



intelligenttravel

Travel Photography Beyond the Guidebook Taste of Travel Family Time Travel With Heart Adventure Urban Insider Digital Nomad On Assignment



To Mush or Not to Mush: Dogsledding in Québec

Posted by Erik R. Trinidad of The Global Trip on December 23, 2014

(0) Pinterest 1 Like 119 Tweet 30 G+ 2 More »



Swiss tourist Tabea Flotron drives a sled behind a team of Alaskan malamutes. (Photograph by Erik Trinidad)

Many new to the world of dogsledding opt for a leisurely ride in a sled while a musher leads them across the snowy landscape with some help from a team of tireless canines.

However, as I learned on a four-day crash course with Aventuraid in Girardville, Quebec, dogsledding is a much more challenging affair when you're in the musher's shoes—especially when temperatures are well below freezing, hovering around -22°F (-30°C).

"On y va!" my bundled-up instructor Julien Gravelle called to his Alaskan malamutes, French for "Let's go!" I expected to hear "mush"—an English term that, ironically in this case, is derived from marche, the French word for walk—but when you're deep in French Québec, it's no surprise that the dogs only respond to proper Français.

"On y va!" I cried to the quartet of dogs in front of my sled. They didn't budge. One ate some snow while another relieved himself. I tried "Allez!" Still, nothing.

Search for: Search

National Geographic Traveler SUBSCRIBE

About Intelligent Travel

National Geographic believes that to know the world is to change it. We're on the front lines of travel that illuminates, celebrates, and preserves irreplaceable places—and we're taking you along for the ride.

Microsoft ONENOTE ALL YOUR NOTES — IN ONE PLACE AND WITH YOU, ANYWHERE. LEARN MORE »



Subscribe to Traveler



"You have to push," Julien informed me. "They have to know you are a part of the team."

I shifted my weight and dug my boots into the thick snow, and the dogs started to run down the trail.

"On y va!"

As I came to understand, mushing isn't merely a matter of holding onto a handle and being pulled along for the ride. It's all about the relationship between the driver and the dogs.

"I find it a bit like horse riding," said Tabea Flotron, a Swiss tourist who was leading her own team of dogs behind me. "You have to see what the dogs do, and react."

This is easier said than done, because when the dogs run fast, there is plenty of reacting to do. While the dogs provide forward momentum, drivers must steer the sled by shifting their weight in response to each bump or curve in the terrain.

Mushing was a breeze when it meant gliding unobstructed over vast frozen lakes, but on trails that snaked their way through boreal forest, it was physically exhausting—especially on sharp turns. Chasing down a runaway sled after having fallen off completely was also not an easy task in snow two feet deep.

The only way to stop a sled, a lesson I learned well, is to step on the brake—a treaded rubber mat on the back of the sled—which tugs the ropes, telling the dogs to halt.

The brake works like a charm when you're standing up, but if you lose your balance—only to be dragged along behind your dogs—you have to pull yourself up on the moving sled and apply pressure to the brake with any body part that's handy. For me, it was usually with my knees.



The author's team of malamutes rests in the snow. (Photograph by Erik Trinidad)

Of course, you can't blame the dogs; they simply love running in the snow. You can tell by the enthusiasm and, dare I say it, happiness, they display when they're at it. The breeds used in mushing—traditionally malamutes or Siberian huskies—are made for toughing it out and enjoying the winter.

"Rroorror!" I barked to my dogs playfully, something I'd noticed Julien do with his own team to motivate them to run faster. Instead of the intended effect, one of my lead dogs, Hawk, kept looking back at me.

"You scared them," Julien told me, reading the dog's worried expression. "Hawk lost his confidence."

I wondered if my bark had sounded threatening, or if my American accent was to blame. Regardless, I periodically called out words of encouragement to him—"Très bien, Hawk!"—until I finally regained his trust.

Caring for the dogs' needs was a part of the journey. After all, a musher is nothing without his team. Each night we'd find shelter at a camp, where we'd nourish our team with hot water—the hard-won result of drilling through ice-covered lakes—and dog food.

A promotional graphic for National Geographic's 'The Genographic Project'. It features a person in a red cape standing in a vast, open landscape under a blue sky. The text reads: 'YOUR STORY HAS A SURPRISE BEGINNING', 'DISCOVER THE SECRETS OF YOUR ANCESTRY AND HELP TELL THE STORY OF US ALL.', 'LEARN MORE', 'THE GENOGRAPHIC PROJECT', and 'NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC'.

Making fires for warmth and cooking involved finding dead trees and chopping wood, which made this "Mushing 101" vacation a crash course in winter camping as well. With temperatures so well below the freezing mark, we wondered if boiling water could instantly turn into ice if we threw it into the air.



"It could be colder," Julien joked.

Despite the sub-zero temperatures and the tasks involved with "roughing it," it was a worthwhile adventure in the end. As frustrating as it was at times working with the dogs, it was still a thrill to be a part of their team—something you can't experience if you choose to be a mere passenger along for the ride.

"If you ask me, the best part of this job and the worst part of the job, it's the same answer," Julien told me. "The dogs."

Two other places to try your hand at mushing:

- **Fairbanks, Alaska.** Outfitter pick: Cotter's Sled Dog Kennel, with a dogsledding school led by 20-time Iditarod racer Bill Cotter.
- **Lapland, Sweden.** Outfitter pick: National Geographic Adventures offers nine-day trips with an overnight at the ice hotel in Jukkasjärvi.

Erik Trinidad spends most of his time crisscrossing the globe in search of exotic food, high adventure, and scientific curiosities. Follow his travels on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter @theglobaltrip](#).

(0) 119 30 2 More »

