



Story & photos by Chris Gibbs

sauna on ST. IGNACE

WE HAD COME A LONG WAY to get here ... and now here hardly seemed real. After 10 days of pulling toboggans across snow and ice on Lake Superior, we were lounging in a 170-degree sauna that we had worked all morning to bring back to life.

Outside winds on St. Ignace Island were gusting to 50 miles per hour, making it considerably colder than the temperatures hover around 15 degrees Fahrenheit. Yet here we sat in an environment so toasty, clothes were not an option.

Winter camping on Lake Superior is something most would not – and perhaps should not – consider. Fast moving storms, unstable ice (if any ice pack exists) and the sheer magnitude of the lake make it fascinating, but not for the casual traveler. Even experienced winter voyagers might shy

from its imposing challenge.

In 2008, Lake Superior called to my frequent travel companion Jon Farchmin of Duluth, adventure photographer Gary McGuffin of Goulais River, Ontario, wildlife artist Rob Mullen of Vermont and me.

We all have a passion for winter. Using traditional methods – snowshoes, toboggans, a canvas tent and wood-burning stove – we have journeyed across the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness of Minnesota and its neighbor, Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario. We have explored areas in northern Minnesota and Ontario seldom seen when blanketed by snow.

Winter weather amazes me. The landscape stops in time and offers a frozen network of lakes and rivers to explore. How peaceful it is. Usually the only sounds are the caws of ravens. You find solitude simply

Photo caption goes here. This copy is for position only. That's all it's for. Only to show where caption goes. Yep, that's all. Nothing else. Just position. Photo caption goes here. This copy is for position only. That's all it's for. Only to show where caption goes. Yep, that's all. Nothing Nothing else. Just position.



Photo caption goes here. This copy is for position only. That's all it's for. Only to show where caption goes. Yep, that's all. Nothing else. Just position. Photo caption goes here. This copy is for position only. That's all it's for. Only to show where caption goes. Yep, that's all. Nothing Nothing else. Just position.

getting out there, even in summer's high-traffic locations. Plus there are no mosquitoes.

But we wanted a different winter trip. We decided to experience Lake Superior in its most challenging season. We would set out from Nipigon, Ontario, to St Ignace Island, part of the Lake Superior National Marine Conservation Area, one of only four in Canada.

In summer, the islands outside of Nipigon Bay are frequented by kayakers and motor boats. In winter, they become isolated, unvisited except for a rare local trapper.

Crossing 13 miles of Big Lake parallels arctic exploration. We researched our route and monitored ice conditions until we left, the second day of February. The crossing had to be timed when the ice was thick enough not to break up in a storm. Our goal was to reach St. Ignace, at 15 miles wide and 7 miles long the second largest island in Lake Superior after Isle Royale. The ice sheet separating it from the mainland could be filled with pressure ridges, slush and open water.

Luck was on our side; the ice was forgiving, solid and with few ridges. Wind had

scoured the surface with blowing snow, creating hard-pack conditions and giving us two days of good travel. We camped in the bays of small islands that offered wood and shelter.

Wind – its direction and how to get out of it – determined where we camped. If you can't get out of the wind, it's hard to keep the stove lit, protect any activity and to put up a broadsided tent. Out of the wind and with each tackling a task – gathering wood, pitching the tent, starting a fire – we make camp in about an hour.

The relatively flat, two-day trek across Nipigon Bay gave us a chance to get used to pulling our toboggans and the toll it takes on our muscles. Temperatures were warm – around 20 degrees F – so acclimating to being outside all day came easier, too. That would change.

Once we reached St. Ignace Island, we came upon a trail that appeared to traverse the island. We set up a base camp on an interior lake near it from which we could explore our surroundings and plan the next day.

