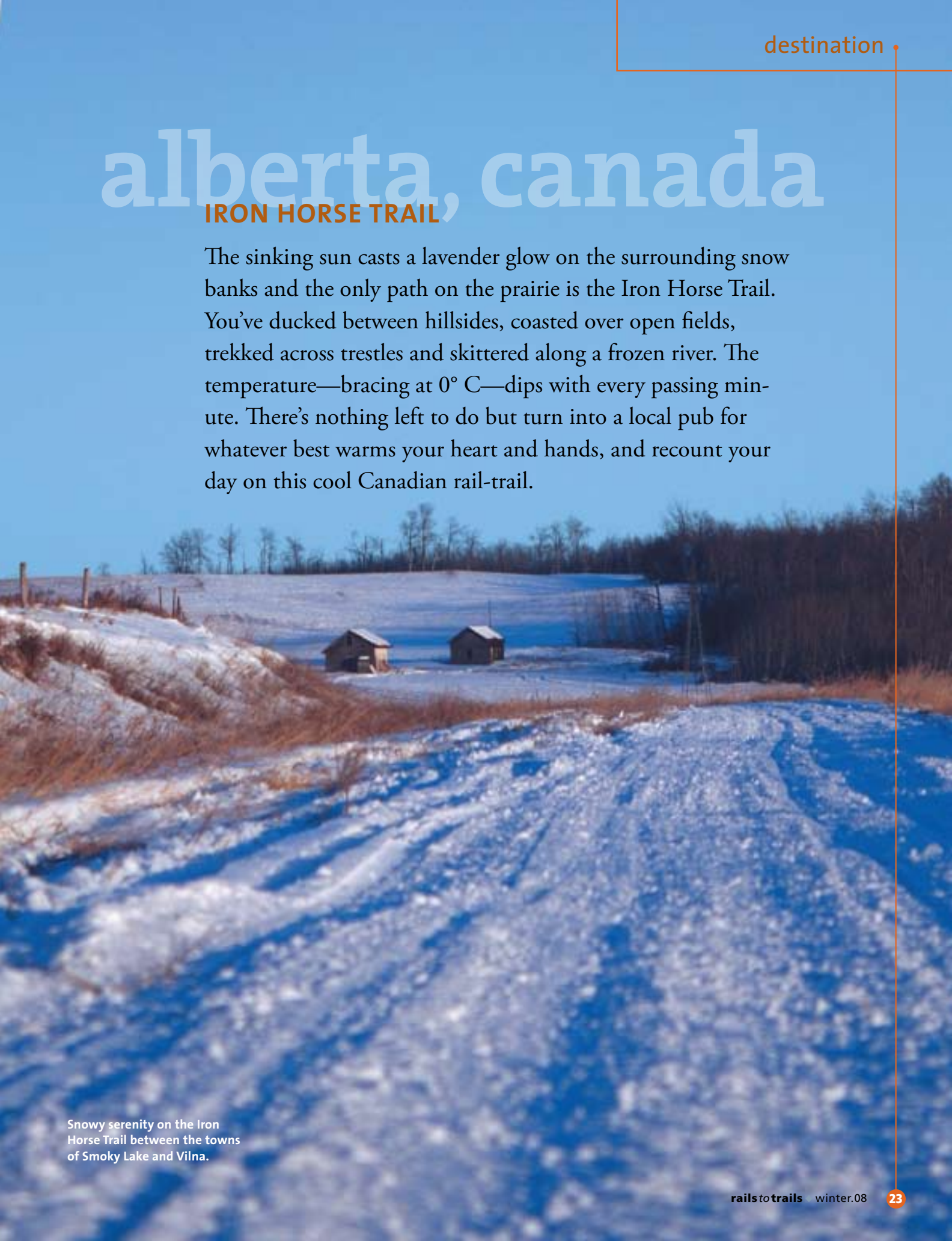


alberta, canada

IRON HORSE TRAIL

The sinking sun casts a lavender glow on the surrounding snow banks and the only path on the prairie is the Iron Horse Trail. You've ducked between hillsides, coasted over open fields, trekked across trestles and skittered along a frozen river. The temperature—bracing at 0° C—dips with every passing minute. There's nothing left to do but turn into a local pub for whatever best warms your heart and hands, and recount your day on this cool Canadian rail-trail.



Snowy serenity on the Iron Horse Trail between the towns of Smoky Lake and Vilna.

Beyond the “southern” reaches of Calgary’s Rockies, further northeast still from the capital of Edmonton, lies a rail-trail that embodies everything wild and beautiful about Alberta, Canada’s snowy plains. Stretching 278 kilometers (172 miles) through the province’s Lakeland region, linking more than a dozen modest-to-tiny towns, and showcasing a fantastically impressive trestle, the Iron Horse Trail is the answer to anyone seeking a remote, winter wonderland.

