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In Minnesota, a Cold Lang Syne

By Pamela Gerhardt
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I was dubious the first time my husband, a native Northern Minnesotan, persuaded me to cross-country ski across a frozen lake in Ely, Minn., on New Year's Eve. The thermometer read 30 below. Never mind wind chill.

You won't forget a winter trip to Ely (pronounced Ee-lee), about 110 miles north of Duluth. It's the last civilized outpost before you enter the central region of the vast and wild Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. National Geographic Traveler included the area in its 2000 list of "50 greatest places of a lifetime." And bestselling novelist Tim O'Brien has sent at least one character beyond Ely, where "the wilderness was all one thing."

Canoeists and back-country campers associate the area with summer. The land, dotted with 1,000-plus glacial lakes larger than 10 acres as well as thousands of smaller ones, provides peaceful fishing and canoeing as you portage from one lake to the next, carrying your canoe and supplies on your back and pitching your tent on tiny, pebbled shores. Motors of any kind, for thousands of acres, are strictly forbidden.

But in recent years, this former mining town, trapping outpost and voyageur pit stop has increased its services to attract more winter activity, especially cross-country skiing. About 13 of the area's 35 resorts are now open year-round, and at least four of the adventure outfitters rent skis and poles. "We're not tied to the [crashed] Iron Range economy anymore," says Scott Anderson, a local dentist and president of the town's ski club, the Nordic Club. "Tourism, including winter, has become one of our biggest boosts."

Miles of groomed trails surround the town, but many locals ignore them altogether, preferring the wide, flat lakes, moving along trails left by dog sleds or skate skis, or skiing on the untouched bodies of water when the conditions are right.

"I know people who ski in 15 miles, fish [through a hole in the ice], then skate 15 miles back in one afternoon," says Anderson. "The best part about skiing up here is that you can go across frozen swamps and other strange places you would never get to in the summer."

The thermometer reading bothered me a lot. While large white-tailed deer walked past my cabin window, I pulled on two pairs of long underwear under my blue jeans (I didn't own a high-tech ski suit). I watched my husband yank on layers. Cotton. Then wool.

I thought about the drive up from his parents' house, the utter whiteness of the landscape, the crunchy thump of wheels rolling over frozen snow, the drone of the defroster blasting on high and just barely keeping a circle of windshield frost-free.

My Hecht's wool coat, it turned out, didn't cut it at all, so I borrowed my mother-in-law's bright pink Thinsulated parka, which zipped and snapped and overlapped against every possible air passage. I wrapped my head in a wool cap and twisted a wool scarf around my face and neck, covering as much skin as possible, and stepped out the door of our efficiency cabin at the Timber Trail Lodge. The sharp, dry cold sent a blast to my nostrils.

We skied right into the wilderness along the South Farm Trail, a beginner route that makes a five-mile figure eight through Boundary Waters woods and is recommended by locals as a good place to start. We'd been briefed on the full range of trail choices: Several trails, including Hidden Valley, stay closer to town and pass such places of interest as the Wolf Center, but we really should experience the quiet beauty of South Farm or the more difficult 26-mile North Arm Trail. Both are free, run through the wilderness and are user-tracked rather than groomed, which means the snow is more pristine and less trodden upon. Most important: No snowmobiles, which you'll find on the Taconite Trail and some others near town.

As we entered the loop, I was stunned by the winter scene: acres of 30-foot blue spruces, part of the Superior National Forest, their snow-covered tips heavy and sparkling in the brilliant sun. We did not see or hear one other person the entire day.

In these parts, in very recent years, cross-country skiing has been pretty much relegated to the "tourists." Many locals now swear by skate skiing, a sport that involves skating on skis and uses a push-side motion (not to be confused with the trendier, Colorado snow skating, where you wear big boots with flat, ski-like soles and don't use poles). Skate skis are shorter and a bit wider, the poles longer.

Skate skiing requires just-so conditions: a brief thaw or even rain to create crusty, icy snow, then another temperature plunge. So you just about have to live locally. "People up here arrange their vacations at the last minute to coincide with these conditions," says Anderson.

