

Go Play Outside

When you've got a roaring toddler on your hands, can you still enjoy a wintry escape with a little grown-up content? Globe Travel editor KARAN SMITH heads north to find out

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By KARAN SMITH

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TEMAGAMI, ONT. -- We were preparing for a wintry long weekend: the CD mix -- *Temagami Tunes* -- had been downloaded, the car was overpacked, a list of downtime activities swirled in my mind and a warm lodge waited, 4½ hours north. But on this trip, one thing was different: the kicking, squealing toddler, our holiday's new backseat driver. I wanted to expose my 1½-year-old daughter to real winter: the smell of cold air and wood smoke, the sensation of making snow angels on a frozen lake, the look of evergreens turned white, the sound of black cap chickadees in a still forest. Pepina's world view was still forming, but I had noticed that her vocabulary included the word "car," but not "tree" or "bird." Her view on the way to daycare every day was of concrete and the grey-brown slush along Toronto's Gardiner Expressway. During the global-warming winter the city has largely experienced this season, our sled sat idle. It seemed time to seek out winter.

When a child can entertain herself with a drinking straw and an egg carton, one has to wonder how much effort -- and money -- to invest in travel. When Pepina was 10 months old, we flew to Italy to show her off to my husband Mario's relatives. Roman ruins, seaside *trattorias* and art masterpieces were at our doorstep.

But Pepina's twice-a-day naps and early bedtime kept us close to the *casa*. There were side trips to the beach on the Tyrrhenian Sea and frequent forays to the *cucina* to eat (and eat) with the *famiglia*, but it made me question if she was too young for all us to benefit from another stamp in our passports.

For many city dwellers lacking a cabin in the snow belt, experiencing winter can take several forms. Self-catering cottages can be rented -- and offspring can shout until the parental breaking point. But what if parents want a holiday too, a reprieve from frying pork chops and washing sippy cups?

I'm part of the new generation of families who want their children -- and their cake too. We want to take our kids to yoga classes and sushi restaurants and dance parties at hip hotels. And we want to travel with them without always sacrificing adult content and comforts.

So I started an online search for a rustic-yet-somewhat-luxurious winter getaway. I looked into bigger inns in Ontario and Quebec -- big enough that we could blend in with other noisy families -- but I wondered: Would we really be getting away from it all when there's a full-service spa and lap pool?

Smoothwater Outfitters and Ecolodge looked promising: cross-country skiing, organic cuisine, nearby dogsledding and an outdoor sauna. As well, it offered artistic and often family-friendly programming, such as bread-baking lessons and snow-flea hunts. But would the five-room lodge be too intimate? An e-mail from proprietor, artist and head chef Caryn Colman assuaged fears: "Imagine getting a photo of her doing snow angels," she wrote.

Colman and Francis Boyes, escapees from Toronto, bought the lodge on James Lake on the northern reaches of Ontario's Canadian Shield in 1994. They created an eco-resort for travellers -- "pilgrims," Colman calls them -- in search of a shot of nature. Everything is recycled and composted. Guests are given a cloth napkin for mealtimes. And a note in rooms reminds guests that the toilet paper is chlorine-and bleach-free, is made of post-consumer material, and that they "don't have to flush every time."

Colman, a watercolour artist who wears a jangle of silver bracelets, calls the property a "front-country lodge with backcountry trails." Guests can walk out of their rooms, snap on their skis -- or slip into canoes in the summer -- and head out into the surrounding Crown wilderness. The sun had set by the time we pulled into Smoothwater's driveway Friday night after a 6- π -hour drive delayed by multiple stops. As we motored north the snow got deeper. Warning signs to leave a safe space

between cars were replaced by marked moose crossings. Snowmobiles lined up outside gas stations, dog sleds were spotted on car roofs, and antlers hung outside an LCBO. Towns got progressively smaller: Barrie, Orillia, Huntsville, Powassan, and finally Temagami, population 1,000.

Upon arrival, Colman showed us to our room, the Wolf's Den, in the low-roofed guest lodge. She invited us for cocktails and a communal dinner at seven in the main lodge, where the family lived with their 14-year-old daughter and four pets. I had been fuzzy on the eating arrangements. Pepina was usually in bed by that hour; after that, she started to get cranky. We fed her in our room's kitchenette, unloaded our gear and carried her to the lodge. A flash of dark sky -- Orion's belt glittering brighter than I'd seen in months -- gave me hope.

