

# Take off to the great north: Searchmont, Algoma and more

BY NANCY SUNDSTROM

Special to the Record-Eagle

After years of being a carefully guarded secret, it seems that the word is finding out that Sault Ste. Marie and Ontario, Canada are a haven for outdoor recreation enthusiasts. Located on the International border at the heart of three of the Great Lakes and just 45 miles north of the Mackinac Bridge, the Sault Ste. Marie

area has long been a draw for skiers, mountain bikers, canoeists, kayakers and hikers. Ian McMillan of the Sault Ste. Marie Economic Development Corporation said that they recently adopted the phrase "Naturally Gifted" as part of their tourism outreach efforts in recognition of the scenic appeal of the region.

"Our location along the shores of both Lake Superior

and Lake Huron provide spectacular beauty along with the mystique of the Great Lakes," explained McMillan. "The overall terrain of the region is very diverse including the Cambrian Shield, which forms what we call the "Mountains of the Midwest.

There's rugged cliffs, and thousands of rivers, lakes and streams. Our proximity to a number of Provincial Parks and protected areas, includ-

ing the Chapleau Game Preserve, which is the largest in the world also provides us with accessible hiking trails, canoe routes, and mountain bike trails."

In addition, the area also has a unique transportation access to this wilderness in the Algoma Central Railway, which has passenger trains leaving from downtown Sault Ste. Marie, making it literally minutes away from this world class outdoors.

Tourists from all over the world have also experienced the area's scenery via the Agawa Canyon Tour train, which brings visitors all throughout the year into the heart of its wilderness. Passengers doing so can take a one-day trip or they can be dropped off at a number of lodges along the rails and spend as much time on the shores of a remote lake as they like.

For those wanting to experience the wilderness, but at the same time return to a luxury hotel with all the amenities, the "Trailhead" program offered through Algoma's Water Tower Inn has a number of outdoor opportunities to suit the entire family.

Traverse City photographer John Robert Williams has been a regular visitor to Sault Ste. Marie for a number years for both professional and personal reasons. He has photographed many different aspect of the area's beauty in all four seasons for different companies, including the famed Searchmont Ski Resort and has hiked, mountain biked, skied and canoed there. Now that he and his wife Katherine have two children, recreational excursions have become a family affair.

"It's just a remarkable part of the world, and I never seem to get over the fact that it's so close to where we live, yet it feels so different," said Williams. "The mountains are nothing short of majestic and every facet of the outdoor experience is unique and pristine. You have incredible options for whatever sport you want to pursue and at

every level of ability, whether you're experienced or a novice. The attractive Canadian rate of exchange also makes it's a great place to visit."

Both Williams and McMillan believe there are several reasons for the recent growing interest in Sault Ste. Marie as a recreation destination. Heading the list is that the trends in travel are leaning towards "experiential" type vacations in a safe and friendly environment that is fairly close to home.

"We have always had that type of environment, but lacked the actual "packaged products" to sell to the traveling public," said McMillan. "We now have a number of operators that are offering outdoor vacations of varying lengths and types that include virtually all of the outdoor experiences. From a tourism marketing standpoint, this type of vacation offering has become one of our priorities that we want to market, and we see Sault Ste. Marie as very much of a gateway for outdoor vacations."

The area is enough of a gateway that it has attracted the

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