



Photo: IAN MERRINGER

SUMMIT ON SOUS-BOIS

A CHALET IN THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS OFFERS A TASTE OF THE BACKCOUNTRY.

BY IAN MERRINGER

I've loved skiing since the dawn of the 1980s when I started linking T-bar laps up and down the side of a ravine in Toronto's Don Valley. The Bruno stretch pants I was wearing didn't have to stretch at all to accommodate my skinny legs, but my wet mittens fit snugly in the moulded handgrips of my poles. The overly ample pompom on top of my knitted toque somehow failed to throw me off balance as I hit tiny kicker jumps again and again. When my groin told me I had finally perfected the Spread Eagle, I knew skiing would be how I would spend

some of the best times of my life.

I renewed my vows in my twenties. Spending a pair of winters in B.C.'s Kootenays, I turned up my nose at the trail map and started casual day touring and, even better, overnight skinning trips to cabins sunk deep into snowpacks high up on passes. Skis became tools for exploration, for travelling and staying in the mountains for more than a few hours at a time. For a kid from Ontario, this was a revelation.

But now I find myself back in Ontario, with a few kids who think their Spread Eagles are pretty

hot stuff. And where does that leave me? Traveling west or to Quebec's Chic Chocs may be the season's highlight but eastern skiers sometimes forget how much is on offer a lot closer.

I found my Utopia—or more precisely, Huttopia. Two km from the base of Quebec's Mont Sutton, the newly renovated Hotel Horizon fronts onto the road that connects the down-home Eastern Township skiing stalwart to the tidy town below.

What you can't see from the road are the cabins behind the hotel, which is surprising, since there are 36 of them. Turn up the road at the far end of the Hotel Horizon parking lot and you'll start to glimpse them dispersed through the pine trees. The identical, two-storey blond wood structures are set back a little ways from the single-lane access road in small clusters. They are all reachable by short walks from the intermittent car park pull-offs.

When our family station wagon sighed to a stop after its 6.5-hour drive from Toronto, a deep-hulled toboggan was waiting beside the parking spot reserved for cabin 36. I emptied the roof box into it and swished it along the plowed path that



Every level of skier can appreciate Mont Sutton's glades, which make up 45 per cent of the resort's terrain.

ended at the last cabin at the top of the hill.

The late-afternoon sun was coming in low below the tree canopy where the welcoming smell of woodsmoke mingled with pine. So far it felt just like arriving at a backcountry cabin, except I didn't have to dig out the front door with an avalanche shovel, the cabin was already warm, and I wasn't sweat-soaked from skinning myself and all my gear up from a trailhead.

Though they've clearly been built with economy in mind, the dimensions are generous, as far as supposed backcountry cabins go. The main floor consists of an open area with sitting and dining areas, a bedroom with a queen bed and a galley

kitchen that leads to a three-piece bathroom. Up the open flight of stairs is a loft sitting area with a pullout couch and a separate bedroom with two single beds. There's not much excess space, but enough to comfortably accommodate a family of four or more, depending on how well-behaved your children are.

Dinner was underway within minutes. No need to fumble with camp stoves, just turn on the double-burner stovetop or microwave. The water is drinkable, no need to melt snow; for cleaning, just load the dishwasher.

As the sun set, we turned down the baseboard heating and electric lights, threw a log in the wood-burning stove and the children out the door. Being nine and 10 years old, they were still young enough to become immediate tobogganing partners with the kids of friends of ours from Ottawa who happened to be staying in the cottage 12 trees away. A coincidence, yes, but not a surprise. I knew Todd and Lindsay from springtime canoe runs on Ontario's rivers. Even though these cabins had only been open for three winters, it was natural that they had found them and booked a stay to break up their weekly ski racing routine with a wedge of rough-cut lumber.

While droplets condensed on beer cans around the wood stove, I let Todd in on my secret scheme to cement the backcountry bona fides of this faux wilderness trip. I spread out the map that we got from the front desk when we checked in at Hotel Horizon. It showed the cabins as they protrude into the surrounding 25-km network of cross-country, snowshoeing and

fat-biking trails that are on Mont Sutton property but run by Plein Air Sutton.

The map is a proper map, by which I mean it has contour lines showing elevation changes. At the far left margin, peeking out from behind the superimposed legend were the outlines of the westernmost chairs and trails of Mont Sutton. Running a finger along an even pattern of contours, I argued that we could fall off the back of one of Sutton's perimeter runs, keep a northwest bearing, stay above a drainage, follow a gently sloping descent and expect to fall into the embrace of Plein Air's network that would lead us right back to the cabins. Projected total distance of our self-supported backcountry expedition: about one km.

We spent the next day enjoying what Mont Sutton is famous for: its interconnecting web of sous-bois (under the trees) runs. Along with Mont-Édouard in Quebec's distant Saguenay region and Mad River Glen in Vermont, Mont Sutton is at one with the woods. These are places where the trail map is a schematic; the best skiing is done between the white lines on the map.

As three o'clock rolled around, Todd and I slid through one of the gates leading into the Fantaisie area, a few cut lines that the resort has (barely) carved out of its otherwise ignored backside. Near the bottom, as the slope bottomed out and the

trail started curling us around toward the front of the mountain, we knew we had reached our point of departure.

That's when the ski patroller appeared behind us. I pretended to adjust the cable of my tele-binding, hoping he'd pass us by. No luck. He was doing his job, sweeping the area, making sure everyone got back to the base. We decided to level with him. I started telling him the plan in some detail, and added with an air of authority that I was writing for *Ski Canada* to give him the impression we knew what we were doing and weren't going to end up on the local news.

I must have convinced him. Or else annoyed him. With a slightly perturbed look on his face, he said, "Well, I'm late. I didn't see you." With that he skied off and left us at the mercy of the mountain.

Half an hour later we slid to a stop outside Todd's cabin. The intervening period was totally uneventful. But that was the intent all along. Backcountry for me was never exciting, movie-worthy stuff. There could be great runs, but if you want to ski hard, you're best to do it in avalanche-controlled terrain. Then you do it again, courtesy of a lift.

Touring, on the other hand, can just as legitimately be about going slowly. Noticing the trees as you pass by, hearing the snow under your skis,

paying attention to the contour of the slope as it leads down to one snowy drainage or another. More than anything, it's about the satisfying click as you release your bindings after getting somewhere on your own, with some deliberation.

Oh, and sometimes it's about enjoying a heated pool and hot tub, too. Did I mention that guests of Huttopia's supposed backcountry cabins enjoy access to Hotel Horizon's facilities? Don't forget your flip-flops. ☺

IF YOU GO

Huttopia is an international company with 56 camping and cabin or chalet properties in France, China, the U.S. and Canada, including Hotel Horizon. To rent a chalet: hotelhorizon-sutton.com

Mont Sutton has a top elevation of 840m and a vertical drop of 457m that's serviced by nine chairlifts. Its skiable terrain of 93 hectares seems larger than it sounds due to the many connecting trails that combine to create more than 200 trail intersections and the ample gladed areas for every skill level. montsutton.com



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