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Throat singing, other Inuit arts in Grand Marais.

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travel

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Dog days of winter



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Ricky the sled dog got ready for breakfast with yips and howls. Henrik, 12, helped harness a dog with guide Ingrid Paulsen. Ten-year-old Luisa loved up McKenzy in preparation for harnessing the dogs. Paulsen steered a team of dogs through the woods near the main lodge of Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge. The outfitter, in business for a quarter-century, sits on the edge of the Boundary Waters near Ely, Minn. See more dog sledding photos at startribune.com/travel.

A winter weekend of dog sledding in Ely forces one family to dig deep, discovering they have more grit than they thought.

Story and photos by ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN
Special to the Star Tribune

The temperature was falling fast and my 12-year-old son, Henrik, was running out of energy, not to mention enthusiasm. It was the third day of 2015 and our entire family — besides Henrik and me there was my husband, Walter, our 15-year-old son, Peter, and our 10-year-old daughter, Luisa — had been outside the whole day, dog-sledding through a snow-soaked forest on the edge of the Boundary Waters near Ely, Minn. The snow had been coming down in clumps all weekend, making it harder for the dogs to haul Henrik and his middle-aged mother across a bog that sprouted in tufts through the ice, like a sleeping giant's beard.

"I just want to play a video game," Henrik moaned, his head falling toward the handlebar of the sled we were riding together.

"You're fine!" I said, glad Henrik couldn't see the forced smile behind my facemask. "We've only got two more hours!" Even though it was 15 degrees — practically Palm Springs for the dogs — my toes and thumbs were numb. The truth was, this was the only time in my entire life when I could honestly say that I wanted to play a video game, too.

We were in Ely to celebrate the New Year together as a family, a long weekend stolen from the demands of work and high school hockey. When I'd suggested dog sledding to my kids, none of them groaned in agony, which was all the encouragement I needed.

I wanted a weekend where our faces weren't lit up by the glow of screens, a few days where we could appreciate the unpredictable and unscripted beauty of being in the wilderness. Most of all, a certain milestone birthday had made me all too aware of how much I wanted my kids to remember being adventurous with their mom and dad — to think back and realize that at least for a few days, Walter and I had enough zing to disengage our internal pause buttons. I was even ready to sign up for one night of winter camping when Walter warned me not to push my luck.

My family has visited Ely every summer for the past 13 years to enjoy a week at Camp du Nord, a family camp on the North Arm of Burntside Lake. I wanted to know what the region had to offer when daylight doesn't stretch until 10 p.m. and life isn't as easy as slipping on your flip-flops.

See **DOG SLEDDING** on G6 ▶

Missing passport brings out the best in Italy

While working on a replacement, vacationers encountered helpful locals and an unexpected trip to Florence.

By DAN WASCOE
Special to the Star Tribune

High on a hilltop in northern Italy, behind the stone walls of a medieval Umbrian town called Montone, we made a discovery that no overseas traveler could wish for: One of our passports was missing.

After 13 days of well-planned sightseeing, great food and glorious October weather, my wife, Joyce, and I found our itinerary unraveling into a spaghetti-like tangle.

Only two full days remained until our flight home. Joyce would need her passports to board the plane. What now? The answer: 48 tense hours that left us grateful for helpful strangers and keenly sensitive to life's ripple effects.

We weren't careless. We'd brought photocopies of our passports and were wary of pickpockets. Joyce kept

her passport in a travel purse, inside a pocket within another pocket, each protected by a zipper and covered by the purse's front flap. The purse's strap was always around her neck. Only when we were at dinner in a hotel did she leave the purse in our locked room, in a safe when provided.

Even so, the passport had gone AWOL.

That's when Italian hospitality kicked in. The proprietress of Montone's La Locanda del Capitano, where we were staying, spoke excellent English. She calmed Joyce down

and, late on a Saturday afternoon, called the U.S. Embassy in Rome. A staffer advised downloading passport application forms and appearing at the U.S. Consulate in Milan at 8:30 a.m. Monday.

After learning that our flight was leaving from Venice — a long way from Milan and Montone — our new friend called the embassy again and learned we could go instead to the U.S. Consulate in Florence, only two hours away. Then she printed out all the forms and directed us to a small

See **PASSPORT** on G4 ▶



Star Tribune staff illustration

Dog days of winter

◀ DOG SLEDDING from G1

With its stubbornly cold weather, Ely is Minnesota's ultimate winter getaway. So I booked a three-night trip with Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge, the most established of the eight dog-sledding outfitters in the area. Owned by Paul and Susan Schurke, it's been around for more than a quarter-century.

Paul grew up in the Twin Cities and was one of the founders of Wilderness Inquiry, a Minneapolis-based nonprofit that offers trips around the world for groups that include people with disabilities. When he came to Ely looking for winter activities for Wilderness Inquiry, he met a guy who lived out in the woods, a guy named Will Steger. The two became fast friends, eventually completing an expedition to the North Pole in 1986. In the meantime, Paul and Susan got married, moved to Ely and started their family (they have two grown daughters and a son).

"It's been a world of dogs and winter and arctic adventures for me and my family ever since," Paul said.

Susan is relaunching her popular Wintergreen outdoor apparel line, after it shut down under different ownership. The winter-wear designs are based on techniques she learned from Inuit seamstresses.

Cabin-sharing

Our first night started with a thud when we realized we were sharing a cabin with another family — a fact I'd missed in the brochure. As a result, I hadn't set realistic expectations for my less-than-flexible clan. That we'd be laughing and playing board games with the other family in a matter of hours didn't matter during the get-to-know you dinner.