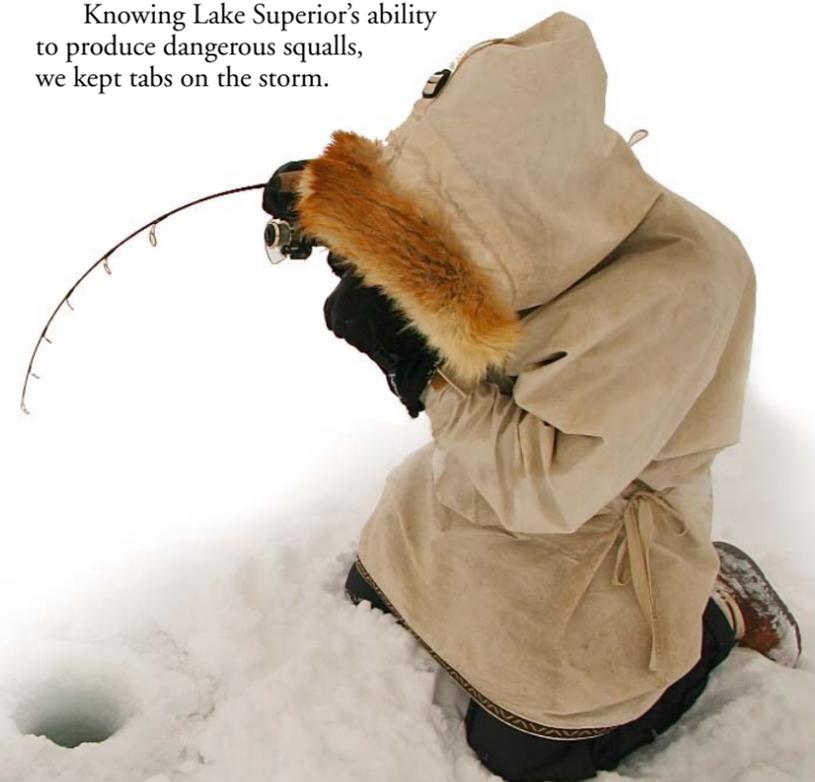
The next morning, I was tent-bound in the throes of a stomach ailment; it felt like I

was on my deathbed. The others traveled across the island and back, encountered open water on the other side. No chance, then, of exploring the adjacent islands on this trip. In winter traveling, flexibility is a necessary companion.

With island hopping out of the question, we joked about visiting one of the remote saunas on St. Ignace used by those fortunate enough to visit in summer. Gary frequently kayaks in this area and knew of them.

Keeping a sauna as an option, we spent the next few days exploring. In our 11 days on the island, the only evidence of life were tracks of a lone wolf, a few traps set for pine marten and sightings of the inevitable ravens. The wolf had been trailing us, we discovered along with its tracks. We stuck mostly to day trips, returning to base camp each evening.

Dinner is a favorite part of the day (even with my digestive problems on this trip). The tent is cozy warm and you are immersed in sleeping bags, talking about what you saw or heard. There's joking all around ... essentially giving the other guys a hard time for one thing or another. It's a party atmosphere – aside from being dead tired – and some nights we'd toast winter with a rum or gin-and-tonic, a rationed treat because we pack in so little of it.



The high-calorie meals themselves, loaded with butter and without any guilt, replace calories lost tackling hikes across the snow.

Jon and I have taken winter trips together for more than a decade, and he is by far the best camp cook I've encountered. He always packs a reflector oven. Jon also does the best job find out the background of wherever we visit, sometimes scouting in summer from his kayak.

We regularly listened to our VHF weather radio during dinner. The reports helped us plan where to go next and what to expect. Several broadcast alerted us to the possibility of a storm coming. Then it happened.

One night while enjoying a warm meal of peas, chicken kiev and a biscuit smothered in butter, the Canadian Weather Service issued a dangerous wind-chill warning and advised of an approaching winter storm with gale-force winds.

Knowing Lake Superior's ability to produce dangerous squalls, we kept tabs on the storm.



The day it was to arrive, we elected to head to an emergency shelter on Caribou Point, 7 miles from our base camp. We'd need to outrun the approaching storm to get there.

