



# Let us play

From dog sledding and snow tubing to cross-country skiing and the simple, unadulterated joy of making snow angels – the Canadian province of Ontario is the biggest, boldest winter playground on the planet

WORDS JANET WATSON

**O**WENT to Ontario and I played. I played on skis, skates, on the back of a dog sled and inside a huge rubber tube. Who needs an inner child? In Canada, I had a glorious, grown-up, hair-down holiday.

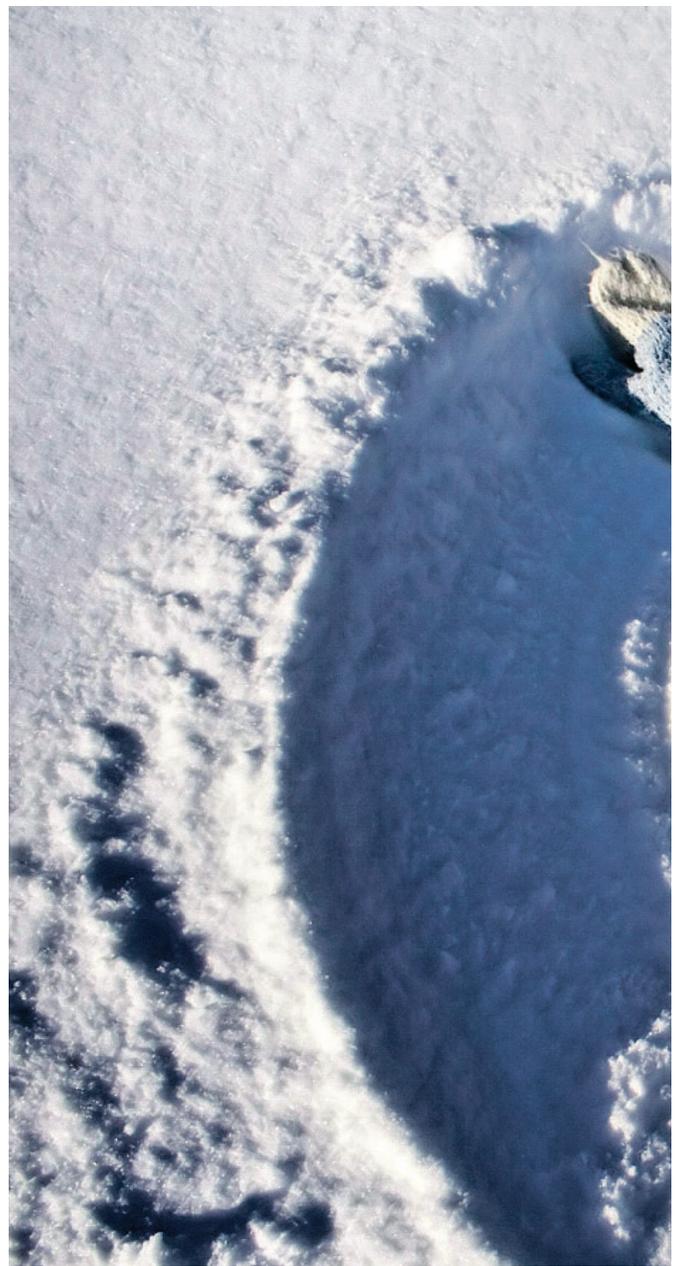
The first thing I noticed about Ontario was just how much snow there was – heaped up, piled high, curled over the edge of eaves and weighing down branches. It's properly cold in Canada in February, and waking up in Deerhurst resort, Muskoka – about two hours north of Toronto – after a long previous day of travel, I wanted to run outside in my fur-lined boots and make snow angels in the inviting expanse of sparkling white.

Instead, I was treated to some of the activities on offer in this resort, where non-selfish grown-ups might want to take their children for an authentic winter wonderland family adventure. First we went cross-country skiing. If you go on holiday to burn calories and catch up on your cardio exercise, this is for you. I loved it, despite being

someone who tends to go on holiday to catch up on my calories and burn the exercise manual. It's all in the knee action – and not falling down helps – and the mini trail that led us to the tubing area was probably enough of a taster for the full day of activity ahead.

Falling into a tube and launching myself down the Deerhurst hill, I felt my first pang of regret that my boys weren't with me to experience the pure, unadulterated joy that is hurling oneself down a slippery slope of ice, cushioned by something big and soft, but it didn't last long. Neither did the ride and I was soon panting my way back up to the top to do it again, and again and again.

The Deerhurst guides managed to drag me away from my tube to the chiminea-cosy Lobby Bar to refuel, then it was back out to horse around on top of Rocket, a 15-hand equine star who behaved himself impeccably on our trek before dropping me from his saddle into a pair of snow shoes for a tiring walk up to a spectacular view over much of Deerhurst's 760 acres. A lit brazier and hot chocolate kept the chills at bay



**WINTER WONDERLAND**  
(Clockwise from top left) The fairy-tale Fairmont Château Laurier; making snow angels; a cross-country skiing party

while our Iron Man guide, director of sports and leisure Mark O'Dell, told tales of black bears, campsites and jogging with Obama during the 2010 G8 summit, while David Cameron eschewed security during an early-morning lake swim.

