

## - THE INTO THE WILD SERIES -

SKIING  
ROSSBURN'S  
ROLLING HILLSAN AFTERNOON SPENT OUTDOORS AT THE  
COMMUNITY'S BEST KEPT SECRET – 9 FINGER RANCH

By RACHEAL FLINTOFT Crossroads This Week

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Crossroads This Week

It's nearing the end of the winter months, and the rolling, picturesque hillsides of HI Rossburn – 9 Finger Ranch had been calling my name all season long.

Watching the weather last Sunday, it looked to be a picture-perfect day, and with only a few more weeks left of prime cross-country skiing, I found myself in the car, heaped full of gear, and taking the scenic drive on the way to the ranch 12 kilometres north-east of Rossburn.

"Most of the trails were here when we bought the property in 2002," exclaimed ranch co-owner, Ilse Ketelsen. "We maintain the trails in the summer for our guided horseback rides, and in the winter for the cross-country skiing!"

Ketelsen and her husband, Thomas, run a small cow-calf operation, also raising Tennessee Walking Horses for guided horseback rides at the ranch, and in the adjacent Riding Mountain National Park. They offer two year-round cabins for rent that sleep up to 10 people – perfect accommodations to enjoy all the area has to offer.

The ranch also has an abundance of trails, used year-round for various feats. Specifically, I had learned from Ketelsen that their cross-country trail system was approximately eight kilometres in length – a perfect trek for a sunny Sunday out.

The trail wasn't rated but knowing that the ranch was used previously for cross-country skiing ... along with the exciting landscape, I found

myself ambitiously up for the challenge.

Following the signs, I arrived at the front gates, and took the long drive back to their big red barn which marked both the trailhead's start and finish. Open pastures stretched as far east as I could see, with trees dotting the landscape. Behind me was the trails' wooded area, and to the north, I found myself taking in the barnyard sights of horses enjoying their morning as I slipped my feet into my ski boots.

What a hidden gem – the charming and peaceful surroundings had me feeling grateful for the welcoming hospitality.

The couple offers their trails to the public free of charge during the winter months, with a small donation box sitting at the barn for those looking to help with the maintenance costs. As a free activity offered to visitors of the ranch, as well as the greater community, the Ketelsens have also grown to love and appreciate their ski trails too.

"When we moved here, the place we took over had been running a cross-country ski club, and one of the things that were left behind was a groomer," Ketelsen explained. "Before that, I had never been on skis... we had an older snowmobile, and the groomer fit perfectly behind. While Thomas practiced the grooming during our first winter here, I found myself some skis to try out, and fell in love with the pastime."

Now 20 years later, 9 Finger Ranch is a Cross-Country Ski Association Manitoba

(CCSAM) listed destination, seeing groups all winter long.

Standing adjacent to the barn, I was greeted by the ranch dog, as I spent a few quick minutes glancing at the trail map – the 9 Finger Ranch Trail System has a Main Trail which encircles a treed quarter section of the Ketelsens' 1,120-acre property. From the Main Trail, several loops are situated throughout, and all have individual jaunt connectors with unique characteristics and names. The day was sure going to be an adventure!

The winter sun was shining brightly overhead, and without another moment to spare I was quickly off... gliding down the freshly groomed trail, with a friendly ranch dog in tow right behind. The forest floor was littered in animal tracks with the ski groves venturing straight through – moose, deer, rabbits, and other smaller critters had ventured quietly through the for-

est and now I was able to join right alongside.

A big difference from the usual weather we had regionally been seeing, by mid-morning the temperature tracker I was carrying read a whopping -7°C. The balmy conditions made skiing on straightaways and declines easy... a glaze of ice in the deep track indentations had begun to form, and I could feel the skis slide smoothly with every push.

"We are in 'rolling hill' country, so don't expect a long stretch of the same," Ketelsen chuckled. "There are ups and downs, curves, some straight stretches, and lot of loops which will always bring you back to the Main Trail."

Ketelsen wasn't kidding... making it hard to rate the difficulty of the trail, there is something for everyone. I found myself going back and forth between gliding quickly down a knoll to ascending a

trail peak with great effort.

"Rossburn Municipality is unique in the way that the southern part is flat, and therefore preferred by grain farmers," she explained. But as soon as you go north of Highway 45, you encounter rolling hills, lakes, and just gorgeous countryside... which is where you find our ranch!"

Ketelsen's description was spot on, and I found that each loop presented a different landscape to make the trail both a challenge, but also breathtakingly beautiful in variation.

As I was rounding the Beaver Trail and heading into the Southeast Loop, taking off my skis, I dropped my snow pant covered bottom into a bank for a quick water break and a trail mix snack.

The ambiance was so peaceful, I could hear little red squirrels chattering in the dis-

tance. Birds overhead were cackling, as snow sprinkled off the tips of the trees and onto the ski trail ahead.

The afternoon was drawing near, as I looked on the map to get my footing. I had covered just about every loop, and connector, as well as the Main Trail encompassing the area. Towards the end, the trail had me whizzing quickly downslope, and I picked up my poles to feel the speed. A sharp turn, and the red barn was in sight, and I climbed the last hill to the trailhead that was approaching ahead.

My little adventure at Rossburn's 9 Finger Ranch had come to an end, and as I drove back to the main road, I looked out my window at the ranch. What a destination... how could we be so lucky to have such marvel in our region – the 9 Finger Ranch is truly a best-kept secret!



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