

The midday sun was changing the snow conditions and our choice of wax became particularly important on this section of the trail.

Finally we came to a large rock face with trails on both sides of it. The one to the left offers better scenery as it skirts Duck Lake and then provides an exhilarating downhill run to Holme Lake which is surrounded by high cliffs dotted with clumps of majestic evergreens.

At the north end of the lake is a passage leading to the equally spectacular Usher Lake (called Deer Lake on some maps). North of Usher Lake is Petit Lac Usher where a stream flows down through densely wooded terrain to Riviere du Plomb.

We kept the stream to our right until the valley narrowed. Then we crossed it for a short exciting run down to Riviere du Plomb. A section of this river is a highway for snowmobiles but they rarely leave their well-travelled thoroughfare.

Crossing this section we followed the river for as long as possible. When it turned into a marshy maze, we climbed up the east bank for about a 100 meters until we reached a little-used but well-marked trail. It followed a ridge for about three kilometers before joining the network of cross-country trails maintained by Mont Ste. Marie.

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WE HAD PLANNED to arrive at Le Tournesol before the restaurant closed at 6 p.m. and after 10 hours of skiing we had worked up quite an appetite. Unfortunately the snow conditions were very slow and we arrived too late for dinner although we did make use of their shower and sauna facilities.

It was after 8 p.m. by the time we loaded our equipment into the car (which had been left overnight in the parking lot) and joined the apres-ski traffic for the 50 minute ride back to Ottawa.