I was sorry to leave Deerhurst the next day, which also happened to be Groundhog Day. On the bus heading away from Huntsville, we learned that famous white groundhog Wiarthon Willy had failed to see his own shadow, predicting that spring was just around the corner, while south of the border, the Pennsylvania rodent Punxsutawney Phil – who featured in the 1993 Bill Murray film *Groundhog Day* – saw his shadow and so predicted six more weeks of winter. I'm glad the Alaskan huskies who were harnessed to our two-man sled in the snow-dusted, frost-sparkled forests of the Algonquin national park a couple of hours later were in greater accord than the hogs.

Dogsledding is something that looks easier than it is. I discovered muscles I didn't know existed after a 20km mush

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through the trees, and actually did make snow angels after tipping into a couple of snow banks before my fellow-musher and I found our sledding legs. The exhilaration and peace of sliding along trails beneath a perfect blue sky made up for getting snow down my neck, while the muscles responded nicely later to a soak in my luxurious bathroom in the Fairmont Château Laurier hotel in Ottawa.

The 429-room hotel, which looks like a fairy-tale French castle, is celebrating its centenary this year and in its time has played host to heads of state, celebrities and dignitaries, as well as people like me; I wandered amid its timeless elegance, swam in its art deco pool, took afternoon tea in the renowned Zoe's Lounge and was drawn out to play yet again by views of the world-famous Rideau Canal, Parliament Hill, Ottawa River and the distant Snowflake Kingdom, part of the wonder that is Winterlude.

If snow is the medium for play at Deerhurst, then ice is where it's at for Winterlude, a free, family-friendly

festival based on three main sites: the Rideau Canal Skateway and Confederation Park, both in Ottawa, and Parc Jacques-Cartier (base for Snowflake Kingdom), across the river in Gatineau, Quebec. On the five-mile length of the frozen canal – Ontario's first Unesco world heritage site – we skated and watched as it seemed the whole of Ottawa also skated.

In Confederation Park, ice sculptors created art using electric saws – with echoes of the film *Groundhog Day* – and at Snowflake Kingdom we played in the biggest snow playground on the continent, complete with slides, sculptures, obstacle courses, kick sleds, horse-drawn sleigh rides and children's skiing lessons.

But Ottawa is so much more than Winterlude. I loved a guided tour around the parliament and the stunning views from the top; wandering round the eclectic ByWard Market; craning my neck to study the massive totem poles in the Canadian Museum of Civilization; eating the local delicacy of poutine, a fast food treat of hot French

## FACT FILE

- Air Canada ([www.aircanada.com](http://www.aircanada.com)) flies from London Heathrow to Toronto for around £500 return
- Double rooms cost from £135 a night at Deerhurst Resort, Huntsville, Ontario ([www.deerhurstresort.com](http://www.deerhurstresort.com))
- Dog sledding in Algonquin national park, Snow Forest Adventures ([www.snowforestadventures.ca](http://www.snowforestadventures.ca))
- Double rooms cost from £168 a night at Fairmont Château Laurier, 1 Rideau Street, Ottawa ([www.fairmont.com/laurier](http://www.fairmont.com/laurier))

- Winterlude ([www.winterlude.gc.ca](http://www.winterlude.gc.ca))
- ByWard Market ([www.byward-market.com](http://www.byward-market.com))
- Parliament Hill ([www.parl.gc.ca/vis](http://www.parl.gc.ca/vis))
- Canadian Museum of Civilization, 100 Laurier Street, Gatineau, Quebec ([www.civilization.ca](http://www.civilization.ca))
- Courtyard Restaurant, 21 George Street, Ottawa ([www.courtyardrestaurant.com](http://www.courtyardrestaurant.com))
- Le Café, National Arts Centre, 53 Elgin Street, Ottawa ([www.lecafe.ca](http://www.lecafe.ca))
- Ontario tourist office ([www.ontariotourism.com](http://www.ontariotourism.com))

fries, cheese curds and gravy, after one too many beers in the lively Fat Tuesdays bar on York Street.

If you're looking for something a little more upmarket than chips and cheese, ByWard's Courtyard Restaurant infuses French-based cuisine with contemporary flair, accompanied by a great choice of wines. Or try Le Café, in the National Arts Centre, where award-

winning chef Michael Blackie slaved to bring us contemporary Canadian cuisine while we made take-home memories from night-time views over the Rideau.

It was with heavy heart that I packed away my snow clothes to come home; Ontario in winter is a pleasure-packed play park for young and old alike. Go and make snow angels. ■