Our aluminum snowshoes were not really necessary on the hard-pack snow, but we wore them to use their embedded crampons for purchase on the ice. Covering 7 miles while pulling a 120-pound toboggan in one day is exhausting. A simple rope and canvas strap tie you to enough supplies for a couple weeks. Going downhill, the laden toboggan wants to run you over. Pulling it across the ice, it pulls back. After dragging like this for six hours, all you look forward to is stopping.

We reached the emergency shelter right before sundown. Rather than set up our tent in the dark, we decided to sleep in the back bunk room of the 10-by-12-foot building. We were curious to see what impact the storm would have. We didn't have to wait long. Just as we settled in, we heard it. The show began as if on a schedule, hitting exactly at 7 p.m. The wind roared like a jet hovering above our shelter. We pointed a headlamp outside and saw only white – a total whiteout.



Winds rattled the wooden walls, and I started to think we would have been safer in our tent. At least in there, the walls wouldn't hurt if they collapsed on us.

That night, gusts of wind disrupted any sleep, sweeping throughout the shelter as though the walls had holes. To conserve heat, we closed off the bunk area and huddled our pads and sleeping bags together on the hard floor. This reminded me how comfortable I get sleeping on snow. Snow conforms and can be molded slightly to your comfort. Not so with a wooden floor.

The next morning the storm was raging on and dawn heralded near zero visibility. We continued our daily chores of gathering fire wood and drilling a hole through the ice in the bay for water ... simple tasks until you add 50 mph sustained winds and snow. As luck would have it, the morning light revealed a run-down sauna on the point across from our shelter. Here was something to do on a storm day.

We braved the blowing winds to head for the sauna. The chimney was buried in snow, the water reservoir was a solid chunk of ice and the stove pipe, riddled with holes, had come apart. No problem. Nothing was going to stop us from seizing the chance for a steamy sauna during winter's most inclement conditions.

We began rehabilitating the sauna. Using our pack shovels, we freed the chimney from three feet of snow. A little jerry-rigging with wire and aluminum foil repaired the stove pipe. We lit a fire. We stoked it most of the day, bringing the sauna to a comfortable heat.

All day as we worked, we talked about how good it would feel to be truly clean after 10 days of nothing but periodically rubbing snow through our hair. After being ill, I particularly wanted – and needed – a cleansing.

The actual sauna became almost ceremonial. Water was hauled from the bay, pack towels gathered and layers of encrusted clothing shed. We entered a tropical environment inside while the nasty wind and snow seethed outside.

We basked in a surreal moment. But soon enough reality checked in. It is an unwritten winter tradition, after all, that a sauna and a snow bath go hand in hand.

After bantering about who should go out first (Gary did), a run outside into deep snow instantly reminded us where we were and what still surrounded us. But we did what we had to do.

A roll in the snow feels like pins and needles on your skin. We liked it so much,

we retreated back into the sauna, warmed up and did it all again.

By the time we'd finished, the storm had subsided. Clean and rejuvenated, the night in the shelter didn't seem so bad and the pending three-day walk across 13 miles of ice back to Nipigon didn't seem so daunting.

As we traveled, we made frequent stops. The storm had sculpted patterns into the snow and offered endless "photo ops." Winter creates an ever-changing landscape.

After two weeks on the trail and negotiating a lot of unknowns, we camped our last night out at the entry of the Nipigon River. We could have made the short walk into town, but wanted one last night out. With reflector-oven chocolate cupcakes, we celebrated Jon's birthday and the end to an amazing winter journey.

We also celebrated another rare accomplishment: weathering a Lake Superior winter storm by literally sweating it out.



Chris Gibbs, an outdoor/adventure photographer and writer in Cambridge, Minnesota, has a passion for the outdoors. His love of winter (and a certain tenacity) bring him to inspiring subjects for writing and breathtaking, seldom-seen images to photograph photograph.

Photo caption goes here. This copy is for position only. That's all it's for. Only to show where caption goes. Yep, that's all. Nothing else. Just position. Photo caption goes here. This copy is for position only. That's all it's for. Only to show where caption goes. Yep, that's all. Nothing else. Just position.

