

WEEKEND

Muskoka's Cool Factor

Ontario's cottage country is a winter wonderland.

BY JENNIFER WARREN

With twice as many cottagers as year-round residents stomping its grounds, the Muskoka region - about two hours north of [Toronto](#) - is a legendary summer getaway spot. But when the 1,600-odd regional lakes freeze over and the cottager crush eases up, it's time to grab our tuques, get on the road and learn to unwind like the locals do: with equal parts hinterland and hibernation. And after a couple of days in the blissfully unpopulated off-season Rosseau area, with our bags packed for home, we can't help wishing for a good old Muskoka-style, road-closing blizzard.



Get in some winter sports thanks to [Haliburton Sled Rentals](#) and its curly-haired, Energizer Bunny-like owner Dan, who'll happily lead your cross-country ski outing through the Red Leaves nature reserve. At night, you can opt for the much less strenuous snowmobile excursion offered by Dan's dad Marc, from the resort to the restaurant Crossroads, for duck-and-pork tourtière and house-smoked salmon made by recently transplanted Québécois chef Richard LaLonde.



Don't pass up the opportunity to sip a pint at the postage-stamp-size [Griffin Pub](#) in Bracebridge. Unable to choose from the long list of Ontario-brewed beers? Go with the sampler: three baby pint glasses nestled in a paddle-shaped wooden holder for a mere \$6. Outside, as we take a picture of the hand-painted Guinness mural, a regular asks us if we're having a "Kodiak" moment.



On the winding road to the lakeside resort [The Rosseau](#), we're greeted simultaneously by a leaping bunny rabbit, two white-tailed deer and an Olympic cross-country skier. (Management swears it wasn't a setup.) There's something both surreal and serene about the view of frozen Lake Rosseau from just about everywhere on the premises, from the indoor-outdoor swimming pool to the spa's Jacuzzi, surrounded by picture windows. Sitting at the bar in the sunlit, lofty Muskoka room, one sip of the artfully crafted Sam Roberts cocktail - Grey Goose, Chambord, peach schnapps and lime, approved by the rocker himself - and we know we're in a new haven of Canuck cool.



The cranberry vines are well buried this time of year at [Johnstone's Cranberry Marsh](#) in nearby Bala, making it a preternaturally peaceful spot. Rent snowshoes in the store and you may well find you get the trails around the marsh all to yourself. On your way out, make sure to snag a jar of cranberry-peach preserves made by June Johnston herself, still canning up a storm well into her 80s.



With all that money we saved on beer at the Griffin, a shopping break on our way back seems justified. In the not-so-bustling village of Rosseau (population: 400), the **Rosseau General Store**, established in 1874, has a killer candy counter *and* 20-kilo bags of birdseed. Talk about one-stop shopping. Across the road, nose through the rooms of **Hilltop Interiors** to find cottage-chic chandeliers, textiles and furniture made by the same local artisans whose works fill the Rosseau.

Photos: The Rosseau (Cross-country skiing, The Rosseau); Ilana Weitzman (Griffin Pub)