

We're off to the sugar shack

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There's nothing quite like witnessing a child's first outdoor taste of sticky, sweet maple syrup brewed fresh in a sugar shack. It ranks up there with a trip to the Hockey Hall of Fame as a top rite of passage for Canadian kids.

Canada produces nearly 85% of the world's maple syrup. As much of the magic happens in March, when sap from the sugar maple trees really gets running and the kids are on their annual school break, it's a great chance for them to sample maple treats at the source.

Images: Fun maple syrup destinations

Images: Ontario's 10 best winter escapes

Many sugar bushes open up for maple festivals during March Break. Two popular ones close to Toronto - Woodbridge's Kortright Centre for Conservation and Stouffville's Bruce's Mill - are running joint festivals through April 11. Activities include daily live demonstrations of tree tappings and syrup making, wagon rides, crafts, pancakes, and of course, free samples of maple syrup. See maplesyrupfest.com.

But there are many other festivals happening around the province. For a full list, visit the Ontario Maple Syrup Producers Association ontariomaple.com.

Maple syrup production is totally kid-friendly. Typical activities can include tramping through snow-covered maple forests, watching lumber-jacks boil sap, and the tossing of hot syrup on cold snow to produce maple taffy. Stories of the history of maple syrup - First Nations people slicing their tomahawks into maple trees to collect the sap, then boiling it down with the use of hot stones to produce the syrup - are also fun and fascinating.

Maple syrup is also part of the March Break family fun at Black Creek Pioneer Village. From March 13-21 there will be daily pancake breakfasts (10 a.m. to 4 p.m.) followed by a presentation on the history and science of maple syrup making.

Daily events also include puppet shows, horse-drawn wagon rides, archaeological digs and Victorian-era doctor demos (leeches included!). See blackcreek.ca.

A trip to the sugar bush isn't the only March Break rite of passage for a Canadian kid. With Canada's historic Olympic gold medal hockey wins in Vancouver, hockey is still on many kids' minds.

Toronto's Hockey Hall of Fame is filling the 2010 March Break with its daily Breakaway events. On Medal Monday (March 15) The Complete Olympic Medals Collection - on loan from Switzerland's Olympic Museum - will be on display. It features Olympic medals from as far back as 1896. Kids will take away a chocolate medal to celebrate.

Tales of the Cup - stories told by keepers of the Stanley Cup - happens at the Hall March 15, 16, 18 and 19. Toronto Marlies stars will be autographing their own pictures March 17, and Mascot Friday (March 19) will include visits from some of the top mascots in sport.

For more information on March Break activities at the Hockey Hall of Fame, visit hhof.com.

Also running throughout March Break is Kitchen Works, an interactive exhibit at the Hamilton

Children's Museum. Kids are encouraged to role play, listen to stories and play recycling games. In Kitchen Chemistry, kids can experiment using common non-toxic items found commonly in kitchen cupboards. See hamilton.ca.

The Niagara Region could be considered Toronto's playground. This year, Niagara Parks has put its Winter Magic Pass on sale for the March Break period. Priced at \$19.95 (a 45% savings), the pass includes a Journey Behind the Falls, entrance into Niagara's Butterfly Conservatory, and tickets to Niagara's Fury, a 4-D recreation of Niagara Falls - snow, rain and mist included!