



Photo/Samantha Sellner

Going to the dogs

VOLUNTOURISTS GET INTO THE MIX AT THIS ANNUAL EVENT

BY AMANDA N. WEGNER

As the sun rises over the hills the first morning of the Apostle Island Sled Dog Race, the canine teams sing with pre-race excitement as their mushers guide them to the starting line. Right there working alongside the teams and handlers are the race voluntourists — tourists who volunteer at their destination — experiencing first-hand the electricity of this annual event, one of the largest dogsledding races in the country.

Celebrating its 15th year in 2010, the race is logistically complex, with 50-75 mushing teams and 300 to 500 spectators at each checkpoint on both race days. With so many out-of-towners on hand for the event, event organizers wondered, why not have the tourists also volunteer? And so the race voluntourist program was born. With perks like deep discounts on accommodations and meals, the number of volunteers tripled from a dozen in 2008, the program's first year, to 36 in 2009. That number is expected to triple again in 2010.

Most of the volunteers are needed for dog handling — with five to eight volunteers needed for each eight-dog team to help get them from the staging area to the start line. As the adrenaline surges among the animals, the scene can get quite chaotic. "There's no

doubt it can be physically demanding," says Kristen Sandstrom, marketing manager with the Bayfield Chamber of Commerce and Visitors Bureau. "When the dogs are harnessed, they are ready to go!"

While most of the volunteers request to work with the dogs, there are also limited opportunities to help with timing, hand out flyers and assist at checkpoints where the course crosses roadways.

An admitted city girl, Milwaukee's Margaret Casey was an AI Sled Dog Race voluntourist in 2009 with three other women. She vividly recalls the first dog team they wrangled: "Before we really knew what was happening, the official gave the signal and we took off like a shot toward the chute. I swear this was the fastest I could run, while holding back trained huskies and trying to maneuver over the very rutted ground to the chute in big snow boots. Our hearts were pounding as we gave the team over to our colleagues in the chutes. We were just happy we hadn't fallen and made complete fools of ourselves!" **wr**

Madison editor and writer Amanda Wegner, amandawegner.com, has wrestled a few big dogs in her day and would love to voluntour at this event!

About the AI Sled Dog Race

15th annual Apostle Island Sled Dog Race, Saturday and Sunday, February 6, 7.

The race courses through the wooded hills surrounding Bayfield, making it a favorite for its challenging trails. The race is open to novice and professional mushers, many of whom compete on the beloved course as a training run for other sled dog races.

There are two main races, each running for a \$3,000 purse: an eight-dog, 80-mile race and a six-dog, 60-mile race. Races begin at 10 a.m. Saturday and Sunday, with half the total race distance completed each day. A 40-mile Sportsman's Race and a race for children 16 and under (the course changes each year and runs between eight and 10 miles) are also held over the weekend.

Get involved

Voluntourist can sign up through January 29; acceptance will depend on availability of accommodations.

A two-person voluntourism package includes:

- 2- or 3-night lodging package
 - Breakfast for two (two mornings) at Egg Toss Bakery Café and Big Water Cafe and Coffee Roasters
 - Friday evening "Meet the Mushers" spaghetti dinner
 - Saturday Night "Musher Mixer" & "Arctic Adventure" with Jim Ryder
- Cost: \$325 per couple for a 2-night stay; \$400 for a 3-night stay

More info: bayfield.org/events_calendar.php, 800.447.4094.