Wintergreen Lodge was full, so we were staying nearby at the Timber Trail Lodge, in a renovated cabin on Farm Lake. To snap my kids out of their antisocial funk, I suggested that we head down to the lodge's game room. On our way, Henrik and I jumped off the shore onto the ice. Within seconds, there was an echo from deep inside the lake that sounded like a bassoon. "It's Bigfoot's didgeridoo," said Henrik.

We jumped again. The bassoon sang back. Then, miles away on White Iron Lake, it was dinnertime for Wintergreen's dogs and howling and yelping shot through the night air. Above us, Orion stretched his bow.

Not one of us complained that the thermometer was stuck at 0. We'd been at Wintergreen less than five hours and already my work was done. If this moment didn't stick with my kids, I'm not sure what would.

Our guides for the entire stay were Peter Schurke, Paul and Susan's youngest, and Ingrid Paulsen, his girlfriend. The two met when Peter was an exchange student in Ingrid's town near Lillehammer, Norway. She's now a student at St. Olaf; Schurke graduated from the College of St. Scholastica in December.

In addition to training us and guiding our dog-sled outings — they skied while we mushed, which probably accounts for the fact that neither of them seems to have even a quarter-inch of body fat — Schurke and Paulsen made our meals and took care of all the trips' details, including playing rounds of Pit, a trading game, with the kids. Their cheerfulness in the midst of harnessing, feeding, cooking, shoveling and guiding made them unknowing yet perfect role models for all of us.

Early the next day, we drove to Wintergreen Lodge to hitch up our teams, usually five dogs to a sled. In their eagerness to get started, the 20 dogs (our group had four sleds) yelped, leapt, barked and squealed with the intensity of a group of middle-school girls getting ready for a dance. The humans were similarly amped up, although more from nerves than excitement.

The dogs took off. Henrik and I grabbed the handlebar. And then we were floating across White Iron Lake, snowflakes flying everywhere, the horizon a wash of gray against white. As the dogs settled into their rhythm, we were able to relax and realize that, hey, we were cutting through a forest on what must surely be the world's most visceral transportation. The vistas weren't compromised by fumes or the rumble of a motor. Instead, all we could hear were the thumps of paws hitting snow, like bass notes.

Dog sledding is definitely not a weekend on the Disney conveyor belt. One minute you're gliding through frost that's as light as cotton candy. The next you're ducking under a branch that pops out of nowhere. Sometimes the paths are so narrow that you have to squeeze your shoulders to avoid banging into a tree. It's not unusual for a sled to careen off the edge of a boulder during a downhill sprint; you hold on and hope you don't get pitched into a snowbank. It's exhilarating. And an absolute break from the strains of the real world.

It's also active enough that you feel perfectly fine digging into Wintergreen's home-cooked meals. While being pulled by a team of dogs certainly doesn't qualify as a hardship, etiquette dictates that you give the dogs a rest and push the sled when you are going uphill. If you start to get cold, your only way to warm up is to get off and run.

A Narnia world

I'd gone dog sledding before, so I knew my kids would think it was thrilling. What I'd forgotten is how completely the experience immerses you in the scenery. At one point we emerged from a stand of birch past black spruce that were almost completely cloaked in white.

"Narnia," Henrik said, more to himself than to me.

I also wasn't prepared for how touching it would be to watch my children with the dogs. They knew them all by name — Inuk, Betty, Willow, Lena, Ricky, Ramona, Larry, Bella, Frasier — and helped each day with feeding and harnessing. They petted them, encouraged them when they slowed down, and basically loved them up.

Our trip included two full days of dog sledding. On the second afternoon we had lunch over an open fire in a grove of pines. While I wouldn't have traded the pleasures of eating pizza cooked in a cast iron pan, sheltered from the snow by a canopy of branches, it was hard to warm back up. Luisa and Peter were hanging in there, but Henrik was clearly at his limit. Which is when he started fantasizing about the video games.

"When will we be done?" he called to Schurke, who was 100 yards ahead, cutting a fresh trail on skis. "I'm cold."

Schurke stopped skiing and looked back at him. "Well, you know how to take care of that," he shouted. "Get off your sled and run!"

I braced for a meltdown. Of course this was Schurke's answer. He'd gone to the Arctic Circle with his dad when he was 14 years old and had grit far beyond what I expected of my kids. When I'd told Henrik to run, he sat down on the sled. I responded by telling him I was proud he'd made it so far. Not exactly a rousing call to action.

What I hadn't counted on was that by now, Henrik admired Schurke. The guide's encouragement was all he needed to push himself beyond what he thought was possible.

Henrik looked up at Schurke. And then he jumped off the sled and ran. And ran. And ran until finally we could make out Wintergreen's hitching posts, standing like searchlights in the snow.

Minneapolis writer Elizabeth Foy Larsen is the author of "Unbored: The Essential Field Guide to Serious Fun," and "Unbored Games: Serious Fun for Everyone."

IF YOU GO

Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge offers day, lodge-to-lodge and camping dog sled trips in and near Ely. It also offers trips to the Arctic (1-877-753-3386; www.dogsledding.com).

Warm and Cozy rents essential winter clothing, including anoraks, boots and overmittens (1-218-235-8664; www.elywarmandcozy.com).

International Wolf Center, in Ely, offers intimate looks at wolves. Our all-inclusive package with Wintergreen included an evening visit there to watch a weekly feeding (www.wolf.org).

ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN



ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN • Special to the Star Tribune
Ely, Minn., has eight dog sledding outfitters, a greater concentration of dog sled tourism than anywhere else in the U.S.

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