With skate skiing, you go anywhere you can -- that is, anywhere in the wilderness. As far as you dare, which seems to be the goal among many who choose to settle in Ely. "A lot of people who come here never seemed to fit in with the rest of society," says Anderson, who grew up in Aurora, a small town west of Ely on northern Minnesota's Iron Range. "They get a cabin in the woods, get a canoe, and ski in the winter and do what they want."

Up here, cross-country skiing might be enough adventure for most visitors. The cold itself is deeply ethereal, simultaneously lonely and exhilarating, lending to life a jagged

edge. People die in this weather -- within minutes. An otherwise leisurely, safe sport morphs into something entirely else.

We huffed through the spruces. The first leg of the figure eight was good. My breath began to form ice on the wool scarf. My hair became crystallized. But I wasn't cold.

Suddenly the tall evergreens opened onto Farm Lake -- a vast plane of white. We crossed it, cutting thin paths through the virgin snow, and began to head up a small hill into more woods. After an hour's skiing we stopped briefly to drink some water. Still not cold, not even my fingers and toes.

Just as we began to move again my husband stopped dead in his tracks. I halted behind him, staying in his tracks. "What?" I asked, unable to see beyond him.

He stepped out of his tracks and let me move forward. "There," he said, and poked something brown with his pole. At my feet, in the deep silence of the woods, lay two large, frozen deer legs, gnawed off at the hip and left by a wolf.

The sun sank behind birch branches. We descended out of the woods toward the lake at around 3:30 p.m. The light now cast a pink glow across the snow. Just at the shore, I noticed water at the edge of the ice where it met the land. A spring, lively enough to stay liquid even in this cold, was making slush. We had no choice but to move quickly through a few feet of slushy stuff to get onto the lake. We heard a wolf howl.

As we passed the spring, something happened. My skis slowed, then came to an abrupt stop. My husband, swifter and farther ahead, was stopped, too. We were in the middle of a deep lake in 30-below temperatures under a rising moon, our skis would not move, and off in the distance a wolf howled. What was a city girl to do? I screamed. I think I yelled, "Help!"

The slush we had skimmed through had frozen solid instantly, and we now had about four inches of ice packed under our skis. My husband twisted around to face me and commanded in a John Wayne voice, "Take off your skis."

Under the silver light of the moon, we sat on the lake and feverishly chiseled off the ice with the metal tips of our poles. We both sighed with relief when we finally skied back to solid ground. But it was no time to talk or laugh, because now it really was dark, and we had to find the lodge down the road.

Safe again in the cabin, we warmed up, showered, then double-checked the car trunk before we embarked on our New Year's Eve festivities. Candles? Check (for warmth after a crash into a snow bank; a candle can create enough heat in a car to keep you alive until help comes). Snickers bars? Check. Blankets? Check. Kitty Litter? Check (for traction).

We drove up and down the nine or so main streets, found only one bar open on Sheridan. Our boots crunched loudly along the desolate sidewalk. Inside, we found three people and a young bartender wearing Goth-black eye makeup slumped into her palms. "What's going on around here for New Year's?" we asked, sipping our Bloody Marys, which in Minnesota come with a pickle, rather than celery, and a snit, a short glass of beer. "Nothin'," she said dejectedly. Oh, but was she wrong.

Down the snow-packed road, back toward the Timber Trail, our headlights cut a path through the high, white banks on either side until suddenly, a view. Something shiny, bright, metallic. We crept closer around the bank and found several rows of at least 50 snowmobiles, parked like Harleys outside the door of a lodge.

Live, big-band music flowed through the log walls. We pushed on the wooden door, and it barely budged as we accidentally shoved several bodies on the other side. We squeezed in and were sucked into a sea of swaying people, nearly all of them senior citizens, wearing paper hats and cardboard tiaras, hugging, stumbling. Two women with tight gray curls and matching Christmas sweat shirts embraced just inches away from us, and one yelled through teary eyes, "This is going to be the best year ever!"

We stayed into the wee hours. I don't know about the following 12 months, but that New Year's Eve was among my best. Ever.

Pamela Gerhardt plans to spend this New Year's Eve in balmy Maryland, because Ely has had only a dusting of snow this year.