With the “Y”-shaped trail, you can kick off a ride from one of its three endpoints—Waskatenau, Cold Lake and Heinsburg—and certainly enjoy an epic, all-out ride. But for those looking for shorter hops, start your trip in any of the friendly towns along the trail. Each community has its own unique flair compliments of the region’s mix of heritages, including Ukrainian, French, Lebanese, Russian and First Nations. However, manmade attractions also add quirky distinction: in Alberta’s pumpkin capital of Smoky Lake, keep your eyes peeled for some enormous gourds; watch for gigantic mushrooms in Vilna; and wonder at St. Paul’s “World’s First UFO Landing Pad.”

Still, these arresting sites don’t eclipse the Iron Horse. Vistas along the trail range from vast, unending prairie on the western end broken only by fence lines and the errant moose, to sloping hills cut by creeks and lake-dotted valleys on the eastern side. The landscape of boreal forest and grassland is home to a wealth of wildlife including elk, beaver, bears, coyotes, the aforementioned moose, and even wolves.

Also expect to share the Iron Horse with pedestrians, bicyclists, equestrians, cross-country skiers, snowmobiles and ATVs. On this last count, it should be noted that the Iron Horse’s origins began with off-road vehicle use and, indeed, in the winter months snowmobiling is a popular pastime and transportation option. But those same trail users are voicing a heartening and earnest desire—enhancing and nurturing non-motorized use. The Riverland Recreational Trail Society, the trail’s managing entity, is developing creative packages for bicyclists and other non-motorized users, and working to improve trail conditions where the path is overly sandy or rough. Their wish:



Until the Iron Horse Trail was built, life-long residents were unaware of the glory in their midst, the one-kilometer long Beaver River Trestle which, when viewed from the frozen riverbed below (right) is a massive amenity to have stayed hidden so long. (Above) Snowmobiling trail users pause at one of the many trailhead comfort stations, found in nearly every city along the trail.

for all users to revel in what the Iron Horse has to offer.

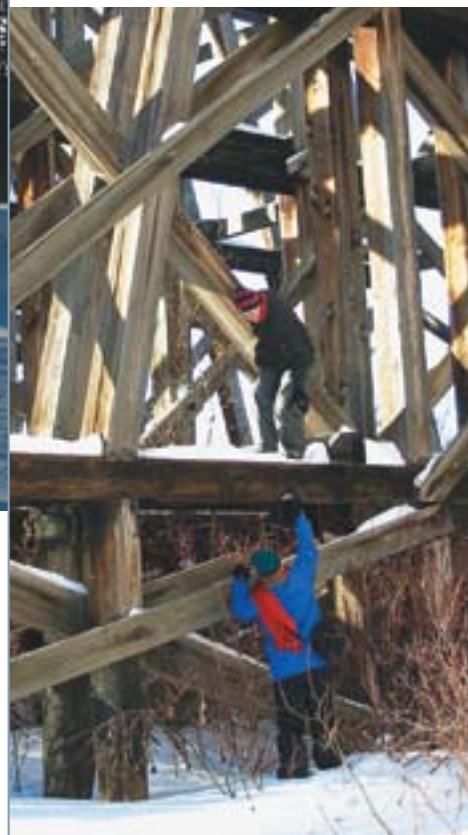
Among the manmade offerings are various staging areas at most of the town trailheads. Many feature original train stations and restored rail cars from the corridor’s time as a Canadian National Rail line. Heinsburg boasts a fully restored, wooden water tower that’s not to be missed. However, nothing can make you better



appreciate the preservation of the Iron Horse’s railroading past than its trestles.

A 200-meter span in Bellis and another 500-meter crossing in Bonnyville are treat enough. But the stunner is the one-kilometer (1,485 feet) Beaver River Trestle just outside Cold Lake that soars 195 feet above the valley floor. Trekking down to the frozen riverbed to stand in the shadow of the trestle is nearly as awe-inspiring as surveying the land from its deck. And until the trail opened in 2004, lifelong residents had no idea it existed.

This is the magic of the Iron Horse Trail. Along its length, it offers seemingly endless gems. But the treasure you take away is the giddy knowledge that now you’re in on the secret of the Iron Horse Trail, too. Pass it along.



MARIANNE PRICE



Seen at left, the trail town of St. Paul boasts the World's First UFO Landing Pad. (Right) A restored railcar in Smoky Lake; snowmobilers are knee-deep in snow beside a beaver dam on the Iron Horse Trail.