That night we met the guests with whom we would be dining: two gangs of outdoorsy, intelligent women keen to cross-country ski the 40 kilometres of nearby trails (even when the mercury read minus 25). They were friends from piano lessons and ski clubs, well-travelled types in their 40s, 50s and 60s. One group had come up on the Northlander train and were sharing the 10-bed bunkhouse. The other trio followed up a morning ski with a game of Scrabble and shots of Polish honey vodka liqueur.

The next morning, snowshoeing was at the top of our to-do list. We zipped Pepina into her red snowsuit, slid her into a backpack and headed out onto the frozen lake. Within five minutes, she was asleep on Mario's shoulders, oblivious to the landscape. We tramped around wondering at animal tracks, working our hip joints and examining bulrushes buried in snow.

Pepina woke up just as we returned to Smoothwater, so we headed to the pine-floored Gathering Hall. Pepina had made quick work of our small room -- tipping over the recycling bin, attempting to climb the ladder to the bunk bed, plopping my face cream in the bathtub. In the Gathering Hall, I pulled off her pink boots and her socks slipped off. Her feet were cold. We settled into one of the couches in the warm, quiet room heated with a blue-oil fireplace and I cupped her bare toes in my hands. We looked out onto the snowy lake and trees. Then the moment was over and Pepina was up and about, poking at books and plinking the keys on the red piano in the corner.

To accommodate our daughter's bedtime, Colman had suggested setting up the playpen in her daughter's room, down the hall from the dining room. Thankfully, once in her PJs, she settled down easily and Mario and I were able to join the others at the long table in the window-filled room near the open, bustling kitchen.

All the guests lived in Toronto, a city where communication between strangers generally involves honking or exchanging blank stares on the subway. But here, once the conversation was uncorked it flowed easily. Connections were made. Four at the table had hiked the Yukon's Chilkoot Trail. "The napkin incident" on a previous trip was revisited. And all ears turned to hear Mario defend why the national broadcaster had bumped Eleanor Wachtel from her radio post. By 9, we all headed to our rooms, slipping into bed before 10, whispering in the dark. It felt almost illicit.

Food was also a highlight. Colman saw the local and organic harvest as another way of "ingesting the spirit of the land." Our first meal, along with wild rice, roasted brussel sprouts and Caesar salad, featured wild white fish from Lake Temiskaming, seasoned with locally milled flour, spruce and sweet fern. For dessert, we passed around the "20-pound chocolate cake," feeling its heft. (I felt a little guilty about the consumption as I hadn't been skiing 20 kilometres. How many calories does keeping up with a toddler burn anyway?)

At breakfast on Sunday morning -- Red River cereal with applesauce, cream-cheese omelette and sausages -- Pepina was happily eating on Mario's lap. (In the family tradition, we had forgotten some semi-vital gear; this time the portable highchair, last camping trip, our tent.) She started screaming -- she had bit her tongue. While the others looked on in sympathy and silence, I worried: Is this the peace and quiet they were hoping for on their wonderland splurge?

That was the thing: When we were with the group, I couldn't completely relax. Pepina seemed 10 decibels louder, her hands that much busier. At home, our cupboards are latched, our toilet locked down and, perhaps most importantly, our pre-child behaviour expectations liberated. In the end, I learned that travel with a toddler includes a varied highlight reel. On one hand, keeping Pepina away from the wine glasses and wood-burning fire. On the other, lying on our backs making snow angels. Or the three of us, on the bed after sledding, napping together, a break we

rarely take at home. Or Pepina spotting the downy woodpecker picking at the bell of seeds hanging just inches from the dining room window. By weekend's end she hadn't learned the word "tree," but now she can flap her arms like a bird.

Smoothwater Ecolodge: Temagami, Ont; 1-888-569-4539;
<<http://www.smoothwater.com>><http://www.smoothwater.com>. Offers a "March Break Snow Flea Festival" package that includes a hunt for the tiny critters, owl hoots, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing. Three nights accommodation and nine-meal package for a family of four (kids under 12), costs \$1,131.