



In the course of our run, we learn to discern our dogs' varying personalities.
Photo By Joseph Wilson

Travel

Taking one for the team

Thanks to some super-enthusiastic dogs, we go for one helluva ride

|Joseph Wilson

Teams of dogs ran tirelessly across 1,800 kilometres of Alaska wilderness in the world-famous Iditarod dogsled race this month.

Inspired by their feat, friends and I decide to try our hand at dogsledding at Winterdance Dogsled Tours, just outside Haliburton (www.winterdance.com).

We rent a cottage nearby as a base for the weekend, and after a long, snowy drive find the trailhead in the early afternoon. We watch nervously as the dogs are hauled from their cages and tied, yipping and yelping, to the harness. They have so much energy that some of them start running in place – they look like cartoons – trying to pull the anchored sleighs.

We're encouraged to greet the dogs, whose coats are so thick that you can't feel their skin, and to consider ourselves part of the team: five dogs plus two people per sled. The sleds seem rickety to me, but they're made to flex, says our guide, Brad. They're lashed together with twine instead of nailed, so they'll give in the cold weather. I take first position, sitting in the sleigh, and my partner, standing, is given a crash course in driving. The essentials: "Hike!" to get the dogs moving, "Woah!" to slow them down.

"On by" reminds a dog that she's supposed to be running, not sniffing the ground at the side of the trail. Although dogsled drivers are called mushers, the command "mush" only exists in Hollywood versions of the sport.

The dogs don't really need commands to get running, though. When the brake is lifted they launch themselves down the trail, eager to test their mettle. After thousands of years of selective breeding, they're incomparable at what they do.

We stop several metres down the trail to rebalance ourselves and make sure no one from our party has fallen behind. When the brakes go on, the dogs look back at us impatiently, wondering why we're spoiling their fun.

Setting off again, we fly down the groomed trails through the deciduous forests just south of Algonquin Park to the sound of panting dogs and wooden runners slicing through the snow. The trail opens up to reveal a winding, frozen river that we follow through trees whose branches hang low with the weight of sticky snow.

During the trip, the dogs reveal their personalities, replacing my first impression of identical coiled running machines.

Kris jogs along in the centre spot with a slack rope, not pulling much at all but seeming to enjoy the run. Cali likes to dive into the snowbanks on the edge of the trail when we stop, to cool down from the heat trapped by her winter coat.

Our lead dog, Heddle, is young and eager to show off, snapping at the other dogs with unrestrained energy when we stop for a break.

We grow more confident of our ability to control the dogs, and they get to know our voices. Then we pick up speed and go for a run down a steep hill. I keep thinking that any minute we'll get tossed from the sleigh. The dogs think it's a riot.

When we finally pull back into headquarters, I'm exhausted and chilled to the bone even though the dogs were doing all the work. We reward the animals with bits of hot-dog, some water and lots and lots of petting and cooing.

We're really a team now, the seven of us, which makes it even harder to leave our mates behind when we head back to our warm cottage.

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