MARINNE PRICE



Trans Canada Trail

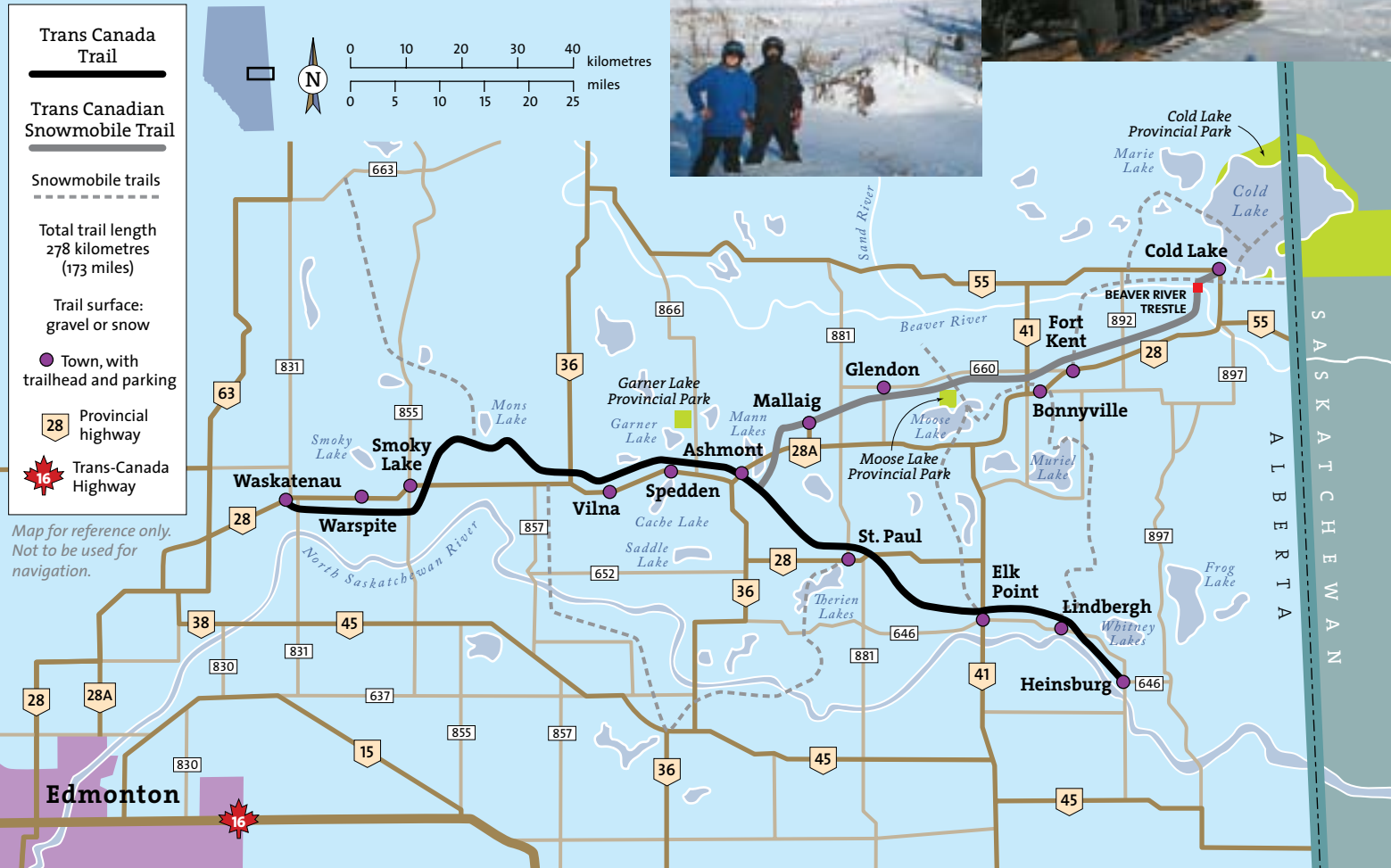
Trans Canadian Snowmobile Trail

Snowmobile trails

Total trail length
 278 kilometres
 (173 miles)

Trail surface:
 gravel or snow

Map for reference only.
 Not to be used for navigation.



With a well-represented Ukrainian population, the town of Glendon offers trail users a Paul Bunyan portion of a traditional treat: the pyrogy.

GETTING THERE: Due to its rather remote location, a visit to the Iron Horse Trail is something of a journey in and of itself. Happily, it's well worth it. Begin in Edmonton, either flying into Edmonton International Airport (www.edmontonairports.com) or enjoying Canada's superlative rail travel (www.viarail.ca). From there, the trail's "Mile Zero" point at Albilene Junction (near Ashmont) is approximately 113 miles away via Highway 28. At the junction, the trail offers three branches: 57 miles to Waskatenau, 60 miles to Cold Lake, and 54 miles to Heinsburg.

WHAT TO DO: Town spirit along the Iron Horse Trail doesn't stop at pumpkin sculptures and UFO landing pads. Celebrations of the region's history, agriculture and people abound. Events include the Pro Rodeo in Bonnyville in May, Haying in the 30s in Mallaig in August, the Great White North

Pumpkin Fair in Smoky Lake in October, the Pyrogy Festival in Glendon in September, and Buck of the Year in December. Visit www.albertaslakeland.com for a community events calendar and more information.

RENTALS: Snowmobile rentals are available in St. Paul from Power Merchants (780.645.4499). Bicycle rentals in the area are still in development so it's best to transport your own or rent from vendors in Edmonton.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: For more on the Iron Horse Trail visit www.ironhorsetrails.ca or call 877.645.4521. Alberta's Lakeland (www.albertaslakeland.com) provides tourism information, travel guides and maps for the region. For more pictures of the Iron Horse Trail, visit www.railstoails.org/magazine.