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Skate 'til You Drop in Ottawa

Residents of northern nations are masters at finding the positive spin on long, cold winters. Ottawa may only be the world's second coldest national capital, but that doesn't stop the active Ottawan from putting on something toasty and heading outside in -25°C weather.

One big incentive is the Rideau Canal Skateway – known to all locals as “the Canal”. The Canal is a busy waterway in summer that freezes over in winter to become the world's largest outdoor skating rink. At almost 8km in length, the Canal offers as much surface skating area as 90 Olympic size skating rinks.

Snaking its way through the heart of the city, the Canal passes many of Ottawa's major attractions like the National Arts Centre and Lansdown Park. It's also a popular traffic-free commuting route in January and February. Food and drink huts clustered along the way offer winter warmers like hot chocolate and a local favorite, beavertails. (Vegetarians can rest easy; beavertails are huge slabs of deep-fried pastry, coated in cinnamon and sugar and numerous other toppings.)

The Canal is usually open for skating from the end of December until early March.

Mid-February sees the culmination of Ottawan winter enthusiasms in the form of the two-week carnival, Winterlude, which features a huge display of ice sculptures, concerts, sleigh rides and a children's ice playground. On busy weekends during Winterlude, you'll be skating in a thick throng of people, but head out on a weekday, and it might be just you, the snow, and the tranquil sound of your skates gliding along the ice.

So bundle up and get ready for a refreshing time outside. There's no excuse: rental skates are available, and you'll see people of all levels of ability giving it a shot.

Last person to tie their skates on has to buy the beavertails, eh? – *Eliza Reid*
Further information available at www.canadascapital.gc.ca/skateway. Winterlude runs from 3-19 February 2006. And the world's coldest capital city is Ulaan Baatar, Mongolia. I knew you were wondering.