

# Discovering & Enjoying Michigan's Winter Playground



BY DIANNA STAMPFLER • PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHANTY CREEK RESORTS

**f**or most of my life, I dreaded the arrival of winter in Michigan! The cold, the snow, the blowing winds and treacherous roads – I cursed them and longed for the arrival of spring, the heat of summer and the colors of autumn. Then, about a half-dozen years ago, at the urging of some winter-loving friends, I decided to step outside the warmth of my comfort zone and give the snow a chance.

The key, I think, is to find the activity that suits you and then to find like-minded people to share those experiences with you. Just like sampling wine or craft beer to find the variety that you enjoy most, winter is about trying a variety of things to discover the perfect fit.

I quickly learned that, despite repeated lessons, downhill skiing is not really my thing. A fear of heights and of losing control meant that riding the chair lift and cruising down the slopes at a fast rate of speed was something short of torture. I am, however, completely content sitting in the lodge sipping a hot toddy while my family and friends enjoy the art of downhill skiing.

Snowshoeing quickly became one of my favorite activities, given it's about as easy as walking and requires very little coordination. My first

trek was at The Homestead Resort ([www.thehomesteadresort.com](http://www.thehomesteadresort.com)) in Glen Arbor, where we set out through a forested trail for a refreshing morning hike. A few years later, I stepped up my adventure with a trip to the top of nearby Empire Bluff for spectacular snow-covered views of the Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore.

Cross Country skiing is another favorite activity, especially the Gourmet Glide offered at Garland Resort ([www.garlandusa.com](http://www.garlandusa.com)) in Lewiston. Spend the day skiing from one food station to another, where mouth-watering small plates are served up along with beer and wine. One of the stops even allows participants to try their hand at ice fishing for lake trout.

Garland also offers a popular Zhivago Night package, with a horse-drawn sleigh ride out to a quaint winter cabin where a five-course feast of wild game and fine wines is served up in a cozy and enchanting setting.

Along with its 30km of Nordic skiing including one lit moonlight trail, Shanty Creek ([www.shantycreek.com](http://www.shantycreek.com)) in Bellaire offers plenty of downhill excitement too with 4 terrain parks, a half-pipe, and a 5-lane tubing park within its two mountain resort. Plus kids of all ages will love other family-friendly programs—on Friday evenings, join in the “Pillow and Pajama Party” with popcorn and a movie, or on Saturday,



take a horse-drawn sleigh ride or enjoy the outdoor Family Winter Campfire.

At Boyne Highlands ([www.boyne.com](http://www.boyne.com)) in Harbor Springs, another unique winter culinary adventure awaits. The Aonach Mor Moonlight Dinner features a sleigh ride to the top of the mountain to a rustic log lodge with wall-to-wall windows and views as far as the eye can see. A crackling bonfire greets guests, along with live acoustic music and an elegant wine dinner.

Thunder Bay Resort ([www.thunderbaygolf.com](http://www.thunderbaygolf.com)) in Hillman has been offering its Elk Viewing Sleigh Ride Gourmet Wine Dinners for years. Cozy up inside the sled as the Belgian horses trek you across through the northern woodlands to the Elk Antler Log Cabin where a five-course gourmet feast in front of the split-stone fireplace awaits.

One of the more unique experiences is paddling the chilly waters of Michigan's rivers, under a canopy of snow-covered trees. My first kayak trip (ever) was on a cold, but sunny January 10, along the Platte River in Benzie County (with a well-experienced guide). I was mesmerized by the crystal-like

ice formations found at the ends of the branches as they dangled in the waters and the way the sun's rays reached through the trees above to dance on the slow-moving waters.

Boyne Mountain ([www.boyne.com](http://www.boyne.com)) offers up a similar experience with their "Winter Rafting, Snowshoeing & Spa Weekend" offered December 11. After a casual rafting trip down the Jordan River, you'll get out and snowshoe the nearby woods to a campsite, where a warming fire and refreshments are served. Back at the resort, you'll warm up with a treatment at the Solace spa.

You don't have to travel to Alaska or Canada to mush your own sled dog team. Several resorts around the state offer such experiences to unleash yourself, including Boyne Highlands ([www.boyne.com](http://www.boyne.com)) in Harbor Springs, Double JJ Ranch & Golf Resort ([www.doublejj.com](http://www.doublejj.com)) in Rothbury, Shanty Creek ([www.shantycreek.com](http://www.shantycreek.com)) in Bellaire, Crystal Mountain Resort ([www.crystallmountain.com](http://www.crystallmountain.com)) in Thompsonville and The Terrace Inn ([www.theterraceinn.com](http://www.theterraceinn.com)) in Bay View. It's quite a rush to sit in a sled traveling over snow-covered hills and valleys, while a team of six-to-eight athletic sled-dogs mush with all their might.

Those with a competitive nature should plan a visit to the luge track at the Muskegon Winter Sports Park ([www.msports.org](http://www.msports.org)). One of three Olympic luge tracks in the country, it is open to the public throughout the season for one of the most thrilling rides of your life. After hauling your sled to the halfway point of the track (the highest point for non-professionals), you'll settle in for a rushing ride of 30-plus miles per hour along the 650-foot track (in as little as 17-20 seconds). During a friendly competition a few years ago, my team

captured the "Bronze" medal, which to this day is one of my most treasured trophies!

Another rushing experience is the zip lines that stretch across the treetops at both Boyne Highlands and Boyne Mountain. These adventures feature a series of up to 10 lines traveling up to 43,000 feet. Fly at speeds of 20-25mph some 50 feet above the snow-covered ground at either resort.

If you prefer to take a more casual approach to your winter adventures, perhaps a horse-drawn surrey ride at Crystal Mountain Resort is in order. The ride through the Normal Rockwell-esque village includes hot chocolate and a warming bonfire at the end of the evening. Of course, a stop into the Crystal Spa for one of their amazing Northwoods retreats is also a great pre- or post-adventure retreat.

No matter which winter activity you find most appealing, take pride and ownership in it. Discover and rediscover it, and over time, it may open up the door to even more experiences that you'd never believe you'd enjoy. I speak from experience when I say that Michigan truly is a winter wonderland, just waiting for you with open snow-covered arms!

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Dianna Stampfler is an avid promoter of Michigan. Her lively program, "Michigan's Winter Playground" is ideal for libraries, groups and schools. For information on rates and available dates, email [Travel@PromoteMichigan.com](mailto:Travel@PromoteMichigan.com).

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